

Why I Fear Water

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2012

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**Concordia University  
School of Graduate Studies**

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Entitled: Why I Fear Water

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## ABSTRACT

*Why I Fear Water* is a fictional, meditative novella. Twenty-year-old Crystal Levinson, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, is searching for her Father; her paternal father, but also the figurative Father, God. When Crystal was a child, her mother was a practicing Jew, while her father, who later abandoned her family, denied God. Having been caught in the middle of extremes, Crystal grows up haunted by a sense of absence. As Crystal searches for her missing father she also searches for her lost faith, and does so by narrating her connection to the divine through the symbol of water. To Crystal, the meaning of water fluctuates between God, nature, life, memory, history, heritage, faith, art, love, intimacy, connection and creation, all of which she glimpses through personal relationships and by sculpting. Crystal's narrative draws upon religious symbolism while borrowing from spiritualist nature writing such as Barry Lopez's *Desert Notes* and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*. Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* are strong influences due to the interiority and lyricism of their narratives, and their investigations into the connection between intimacy and spirituality.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Josip Novakovich. His great encouragement and insight made this project possible.

My appreciation goes to Mikhail Iossel and Judith Herz for providing such helpful feedback. Thank you to Patrick Leroux, who devoted extra time to teaching me; to Alan Bourassa, for his encouraging nature; to Mikhail, for his guidance. Many thanks to Bonnie-Jean Campbell and to Beth Crevier, for their assistance throughout.

I am indebted to Brandeis University's Women's Studies Research Center's summer internship program, for its support of this project. Thank you to Debra Kaufman and to Debby Olins.

Thank you to my siblings for their generous help, and to Ian Robson, for proofreading.

I am extremely grateful to my mother Debbie, for her many hours of editorial labour and wisdom, and for her tremendous care and commitment. Similarly, I am thankful for the endless encouragement and support given to me by my father, Alex, and by my stepmother, Nina.

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## Why I Fear Water

i.

I was born and raised in Port Moody, British Columbia, at the most inward point of the Burrard Inlet where the Pacific washes along Vancouver. On a map of Canada, the narrow passage seems like a solitary body of water, as if it wandered away from the ocean, and anchored into our shore like an arrow. When I think of my parents, I contemplate the mystery of our ocean; when I think of my mother birthing me, I consider the miracle of the ocean. Raising me, my parents never guessed that their conflict would become as vast as an ocean, that the question of whether to bring me up with religion would drive them apart, with Father ending up on one dock and Mum on the other. Ever since, trying to connect to my parents has been like searching for a lost thing in the waves, because although I once believed that I could really see them, I have found that in truth, they are gone.

My name is Crystal Levinson. I am twenty years old with pale skin and longer than average fingers, 5'6" in height, with dirty-blonde hair. My parents were born of Jewish Russian heritage, my father being the first to give up the Jewish rituals, and by the time Mum did the same, Father had already left us, had taken off to

the Southwestern United States in the beat-up Honda we used to ride through the North Vancouver woods. This is the story of how, a few years ago, I tried to go after my father to find him.

When I consider the beginning of my life, I recall the Christmas of 1995, a night that coincided with Hanukkah, which is also the night I last recall having the feeling that Father loved me. My father liked the glitter of Christmas. He liked the strings of coloured lights, the loops of red ribbons atop store doorways, the smell of evergreen and mint. He wore red socks with white snowflakes because he bought them at the Christmas sale and it got him into the spirit of the season. He stood on a ladder by our window wearing the red socks and hoisting up the Christmas lights, and to compromise with Mum, they had to be blue and white, not red and green, strung in a ring atop the Menorah that held the candles for Hanukkah.

I was seven years old. Down my back, I had a blonde braid which Father had tied that morning, and I wore a red dress with a high collar. I stood beside Father and looked up at him as I handed him a sliver of tape for his lights. With an appreciative smile, he lifted the sticky piece from my finger and pressed it against the wiring of the light with slow precision. My mother watched, standing



apart from us in the shadow of the room with her arms crossed. To her my father might have seemed a silent man, but not to me. When he smiled at me I was convinced that I knew what he meant. But this is where knowing is difficult, because at that time, I also believed that he loved me.

I didn't want to obey Mum, but listened to Father instead because he put up the Christmas lights for me and smiled when they shined in the dark evening, while Mum took Hanukkah candles from the sitting room and counted loudly and tediously in her sparse Hebrew, one candle for each of the eight miraculous days I should feel grateful for. According to Mum, the Hanukkah miracle was mine to keep. She lit the Sabbath candles in silence at the window with her palms curved like the moon against her eyes, waving her arms through the air as if she were inviting something into our home, a messenger who she said would keep me safe. Her blessing seemed half like a yearning for a miracle and half like a lie, for our house was never warm and never safe. It was cold and rigid. But Mum hoped the messenger would come help me see God. He might be tardy, she said. No matter. We would wait for him. My mother was a determined woman.

Mum didn't believe in the Holy Spirit any more than she believed in Christmas. She believed in rules like candle-lighting, and it would be discipline

such as this that would bring God back to us. She lit the candles the instant it got dark and rose for prayer as the first spark of sun could be seen at the peak of the mountain. Mum thought the eternal was inside of me, that there was no spirituality more promising than what Judaism offered, that it surpassed a string of electric lights and saw right into the fire, toward a God that is trustworthy.

“First you'll obey,” she said to me, “and later you'll understand.”

But Mum's God was unseen by me, and this made her faith seem like a lie. I couldn't believe what she said after she switched off my bedroom light, that she had truly sensed a messenger of God come in.

Mum wanted to live by her grandmother's Bible that had been passed down to her. She was nervous about losing its rituals, so she lit the brightly coloured wax candles and left them until they dripped to the window ledge. She left them until late into the morning, when the cooled wax had to be scraped off with a knife. Father and I did not dare scrape the wax without her. We did not dare defy her. We left the ledge wax-covered in the shades of a rainbow. It had been an exceptionally warm Vancouver winter, and the wax warmed up in the sunlight, and when I stuck my finger in it the purple slid off onto me like soft clay. I

noticed that I could manipulate the wax with my fingers, the sunlight lighting different shades in the purple.

“All of this is for Crystal,” Mum reminded my father at that moment, speaking of the frosted dreidel cake and the candles, “so she can be raised with the joy that we were not.”

But Jewish practice was a commitment that my father did not have. Mum’s hands were on her hips. Father’s hands were on the television remote control. As she continued to call out to him, he was seated in the kitchen drinking Guinness from a glass and watching football on the BBC, spooning cake into his mouth without noticing what he was eating.

“It’s the most important match of the season,” Father whispered to me, eyes warm and green like mine. He put one arm around me and motioned me into his lap. I leaned into him and snuggled into his belly, which was as round and comforting as Santa’s. Father whispered that he was Santa in disguise, which I knew was impossible, since Santa was on the television screen, and my Father was, at that time, right there beside me in the flesh.

“Was it Judaism that made him leave, or was it me?”

This was my mother's question, and she would repeat it late into the

night. Deep down, she understood my father's dislike of religion. After the Holocaust, my father's parents decided God did not exist because it was all they could imagine, and yet Mum's parents believed God did exist because it was all they wanted to imagine. Father and Mum were taught different paths. Father didn't believe in God, and Mum could believe nothing else.

“Was it Judaism that made him leave, or was it me?”

Mum asked this and the house went so silent I could hear waves roar from the Inlet. Mum answered her own question, and came to believe that changing herself was the only way Father would come back to her. She ended her practices, so that if Father would come back, he would love her.

When Mum had tried to teach me her rituals, Father drew me closer to him, so it always seemed to me that as Mum had lost his love, I had won.

But then Father was gone.

September 2001 was the month that Father left, the month when his exhalation was a long hushed sigh. He didn't seem to want to breathe the air back in. He was tired because he was always tired: the reason was implicit in the feeling. Sadness is to depression what something is to nothing. Sad as I had become, I wanted to

pick apart my sadness as if it were clay. I wanted to plunk it on the table to look at. I was caught up in thoughtful sadness, and could stare for an hour at a raindrop glide down the pane at the end of a day. I could speak of my sadness but could never find words for Father's, let alone for his depression. Father was himself unwilling to speak of it. He was not reserved, he was vacant. He was not predictable, he was gone. A dark hole I could not find, and even if I could have found it, I knew I could not enter. Days came and days went, blurring together, until he could not recall if he had ever felt better. He could not remember his past; he could not imagine a future. From moment to moment, only I could be time's advocate. I was twelve years old, and my task in the months before my father left was to assure him that he could still feel something.

“Am I even breathing?” Father wanted to know, his hand on mine and his eyes closed.

“Yes,” I told him, “You are a present body.”

To me, he was still the only one. And so I watched patiently as he gathered everything he had into piles, one pile of items to keep, the other to throw away, and he seemed especially adept at adding to the throwaway pile. He suggested that I help him lift each bin of throwaway things and topple the

contents into our storage closet. I did not know that he could be leaving, and that the items he was asking me to handle would be for Mum and I alone to keep.

I found photos of me stuck to the bottom of the box.

## ii.

When I left my mothers' house three years ago, I recalled that shining moment when I had manipulated the purple candle wax in my fingers on Christmas morning, and seeking a way to express who I was, I took to sculpting. I was living alone, and shared a studio with a painter named Karen. I was eighteen and Karen was forty-five, and she seemed sure of herself in a way I thought I could never be. I spent almost every day sculpting, and if I was not sculpting, I was working at a grocery store, and when I was not doing either of these things, I was talking with Karen.

One evening in September of 2009, I was at Karen's house. I noticed her earrings were gold hoops with glistening rhinestones. She applied her new mascara. She put on high boots and took her prayer book. Karen could have worried about what people would think of her when she entered the oval doors of church with earrings and blush and boots, but she was an artist and some things she did for beauty. To Karen, beauty was the focus of God's eye. Some people at her church kept their distance from her, but I walked with her as she tended to the plants in her garden, and I listened to her stories, hoping they would inspire my own. Artists like Karen are addicted to creating paintings,

stories and dreams, so even though some people called her art the work of devilish hands and refused to hang her paintings, I knew that Karen's art was inspired by love. I felt this by simply being beside her.

Karen belonged to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and she taught me that she kept the Sabbath beginning on Friday night like Jewish people do. She said that I could light the Sabbath candles at the dinner table on the patio before she left for church. She brought two tall candlesticks and trimmed the wicks with a kitchen knife. She placed them at the end of the table so that their light would shine upon the trees. But I didn't remember the blessing for Fridays, because when my mother had done the blessing in front of me, I had been seeking out Father's eyes. He had been my defence from ritual. But suddenly Karen was watching me expectantly as my mother would, so I struck the match and held the flame against the navy sky. It engulfed the wick quickly, the flame so hot it was almost wholly blue. And then I let the match fall with a sizzle to my feet, and I muttered, "This is for the Sabbath."

That evening, I was laying plates on the patio table which was decorated with a silk cloth the colour of porcelain. Karen was leaving to go to her small church in



Burnaby, cut deep in a hill with a red brick and white plaster frame, the roof a low-rise triangle. I had asked to go with her but Karen frowned and said she would not take me.

“You are your mother's daughter,” she reminded me, as if it were a rule. But she said she would teach me the similarities between Seventh-Day Adventists and Jews. She added that Judaism and Seventh Day Adventism share the same perspectives on health, that the body is connected to the soul, that the present moment really matters.

“Read your scripture,” she instructed me. “If not now, then when?” And then she closed the door behind her. I knew she felt badly that she could not teach me more. She offered me books, but not the Gospel - for I am my mother's daughter, she would say - but that evening she had given me the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, so that I would feel as light as the candles. And in her garden, I did.

Here is what I knew about Jews at that time. My mother is one. She told me that her mother was rescued from a Nazi concentration camp almost seventy years ago, and had come to Canada with only the clothes she was wearing and a silver

bracelet embossed in Hebrew. She had completely forgotten who gave it to her. She put it away when she arrived, thinking it mystical, the reason that she, out of her whole family, was saved.

Grandmother believed in the power of the imagination, and so she liked telling stories, and had a hard time separating made-up stories from real life. One night, Grandmother told Mum that a rabbi had secured the silver bracelet to her wrist to protect her, before he was taken away. Another time, Grandmother said it had been an unwed daughter from her village who had strung it around her wrist, that the woman had said nothing when she gave it, but seemed very tired. To Grandmother, both stories were as good as true. She gave the bracelet to me.

“So that you should look like a doll,” she said, wrapping it around my wrist.

I was nine. I looked into her mirror, lifting my arm up and down so that the bracelet jangled. Grandmother's mirror was bordered by an elaborately molded oak frame, and I glided my noisy wrist along it until I reached a knob on the dresser below, spherical as a globe.

My father is also a Jew, but as I mentioned, he left us, and it was then that my mother started saying the words “Jew” and “Jewishness” as if these were

things you could put your finger on, things you could point a stick at. She stopped doing many of the things that she did when Father was around. She stopped lighting candles, stopped sewing, stopped sitting on the deck on Saturdays reading *Homemaker Delights*. She started watching TV and eating Humpty Dumpty potato chips, a family-sized bag every day. I could hear the crinkling of the aluminium bag from ten feet away when she came home with egg salad, the smell of salt and sulphur from Soli's Bakery wafting into the sitting room. On one hand Mum tried to forget everything about Father, but on the other hand, she became similar to him. In time, she would relate to any trace of Judaism as though it were a thing outside of her, as if the word "Jew" was a name her mother burdened her with, and now it was too late, she thought, because everyone in the neighbourhood knew she hid the name.

It was my father and Grandmother who chose Crystal for my name. Grandmother said she wanted me to have crystal-clear eyesight, and she laughed when she said it, her eyes delighted. Father too liked the idea of seeing things clearly, so that I would keep things simple, seeing clearly as crystal through the lie of religion.

## iii.

Port Moody, November 2009. I had joined Karen's studio because I wanted to make things with my hands, things I could feel, things I could keep. But the studio was being torn down, and the land near the dock had been bought in order to build a shiny new condominium. When I looked at the yellowed stone of the studio and the dirty windows lit by the reflection of the sun on the water, I pictured it gone, and in its place a condominium of pure silver. I pictured people in suits and gowns shooting up its elevator as if to heaven, reaching a twenty-fourth floor penthouse with walls like smooth velvet and door handles made of brass. I imagined the immaculate windows looking out across the ocean by starlight.

But to touch the ocean, those people would have to get back in the elevator and ride it straight down to where they came from.

On my final day in our studio, the noonday sun was in full glare. I could hardly walk across the floor as there were stones and rags, feathers found on the beach, newspaper clippings, foam and fabric, sticks, ropes to pull sculptures up and make them stay. I could tell a story about each object. The newspaper I got from a stranger at the Burrard sky train stop. I had chosen the stones while

walking along the sidewalk. Karen had picked up the feather on the beach. She had stuck it in my hair, holding my head straight with two hands. I created sculptures from objects that came from my own experience, the very things I remembered touching. Objects of memory became my eyes, and to my eyes our studio had become home.

Will anyone care what this place was like before it was torn down? Will it be haunted by the memories behind each gesture, stroke, thought? People of different cultures worked there. People of different faiths and beliefs worked there. And yet they seemed to want similar things. They worked eighteen hours a day and never took a day off. Last Christmas, for example, a performance artist spent the holiday filming Karen out by the waves, her skin stiff in the cold and a bed-sheet blowing above her, a wide white ribbon against the black sky.

I did not believe it was my hands that held the clay. I was ashamed for not saying it throughout the time that I worked there, so I acknowledged it on the day that I left. It had not felt like me, but like something else that pummelled the clay, that shaped the mold, that carved the form.

I wondered what Karen would say God's hands looked like.

I knew it had not been my hands that molded the clay. It had been a matter of faith. I sat with the clay that morning. As I pressed it down, I trusted my relationship with it, knew that where the sculpture had begun would be clear by where it ended, and I breathed deeply and imagined the sun warming the clay, and I found my own knowledge as I pressed down. I could sense something greater guiding my hands.

“Just because you don't see it with your eyes, doesn't mean it doesn't exist,” Karen told me once. And then she disappeared between the trees of her garden. She didn't expect me to follow. Some places were her own.

For the last time in the studio, I guided the wheel, stayed focused, and watched it spin, and later I watched the clay rise and spread. I brushed the clay from my palms and washed in the basin down the hall, taking a long time with my hands in the warm water, as the day's work disintegrated off of me and the sound of the water echoed in the quiet hall.

Karen was also done for the day, and I returned to our room to see her. I saw her walk to the window, watching night fall. Karen hoped for snow, loved snow because it reminded her of Toronto, and made the west coast as luminous

as her home town.

“But if not snow, I'll take rain,” she said, sighing.

Karen liked the sleek cement, how the earth froze, how the plants slept. I listened to her speak about winter in Toronto because I had never left British Columbia. I had not left my mother's home until a year before, and since then had lived in Port Moody on my own, where it was grey most days and my backyard filled with puddles.

The wall of our studio was filled with sun where tubs three feet high held red, blue and white acrylic.

“I've learned how colours will find each other, what they are made of. Colour science, colour language,” Karen called it. “It's God's colour,” she told me, and looked into my eyes. That was all she said. She was never as silent as when she painted.

Karen said that in order to paint with clarity I first have to learn to swim. I have to dunk my head, she said, become engulfed. Every afternoon she jumped into the Pacific off the boat belonging to Fry, a fisherman at the Wharf she had known for years. When she went to swim that evening, she asked that I rinse the

paint brushes and wipe the tables down so that the counters would shine by nightfall. She would return later to paint with water glistening on her arms and the sound of the ocean trapped deep inside her bones, the waves that reminded her of where she came from and where she was going. Since I could not swim, I could not share that knowledge, so once she left, I dumped the brushes in the pail for soaking and went outside.

The ocean offers wisdom, but my mother never taught me how to swim. I decided I would teach myself. I walked along the shore. The sun was low, an orange light resting above the line of the horizon. I took my shoes off and moved through the sand that paralleled the boardwalk, loved how the sand made my ankles burn. I felt like a crab thrown out into the sun, my skin the shell where the superficial burn was held, and the inside of me a slow-burning fire. Along the pier a man walked his dog, and there was a freckle-faced woman and a baby with a silver balloon tied to her wrist, and a man close to them, ready to take their photograph. I walked the wooden slats that ran into the ocean where the waves were fierce. I was ready to jump in, but my parents had never taught me to swim, and so I kneeled and my hair blew up long and golden toward the roaring water. The tide was rising higher, and I knew then that I was afraid of water.



Water engulfs everything, and creates new shores, and new beginnings.

My mother had made me a memory keeper, and I didn't want to see my purpose swallowed. I sat, and the water grew quieter, and I listened.

Later, having just returned from the ocean, Karen began to speak about her memories, but I was scared of memory like I was scared of water, and I could only remember a few dates. March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1998, my ninth birthday. I had kept a few things from my childhood too, a red wool sweater with a white stripe across the middle. But what is mourning when I have no clue what occurred? The bracelet given to me by my grandmother offered me no access; it represented a heritage I did not fully know. If there were knowledge to lose, then I had lost it, and it seemed incredible that I could know this even though I didn't know what it might be.

Karen said she could try to teach me the rules of the Sabbath I had long forgotten. She seemed to want this for me, but I only wanted something to have fond memories of. I wanted a sense of what the past felt like, and I wanted it to be a cherished past, one that felt like my own. Memory might be a code that cracks the lock on a seemingly empty vault. If I had intensely personal memories,

I might get beyond nostalgia and into the experience itself, the inside. Inside the vault there appears to be nothing, only a steel bottom and air. But what is truly there is absence, and absence is never nothing. Absence has weight in the same way that silence carries weight. It lingers. It cannot be seen, but feels heavy in the palm, soft as warm air that weaves through fingers in sunlight. My mother could feel that weight. She could open her mouth and feel it enter her. She hoped that one day I would open it like a door.

iv.

Karen was telling me stories about when she fell in love, but I would have preferred if she had simply explained to me how she made my favourite painting of hers, an orchid on beige canvas on the wall, glowing with every colour imaginable. The radiant purple, yellow and red blended together, their colours forming the face of a flower unlike anything in the field outside my mother's home, unlike anything I could have imagined. I asked her how she painted it and the question itself is now a memory. Karen was standing behind me with her breath on my neck, as I thought of how I wanted everything to be as visible to me as this orchid hanging on the wall. I thought of my walk to the dock, how a shell thrown out by the sea left lying in the sun looks luminous and feels hot. It begs to be picked up. I wanted the history I could not remember, the knowledge I could not conjure up. And I was desperate not for a mediated experience of Father, but for his real voice. I wanted to get beyond the basics of feeling in the same way that Karen worked colours, opening memory like a vessel bursting in the heart.

Karen opened her memory and I felt the inside. She told me her story. In

November 1981, her bedroom in Toronto was lit by a lamp because the light fixture in the ceiling never worked. She had to squint just to see. She closed her prayer book, and put it on the night table where it belonged beside her as she slept. She didn't know why she had started to pray, but it came naturally to her. It had been a month since she had joined the church on Dupont Avenue close to where she lived. She had approached it for the first time with her cheeks red from the cold, exhaling in the warm sanctuary among people who dressed in simple gowns or slacks and read from prayer books in silence. Karen wanted to cultivate quiet and develop understanding. And somewhere in her body, it made sense to her to go to the church. There, people called this feeling a calling, a calling toward the light.

Karen believed that everything was light.

Karen stared out her window at the maple tree in her yard, watching clouds float over the sun. She thought of how God made everything, how he made everything at once, and not only once, but over and over, in six days and sixty-six times a minute, as life continues to be born. There is not one beginning, Karen thought, but continuous acts of creation diffused like a tsunami across the ocean. Each of

her perceptions, she thought, is created in the instant in which she conceives of it. Each one is a miracle. Life events are unpredictable, she thought, and the light fixture on her ceiling could fall and strike her at any instant, and a billion plausible events could change her life course unpredictably, and yet seem logical in recollection. She could not imagine that life events were triggered by cause and effect. The only thing that mattered in life was when she felt touched, or when she touched others, the moment she might be struck by the light.

The tree outside Karen's window was similar to the largest birch tree she would one day have in her garden in Port Moody twenty years later, a hundred years old, brushing against the window. Karen wanted to reach out to touch the huge leaves that grew like hands. She was taken by the natural beauty of the city, and that month, it was as if all she saw was leaves.

It was late afternoon the day Karen sat by her window, and if she left right away she could be at the pond at High Park by sundown. Karen went. She walked the gravel path through the park and looked at the endless sky, branches framing the fading remnants of sun. When she stared long enough at the trees she was sure that the divine was in everything, that all things were created by God speaking.

God made even the absences, the lack of light when night comes. She was aware of the sound of her breath, and thought of how air outweighed gold, that even if she had a truck full of gold, it would not matter. The only thing she could do with gold was weigh it.

Karen's silhouette flickered against the tree trunks. She felt energetic and alive, and the hairs on her arm rose in the same gust of wind that blew the remaining leaves on the maples. Winter was coming. Soon clouds would fill the sky. Soon there would be white in the sky and white below, the pavement covered in snow. She held her hand up and examined a skyscraper, small between her thumb and index finger. She walked to Queen Street, the sun sinking below the buildings, a final ray cutting across their roofs like toppled gold. Walking beneath the storefront awnings, an icicle fell to the sidewalk. She picked it up to let it melt in her hand. She didn't yet feel the cold, but she knew what was coming: soon her lips would become cracked in the frost and her whole body would be like a rusted machine in the freezing air. Soon errands would become a strain, and she would slow down. She would experience a Toronto winter, her eyes dry, the wind scraping the inside of her throat. She arrived home and

stopped at the walkway of her apartment.

She saw the salt along the sidewalk and she yearned to smell the sea.

The next day Karen stood in line at Cafe Diplomatico. It was noisy. She flicked her dimes onto the counter, counting out enough for a tea. At school, her art instructor had taught her to reproduce classical forms, but she had no motivation to do so. She wanted to paint simple things, she told him: the sky, the sidewalk. The simple things are the most complex, she insisted, and she shoved her money across the counter with frustration. She only wanted to paint things like the sign outside the cafe that said “no roller blades”, or the man behind the counter, the man behind the counter who was looking right at her.

He couldn't bring himself to stop looking at her.

On another evening Karen walked to the cafe alone, ordered tea and tipped generously because what little money she had she didn't care for. Money is shit, she thought, so she gave it away, watching customers pass in and out of the cafe until late at night the chairs were put up on the tables and the lights were dimmed and, with everyone else, she piled onto the streetcar to go home. She thought about what courage it would take to drop out of art school and she begged God

for that courage. She knew that if she left school, she would leave materialism behind too.

Karen quit school, and while she was unemployed she ate stale bread and beans from the can and walked instead of taking the streetcar. Her stomach ached with hunger and her tongue craved something savoury and her clothes were never quite clean since she washed them in the sink with hand soap and laid them to dry by the window. In her imagination she heard her mother's warning about the consequences of her actions as she lay awake at night staring up at her broken light, until, unable to sleep, Karen went back to the cafe for a third time. The same man was behind the counter looking at her, and as she stood in line with her hair wet from a shower, and her eyes weary, the man, whose name tag read "Joe" said, "Can I get you a cup of tea?"

Karen took out her money, but Joe held up his hand to stop her and went on brewing the tea. In what seemed to Karen the most miraculous event of the year, she thought that she understood what he meant.

Intuition is how love starts, Karen explained, and also, how just about everything starts. Joe was extraordinary, she said, with high cheekbones and eyes like green



opals. That night, they were going to a restaurant near her home on the Danforth, and Karen dressed in a red sweater dress that closed tight around her knees. She outlined her eyes with mascara and wore pink lipstick and a gold necklace her mother had lent her.

“Who are you?”

She spoke these words to herself as she stood in her kitchen alone dressed in her winter coat, preparing to leave to meet Joe, who was already headed out into the night. He splashed up the steps from the subway, ice water in his shoes leaking into his socks. Minutes later, Karen dabbed perfume onto her wrist as she walked, and stopped to look through the window of a bakery that was closed for the night. Joe saw her at a distance peering inside it, witnessed her tall shadow stretched across the sidewalk. Joe wanted to be a writer, and so he cared very much about which words he used. He was rehearsing how he wanted to say hello to her, and was, naturally, apprehensive about those first tight syllables, afraid he would forget which muscles operated his mouth. Finally he stood a meter away from her waiting for her to notice him, and then he said her name. She turned to him, and they walked, south to Lakeshore Boulevard and to Queen’s Quay. They began to speak softly to one another. Together, they

wondered if Lake Ontario was frozen, if they could skate across its ice.

They forgot about having dinner and kept walking, passing cafes and bars until they were closed for the night, until the slice of moon dissolved in the sky. They sat at a snowy bank off King Street. The street was empty, the only light came from the skyscrapers. Karen took an orange from her bag and peeled its skin, and they chewed quietly, and watched light expand as night lifted like a veil. The peel of the orange reminded Karen of her own skin, how it is so temporary, and would soon be gone, but she looked at Joe, and he was a relief to her. The sun made the pavement red. They lay down to feel its warmth, spreading out, light covering them as it shone between the high rises.

Minutes later, a woman dressed in a parka stepped from her condominium building and went out into the cold, and found them sleeping there, wet from sweat and snow.

That first night, gazing across the city, Karen asked Joe, “Does this blue slice of dawn symbolize morning or night?”

Karen asked this because she found it difficult to distinguish a beginning from an ending.

When Joe did not answer, she said, “Tell me a story.”

“In the beginning,” Joe said, “The sun is a circle above our groggy heads, as if our future is a bell, and I took you outside with it ringing in my hand, and then light would stretch beyond us. Everything is awaiting, but of course, we can't know what will happen. Right now, all we see is a red light, a thread knitting the sky.”

Karen could not even imagine becoming tired of it. In the morning, the sun that was billions of years beyond their reach was simply a circle that was too bright to look at, and the two of them were simple too, bright and basic beneath it.

Later that morning, when Karen went back to her apartment, and her head hit the pillow, she forgot the foreshadowing of the sun. It was only the beginning, and she did not need to think about the future, the ringing bell. Not yet. She dreamed that they would drive across Ontario to see every town, stopping at each gas station, not for gas, but to meet people. They would note the details in the roads and in the dirt blown up by their tires because someday they might drive a different road, or they'd be in the opposite lane, or they'd be different people. These were the possibilities of their beginning.

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Karen had been speaking to me as she cleaned her tools. The metal of the paint knife gleamed beneath the ceiling light.

“Karen,” I said, “how did you get through days drinking almost only water when you lived in Toronto with so little money?”

“Water is the sustenance we need,” she told me. “A human can live a month on only water.”

“You must have been starving,” I said.

“No,” she said. “I had Joe to help me.”

“Joe gave you food?”

“Joe gave me water.”

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Toronto, December 1981. Karen walked to a restaurant at the outskirts of her neighbourhood, a restaurant she will not name even to me, and sat in a dark corner where a slice of evening light lit the pages of her book. When she was alone she was always watching and always painting, her eyes a magnified lens. She kept these things to herself, for she believed that her mind was as sacred as her body, and what was kept sacred was kept free.

Her confusion began in that restaurant where she sat alone, her eyes wandering to other people as they looked around, spoke, drank their wine.

She was beginning to feel a yearning.

Karen had left the apartment early that morning. She arrived home late smelling like the cafe's wine, and her smell mixed with the smell of musty furniture and trash that needed to be taken out. Joe looked up at her from a novel he was reading.

Karen said, "Let's go for a walk."

Snow was falling and sparkled beneath the glow of lights on the restaurants along the Danforth, everyone inside them preparing for the freeze, for the slow motion of another Toronto winter when everything deadens. Karen imagined an instant of synchronicity in the city, that traffic would stop and cars would halt, the cacophony of daytime traffic mute for a moment. Would people look at each other?

Karen didn't mind if she and Joe lived hand to mouth; it proved to her that they could do anything. They took walks like these in the night-time snowfall, flakes whitening their hair. Karen's blue eyes were knowing, as if she could predict past

and future, and even Joe's thoughts. He loved that about her.

Afterwards, Karen lit a fire in their apartment, which was sixteen by sixteen feet, square as a cube. She had used what money they had to buy pork and beans, and as they ate their simple meal and the flavours of beans and pork blended in her mouth, Karen watched Joe across the table, and she knew why she loved him.

Likewise, Joe watched Karen's stroke of blue paint glide across the canvas as she sat cross-legged on their balcony in the cool night, cigarette in one hand and paintbrush in the other, eyes so close to the canvas they were almost coloured by the paint. Joe wrote in his notebook, trying to find the perfect words to describe how she looked, trying desperately to uncover her, to probe deep into her heart, where he couldn't always reach. He thought he might write an entire book about her. He thought his very first book would be for her. But there are places in a lover, Joe began to realize, that no one can know; especially lovers, he thought, because they know how to perform for each other, know how to watch, and how to be watched. Karen sat on the balcony, and stopped in thought, the point of her brush a millimetre from the canvas. She knew she was being watched.

It was true that Karen needed Joe, but in the instant of feeling watched, she felt an urgency to see her life like a blank canvas. She wanted to turn to him suddenly, out of nowhere, and talk to him about the possibility of them leaving, of moving to the other side of the city, or of leaving the city altogether. But Joe would not be interested in leaving, she thought; she thought he was the kind of person who dreamed of a straight road that would lead to a safe end. Karen didn't imagine an end at all, but if she was forced to, she needed it to be a redeeming one. Redemption, she thought, is the opposite of safety, because it tears you away from what you think you know.

Karen thought of this feeling of redemption a week later, when a beige envelope arrived in the mail with eighty dollars in it. She recognized the writing on the envelope as her mother's, tore it open and left walking east. She hitched a ride at the street corner. The kids in the van were headed to New York. They dropped her off at a gas station north of Ithaca off of highway 81 and she stood in its barren lot.

Inside, the gas station had a small diner attached where people congregated for a cheap meal like fried eggs or grilled cheese and ham. Strange, Karen thought of the people who sat at the diner, and she considered that she

might look strange herself as she slid into a booth. Her waitress's name was Deb and wore a white golf shirt with a red stripe, and a tag across her breast which had her name embossed in black. The black was faded, just like the black roots of her hair, wound in a bun atop her head. Deb seemed ancient as a monk, savvy about who was coming and who was going, who was leaving town without spouse or kid or money and would be back in a cycle as obvious as the seasons.

The restaurant was called Jim's Palace. It had rooms up the stairs you could go to for a nap or for the night or for fifty nights if you had nowhere else to go, and since Karen had no place else to go, she ordered a beer and sat on the stoop outside and imagined a patio in New York City where the kids in the van would be going. She could become some kind of wanderer if she wanted to, was young enough that she could explore forever. She picked up a stone and tossed it. No one was around her, no one was watching. Just an open road. It was the only way she could imagine herself.

Karen went back into the diner and took Deb by the shoulder. She needed time to know what she wanted. She needed time alone at Jim's Palace in a room with no curtains and dust mites lining the wall, time all by herself.

After two days, Karen went home to see the Deaconess.



This is what happened.

Karen got off the bus in Toronto and walked north. She had the prayer book memorized and she knew the rules, what to say and what to answer. She knew the questions, knew them so well that she could write her own. She would have preferred that, but she dared not say this. She said she needed water. She wanted to drink it by the mouthful; she wanted it poured down her back, warm water which in her imagination grew heavy as mud, weighty as a darkness she could crawl through. She wanted it to harden and cake on her, to be a shield, a shell to crack. She yearned to come closer to it, to that eternal part of herself.

The church had once been Catholic, and the sanctuary dominated the building. Its grandeur did not need adornment. The Adventists had built windows in the walls to look out upon the world and for the world to look in upon them should anyone want to seek glory. Karen's steps echoed through the chambers as she walked toward the pulpit. The Deaconess was sitting quietly, and when Karen reached her, she told Karen to pull her hair back and take off her earrings so she would appear simple. In simplicity, the Deaconess said, there is truth.

“Please say your name,” the Deaconess said. For there would be two

additional record-keepers; the chaplain, and the one unseen.

And then the Deaconess asked, “Do you believe there is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons?”

“Yes,” Karen said.

“Do you accept the Ten Commandments as a transcript of the character of God and a revelation of His will?”

“Yes,” Karen said.

“As for the Lord, will you be witness to His loving salvation by using your talents in personal soul-winning endeavour to help others be ready for His glorious appearing?”

“Yes,” Karen said.

“And is your body the temple of the Holy Spirit?”

“Yes.”

It covered her, her hair and her eyelashes, her clipped nails and the small of her back; it enveloped her as the scripture had. She felt the Deaconess push her down and Karen heard blessings muffled through the water. Her heart pounded fast. Many seconds passed. What was it she wanted, she thought now, squeezing her eyes tight.

When she went underwater, she didn't hold her breath.

She opened her mouth.

The next three days felt like an eternity as silence passed between Karen and Joe. Rain hammered on the roof so loudly they feared it would shatter. Karen spotted a leak from the kitchen ceiling. She put a pot beneath it and prayed that the water would stop.

After the storm the weather was misty, and though Karen expected the grey to linger, and the sky to carry its fog throughout the afternoon, light cracked through the clouds to reach her. Grey became silver and warmed her.

Karen said she was sorry.

They went for a walk to see the unexpected light in the sky. Joe's fingers seemed as thin as the cigarettes he was smoking. As Karen watched him, she thought that she heard a ringing bell in the distance. She told Joe that the bell was an omen. But he was silent.

“Let's look forward, then,” he said finally. “Let's go west,” he said.

They stopped at the entrance to their apartment. They saw the salt along the sidewalk and now they both yearned to smell the sea.

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When I returned from my walk along the dock, purple painted the sky through the studio window. Karen heard the splatter of my feet on the linoleum.

“Only your feet are wet,” she said without turning round, continuing to dab a black shadow of a boat gliding upon a lake.

“I can’t swim,” I told her, explaining why I was dry.

“The trick is to become engulfed, which is altogether different,” Karen said. She came to me and kneeled to dry my feet with a towel. She did it carefully, gently, and thoroughly.

“But if I were engulfed in the ocean, I would die,” I said.

“No,” Karen said, getting to her feet. “You can be completely immersed without drowning,” she said. “It’s something you have to learn how to do.”

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Toronto, March 1982. Just before she got married, Karen woke up from a dream in which she was flying in an orange and blue hot air balloon, like the ones she watched as a child at the balloon festival outside of the city. There were no clouds, and the air was bright and cool, and she breathed deeply in the glow of the sun. The sky was vast, and as she rose the city seemed small. She watched her

apartment shrink until it was gone, until there were only patches of land and water, and her alone in the clouds. She had the sense that she was disappearing.

What could disappear, she wondered, moonlight lighting the bed through the blue curtain.

The mountain that is both rough and steep and warm and cold, that teems with water in its hills and ice at its farthest height.

Still, Karen got married in the tiled kitchen of their apartment, a room so small that her and Joe's parents were scrunched together. The apartment was musty, so the priest opened a window and the Sunday breeze swept through the room. The sun cast a golden hue on their rings.

They didn't miss a beat of time. Karen drove west with Joe beside her, the fields a radiant ochre, the road illuminated by sunshine. Karen said that God brings spring to remind people when it's time for change, and there it was, the change they needed. It was March already, and ice was cracking beneath their wheels, slush splashing against their tires along the highway as they whisked west.

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During her first summer out west, Karen found that nothing compared to the

smoldering Toronto mornings. Port Moody was cool and misty, and even in the hottest days, the warmth did not compare to how smog could heat you up. Karen remembered how the University of Toronto's walking paths gleamed in dawn's almond light, how the hot concrete of the downtown Toronto Dominion Bank building had been smooth against her back, as if it were an extension of her. She was as fond of Toronto's skyscrapers as she would be the redwoods in Vancouver's Stanley Park. To her, ancient trees became parallel to man-made height, and seeing herself in a bank window would be like leaning against a Douglas Fir. Slowly, the rough of the bark was becoming as natural to her as pock-marked cement. She went to the ocean and leaned back into the hush of the waves and let them glide her away. She did not try to swim. She let the water take her.

From her house above the hill she could hear the waves, the vibrations that gave living things their guidance. She knew that everything fed upon them: her body, the grass, the alders that beamed to the sky. Everything needed the mist.

Karen and Joe had left their close friends in the city. In summers they used to walk along Dundas Street in Toronto, shop at the market and sit on the

patio in the sun. In Port Moody, Joe grew tomatoes in the backyard and felt the thrust of the ocean prick his skin. He missed the music he once heard from his back patio.

Joe had asked to marry Karen, and upon her agreeing she had asked for a thing too, to raise their son a Christian. But Joe wasn't fond of the church. He didn't believe in saints and martyrs, he told her, but he believed in love, and for love's sake, he would try to do what she asked. But after Joe hadn't gone to church even once in five years, Karen left him. She raised their son John by herself. They prayed every evening and painted together. And yet Karen still longed for Joe, and imagined a time when they would again walk through Stanley Park, the raccoons sneaking past as if they wouldn't be seen, the swans' smooth bodies blanketing the pond. She knew that they were drawn to each other.

Karen's garden grew tremendously as the years passed, and the flowers wrapped all the way around the house, from the front to the backyard. The petals of the magnolia were a yellow so pale they were almost white, and they were smooth to the touch. Eight-year-old John picked them and brought them to Karen's bedroom as she lay napping in the afternoon. She sat up sleepy-eyed and she drew him close to her. She smelled like magnolia already, John thought, so

why did he bother picking the flowers? He slept beside her and in the light of the window the petals were translucent as glass.



Port Moody, January 2010. Karen's home was beside The Beanery Cafe where a folksinger from the Kootenays or from Calgary played soft music in the evenings, and from the entrance of the Beanery you could see Karen's garden with pink and blue hydrangeas swirling atop her fence, and herbal stalks from which she prepared sauce, salad, and lemon balm tea. She anointed herself with frankincense and aloe vera gel from her own plants to prevent her eyes from looking weary. Karen rarely slept.

“There is too much work to be done,” Karen often said.

It was six in the evening and the light was low in her living room. A juicy aloe leaf sat sliced open on the side table, its insides shimmering like gelatin. In the kitchen the muffins had been baked from scratch at six in the morning, and the scent of buckwheat and blueberry was still afloat in the evening air, sticky and sweet. Karen applied the aloe beneath her eyes as she stood in front of her mirror. Everything from Karen's mouth was a secret to me, and each syllable was as precious to me as gold. She seemed sure of every motion she made, and, graceful and confident, she did not watch her own actions. But I watched her, intently and intimately. She twisted the knob of the tap in the kitchen and kept

her hand on it while water spiraled down the drain. Her oil-black hair was straight down her back, her skin seemed smooth as bone, and her outfit that day consisted of cotton pants and a collared black shirt with paint stains, since she refused to wear a smock in the studio. She laughed loudly, saying that God was smiling through her, but was careful not to speak the Lord's name in vain. And against the wall in her garden was her painting of the orchid.

“God is a constant watcher,” Karen said when I looked at her painting.

I thought, the Lord sounded nothing like my father.

In her painting, Karen tried to give credit where credit was due; that is, she knew everything by the hairs of her paintbrush, the colours that met the particles of hair, the canvas that took on pattern. She knew things only in the moment of creating them, not before. The brush stroke itself, slow and directed by the heart, was where her knowledge was found. This was her method of seeing, and for this reason she called her body her mind-body, indicating that her mind and heart were one.

Karen looked at her own painting in thought. To her knowledge, she said, her son John was lonely. He lived alone in a dingy ground floor apartment on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, in a building that seemed to resist the light, burrowed into a nook in a

dead-end. The apartment had windows that were as small as eyes and rooms so damp they seemed like bathrooms. When I mentioned my problem paying rent, Karen suggested that I move into his apartment.

I wondered if she knew my secret: that, like John, I was lonely. That I came to her garden because I was lonely, that I spoke to strangers because I was lonely. There were so many things I did because I was lonely. I thought I could never create art like Karen's orchid, that I could not connect to anyone.

So in spite of my unease in the water, I thought that I might take Karen's advice, and immerse myself in life.

Port Moody, February 2010. John rented a bedroom to me and ate plain brown rice like a monk. He was not a landlord to me, but a desperate guy who ended up with a two-bedroom apartment and his name on the lease. He never spoke of his past, and I used to think it must be hard for him to keep track of who he was, since his friends would call and ask after him, but he never came to the phone. One day he just stopped everything he was doing, he said, except renting my room and eating rice.

He told me, "Some things you just lose and you can't ever say why."

John was five-foot-nine and stick-skinny, so even with a belt his pants seemed to be falling down, and it was a coincidence that his shirt matched his pants, since he did not consider his physical appearance. That Monday morning his sweater was a shade lighter than his pants and his pants were a bit darker than his hair, and the thing that stood out was his eyes, the same green as his father's. His long face seemed to see all the way through me when all I had asked was how he was, but even at this he would not smile, for he rarely smiled at the time I met him.

John rarely smiled and hardly spoke. He spent the afternoon in his room alone. I heard chanting and the high notes of his guitar being played. He let each note ring completely, as if paying slow attention to each sound, each pitch. It was all he needed. John had no friends and no desire to have friends and no desire to eat, though I noticed he liked peanut butter. The rare time that John left his bedroom it was to get some peanut butter, Skippy peanut butter, salty and sweet on the tongue.

I left the apartment in the early morning to walk the streets and I came back after sundown. The air was clear and cold and when I came home John was wide-eyed in the kitchen. My guitar, which was broken, sat on the chair beside

him. I watched John lift the guitar firmly between his legs, the top part inches from his eyes. He played a string and heard it vibrate for a full, weighty moment, and then he put his ear as close as a doctor would to a beating heart. With the same slow care I'd seen Karen use when painting, John twisted the knob of the guitar. He kept on tweaking it, eyes intense. That John was doing this at all, and without knowing I was watching, was incredible. He barely knew me.

He played a full chord, the strings vibrating as he picked up his cigarette and leaned back. Miraculously, the butt still had something left to it and he took a long inhale, then let it out, the smoke binding in rivulets. The coffee maker leaked brew onto the kitchen counter, the drips on the floor growing to a puddle. But John had been so focused, he didn't even notice.

After I watched John working silently and slowly that day, when I next approached him I felt as if I were walking from the dark of my bedroom to a place where everything shone. The very sight of him was satisfying and safe. I had never before felt satisfied and I had never before felt safe, and so I could watch him for hours. Having grown up by the shore, I knew well the smell of the ocean, but in John's apartment that smell was sharp as ginger. It was a new smell. It seemed to blend into every aroma and into everything I tasted. And every time

I looked out of the small windows of the apartment I felt as if I were in a new home, and there was such a distance between this home and the one I had come from, that I began to believe in my imagination, the place where intimacy comes from.

## The Desert

i.

My father frequently went for business to Olympia, Washington, and when he came back he'd bring toys from the American store. Once it was a wind-up Santa Claus on a reindeer, a small Santa with three black buttons down a red belly and a white plastic beard. He gave it to me around Hanukkah, wrapped in green paper. When the Santa was wound up, the reindeer would take a quick-paced walk upon the dining room table. But I didn't like Santa's eyes, which were black and beady. The next time Father went he brought me a tin cowboy riding a horse. The cowboy was completely red and had bullets in a canister against his chest. When wound up, the horse would rear up and the cowboy would swing the lasso. I told my father I didn't want him to bring home any more wind-ups with bullets.

And so I preferred the third gift he brought me, a plastic turtle that was topaz like the sea, whose flippers would kick and flap. The tortoise's eyes were a calm blue, and though it would flap, it couldn't move, and when my father wound it up it would sing a tune of the same five notes over and over again. It was basic, and I could remember it, and so it became my favourite. Father saw that I liked this one so he explained that what I had to do before I went to bed was wind up the tortoise. This was the only rule I remember him giving, and I followed it



dutifully, heard the tune so often that it seemed to be in every room of the house. The tortoise would sing and flap but go nowhere. The month after Father left I wound up my tortoise in the mornings as I helped Mum with the dishes, and I heard it in my mind when the house was quiet.

The days were quiet in John's apartment, and John's chanting was as comforting to me as the tortoise's tune, the song I remembered from my childhood. I came to notice that John had a way of watching me very carefully. He said it had to do with knowing the passing of time even more physically than what he can touch, how watching intently was the way inside a moment.

“This is how you really touch things,” he said, looking right at me.

The ocean waves crashed at this new shore by my new home with the new smell where John was. They seemed to crash softer now. When the sky was navy between the tree trunks, John sat strumming his oldest and favourite guitar, and I asked him why he was not as curious about things as I was. John said he could not see the importance of holding onto anything for too long. He tried to detach himself from everyday entertainments, from things like potato chips and record collections, and from other things as well, things like love.

I was surprised to find, though, that John didn't stay in his room very

much anymore. One morning I could hear him loudly at six am, chanting, and the sound became a hum as gentle as the sea. I was groggy long after I woke up that morning, and meandered around the apartment drinking tea in a clay mug, watching the Earl Grey leaves disintegrate like ash into the hot water. John came out of the room and sat beside me on the couch. Suddenly, he put his hand to my chin as if to kiss me, but he stopped himself.

He was nervous with me.

I told him what his chanting reminded me of, the song the toy tortoise used to sing, and I told him, suddenly, about my father, how I had always wanted nothing more than to find him.

“Do you have an address?” he asked.

I did. I had found it in my mother’s bedroom on a postcard from the Grand Canyon.

John went to the bathroom. There he kept a stereo that chanted throughout the day, so that he could meditate when he brushed his teeth or used the toilet. Everything around him was timed to the melodic whispers of monks. Brushing his teeth, closing a door. All to the guiding of monks. I closed my eyes and listened. They were still chanting. They seemed like something to count on,

loyal, like friends worth having.

My bedroom was in the back of the apartment and was meant as a storage space, with a broken window, a washer-dryer tucked into the corner and a musty rug for Matilda, Karen's cat. At night I lay on my futon mattress with Matilda purring at my neck and listened to glass cracking from the alley, the sound of the men who rummaged through our trash looking for something expensive.

Yet John and I thought we were poor. My guitar had a dent in it. John painted on cardboard he found outside, pulling it into our living room. I switched up the amp and he patted down the damp of the cardboard. When John played his guitar, he let each note sound three seconds and then cooled it with his finger, the quivering string indenting his index. He was predictable. I liked that about him.

John leaned against the wall with a saucer of steaming potato beside him. He tossed pieces into his mouth between notes. There was nothing left in the fridge but relish and sour milk. I had been hungry for three days. Since it was the first of March, we were supposed to give our landlord the rent money. We sat in the kitchen counting our money, trying to figure out how to pay for the rent and

anything else we'd need.

Frank the landlord came by, a fat fellow who had invested in a few crumbling properties when he was thirty. He was fifty years old now, and our bathtub tiles were riddled with mold. When he knocked on the door to collect the rent, he delivered yet another promise to renovate. He only promised.

But Frank was generous with advice.

Smiling, he told me, "Invest in things when you're young and you'll be going places."

I asked what places he had in mind for us, but he was never good at following through, just shrugged and recommended that we bring our bikes into the storage room, by which he meant my room. He said it was bound to rain.

He was right. It rained for most of the day.

In the evening the sky cleared and I went to stock the grocery store where I worked. I liked taking the Sky train to get there. Vancouver was just breaking out of the rain, and I liked waiting for the moon to rise, a full, beaming circle. I liked the slow ride that split the sunset, the twist and turn of the train that reminded me to keep my eye on the mountain as if expecting it to disappear.

## ii.

Port Moody, April, 2010. We watched from Karen's veranda as the rain streamed into the garden. It was difficult to hear Karen's voice over the downpour.

Karen said, "If you go someplace you know, you are bound to be disappointed."

At first, Karen tried to discourage me from looking for my father. But without our studio, I had little reason to stay in Port Moody, and the road seemed open to me to go.

"You don't need your father," Karen said. "A scar is just a bad habit. Stop thinking about it."

Karen kept ointments she created from her herb garden which she used to heal small wounds. Karen said that plant oil works well because it seeps straight through the skin to the vein. She said to look to plants for healing. And for a larger wound, she explained, you must be willing to use your imagination, to re-envision what formed it.

Karen believed in getting past things, and was able to detach herself from cars or jewelry, from fear, anger, love, the support she had gotten for her work, the idea of being intelligent. To Karen, logic was only desire being swayed in one

direction or another, and she would prefer to look at the yellow leaves ablaze in the sunlight, perceived deep within her, than waste any time. As when she was young, the most basic things were still holy to her, and she wandered through her stacks of ointments touching each canister, reading the name of each plant she had cultivated in the autumn harvest: juniper, comfrey, nettle. She was full of emotion that ran her body, which she kept deep inside of her, and it radiated out. She kept nothing for herself. She wanted me to get beyond need, to see beauty without touching a thing.

“Everything is precious,” she told me.

She forgot the shape of things and let her mind go, and walked outside toward the hammock that was strung between two tree trunks in the backyard, and I imagined she was so in tune with herself that she could feel each organ in her body, and identify each bone and tendon as she moved, everything from the outside layer of her skin inward to her skull. She reached a patch of earth beside the veranda and knelt down, trying to get closer.

“Closer to what?” I asked her.

She said, “Beyond and beside me, immeasurable, grandiose, whole and permanent, who was before and will be after.”

Then she asked me, as if it were a rule, “Have you ever seen a shining pin of light circling a strawberry like the Earth does the sun?”

I remembered the questions the Deaconess had asked her long ago, such as, will you use your talents to help others be ready for His glorious appearing?

Now Karen's pupils sparkled in the dark.

“Yes,” I said.

That evening, we went to sit on the veranda, watching the flowers gleam in the light of the candles, and the woods were quiet, except for the trees, which were gently rustling.

“Can you hear?” Karen asked.

“Yes,” I said.

Everything Karen pointed out to me was suddenly audible to my own ears, as if she hauled a wide curtain off the sky and revealed what lay behind it.

Karen pointed to the flowers she had cultivated throughout the season as if I had never seen them, while John sat on the veranda and looked upon his mother's garden. He told me that he loved a sudden rain on the coast, that although he expected it with the change of the season, it always seemed a surprise

when it returned, the rain that made the plants shine, the pools of water in upturned petals shimmering as he gathered flowers.

From Karen's home we walked down to the beach where John anticipated finding rocks and shells, the ocean throwing gifts to him. The waves roared toward us, then pulled back, and went on and on as John sought luminous stones from the earth and collected what he was given, even scattered glass worth finding. He found a smooth stone for us to sit upon and we watched the flight of birds, the slow heave of their wings across the horizon. John said they were flying to Devil's Island, across the water, where as a child he had imagined there were bears. He said that when he was nine, he had rowed over with friends and spent the night between the trees.

“John, what did you boys discover there?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, but he was smiling, for he had seen a thousand stars light the sky.



## iii.

Late April, 2010. John taped a letter to my door saying that he would leave with me. In it, he asked me again why I wanted to go, and I thought, it was for beauty, or as Karen might have said, I could not ignore a calling.

What Karen actually said was, “You can't ignore God when he asks you to do something.”

The day before we left, we went to Karen's house so late at night it was almost morning. Karen was almost always awake. John went for a shower and I stayed outside to sit in the cool night. Karen closed the door behind her and joined me. She sat on a smooth stone beside the plants. I looked at her. I had become accustomed to knowing her thoughts just by the sight of her. She was the kind of teacher who taught by being quiet. She took a leaf from a tree and examined it as if preparing to sketch it.

“Why did your father leave?” she asked without meeting my eyes.

I said nothing.

“Please, try not to get hurt again,” she said.

Karen said that as a child John used to bring mud in a yellow bucket from the garage and cover himself with it, and then pour water down his back, as

though he were a seed being planted in the earth. She said that he laughed and laughed. Karen described the old layout of the garden from when he was a child, describing each area as if it were an enclosed room, such as the back, for example, where wildflowers bloomed. An apple tree collapsed there a year ago, and when it died Karen discovered a horseshoe beneath its roots. She painted it with gold acrylic and hung it from the ceiling of the veranda. She told me to look up, and sure enough, there it was, swinging above my head.

We sat for hours by the flowers. The wind blew and the trees were thrown into a rattle, like air pressing through a wet throat. Everything seemed clear to me then. Karen's voice, the trees, the air, all felt interconnected, like parts of the same thing, like one.

And then there was the dripping of the morning dew.

Early dawn brightened to early morning. As the sun rose behind the birch trees, tree trunks found their definition, the rusted bronze bark glowing to speckled gold. Soon it would be light completely, I thought, and I would feel better about leaving, better about still being awake at this hour.

As Karen slept in the hammock, John and I went inside. He warned that

we would hear each creak in the house, every turn of a knob; that in the morning, we might know his mother was awake by the clatter of her teaspoon against the tea pot, a switch of the reading lamp, a gurgling of sink water down the drain. But I heard only the singing of birds that accompanies sunrise, and saw the garden guarding Karen like a sentinel. I imagined her swaying in the hammock, lulled to dreams by the mist that flowed from the Inlet, the wandering mist, the wild water.

In this way Karen slept outside in her hammock. Hummingbirds sang to her.

Later, as John and I sped away, I imagined a crinkling sound coming from the hammock as Karen's bare feet would flatten themselves upon the damp ground. I imagined her walking indoors. The calm and starless sky was blank like a canvas. She did not turn on her lamp, but longed for natural light. At one time Karen had been able to see the red sunrise light the mist of Lake Ontario, but it was already full morning in Toronto when the sun rose in Port Moody, and here her sense of water was the cold coming in from the window and the breeze blowing from the ocean. The alien damp prickled her skin as it did when she first arrived on the

coast, and she moved through its layers all over again, beyond what she called night.

Driving, John said that his passion was kept closed up. He meant it like it was a bad thing, but it sounded like a good thing. He was searching, too. His friends had settled down and had taken after their apartments and grown old, bought furniture to keep them steady; varnished oak, the kind you can't lift without a moving company. John seemed different than them. He thought it was strange to invest in things he could never take with him on a drive, or lift with our four hands.

I said, "Are you sure you want to come along with me? There is still time to go back, if you want to stay in the city."

John stared straight at the wheel.

"I don't think I would be happy that way," he said.

So we were leaving behind the last bit of winter, the time when God brought Vancouver heat, when coastal fronts would blast through our windows and we would throw our coats to the sand and watch each bud blossom from its tree. Now, with spring coming and desert heat awaiting us, we would be going

toward beauty, as Karen had taught me. Beauty itself had become my hope, my goal, for love is a means to beauty, and beauty is love's end. Why don't I see beauty as a warning? As if God were saying, don't touch this, it is forbidden to you. If I had seen beauty this way, then everything would have been a warning, and everything would have forbidden.

The inside of the car held the cold of the north. I slept to the sound of the engine as it roared, John's finger tapping the wheel, the sound of his breathing. When I woke up and opened my eyes to the blur of purple evening light, he confessed he was too tired to drive any further.

But the plain was ahead, where we were meant to begin.

Just outside of Spokane, a woman named Sylvie gave us a place to stay in her bed and breakfast, a one-level home with large square windows that looked out to the river that wrapped the mountain. In the morning John and I woke to darkness but for a slant of light from a tiny window at the top of the wall. Standing on a chair to look out the window, I saw the Selkirk Mountains, mountains which reminded me of the curves and angles of a sculpture. I thought of how I want to climb the mountain, but would surely fall. The mountain is all ice, I knew; the

mountain is below freezing at the highest point, the mountain is steep, and even the idea of it can plummet me. It is beautiful when it is in the distance. It is a still life, and yet I can never be still beside it, for it begs to be climbed.

Like beauty, it's a warning. Do I listen?

Folks from the neighbourhood stopped by for coffee and blueberry muffins in the bed and breakfast. I was still distracted, looking out the window, seeing how the gravel road spiked up and then went down, how the sunlight reflected upon a south-bound sign that said one-way. I imagined going down the mountain into the fog: south-bound to Utah, and then onward, to the desert.

I found that the desert had mountains I had never imagined.

We walked up a hill to where we could see a view of the mountains capped with snow. Sunlight was pouring into the field below us, breaking into shards of light. I thought how amazing it is that the Earth revolves around the sun, how the earth's turning lights the mountains. Jagged mountains. Rough mountains.

We sat until just before it was completely dark. I didn't want the day to end. I wanted to drive through it.

I said, "If we drive south all day, we'll never see night."

We drove south. We had two-thirds of a tank of gas, a pound of coffee and a pack of American Spirit. Sylvie, from the bed and breakfast, had told us about a cabin we could rent outside of Salt Lake City. It was 9 pm when we arrived there, and the fire pit was soggy, the sticks ground down and soaked in rain. We fell asleep outside, by the final remnants of starlight.

In the morning, I watched light crack open the sky to day.

“We have to go,” I said, as John opened his eyes to the sunlight on the porch. I longed to feel the burn of the sun, for a dark sheen to coat my skin.

As we drove, there was a weave of electric pink light in the distance, and soon I saw the sand dunes and I imagined I saw my father there. I figured the desert land suited him, that it was as foreign to me as he was, the bright orange dirt and shrubs and blue sky tempting my imagination along the long and empty road. Father might have slid down a dune but couldn't guess which side he had come from; perhaps that's why he couldn't come home. Father might have molded the turf with his body, gone up and over another dune, disappeared into the sand; maybe that's why he couldn't come home. If so, then I wanted to disappear too; for a minute, that is, not the way he did, not gone for the rest of

my life to the outskirts of Phoenix.

It was like Father to want to disappear into the sand. If he had disappeared out there beyond, how far would I go in to find him?

It's common to leave love behind, as Father did. Some say that love cannot last forever, that it is a storm dissolving to mist, that it disintegrates like dead skin in our sleep until we finally see each other for what we are. And yet it's not optimistic to say that we live only a moment and then are gone, with no one to remember us. If I love a person, I will take the two negative points and blend them, in the same way that two minuses equal a plus. If my life is a second in eternity, and so is the length of my love, then I'll let love live a lifetime, project it everywhere around me, and remain in a hopeful, optimistic space for the drawn-out second that I have. What else could I want but the sun itself, the journey itself, the mountain, the light that illuminated the Arizona highway, a straight line to an unknown destination.

The road was flat at the rim of the Canyon and the sky was beaming purple, orange and blood red. South of Flagstaff, Navajos set up shops along the freeway, thick cloths held up by wooden sticks. Within an hour of driving from



northern Arizona, red rock turned to bush and trees shrivelled to cacti. John's hands were tight on the wheel as the humid desert wind bellowed, and soon it was pitch black night, and we could not see the length of the road. Was my father right that it was barren here? I imagined him speaking to me.

“Do you see how vast it is?” he would say, seeing the land untamed.

But he always saw nothing.

And so we arrived in the nothingness of the desert, which is what my father saw in it. The sheer volume of land seemed treacherous, spread to infinity, lit by the soaring yellow light of the moon. Beneath this light I unfolded my father's address. 38 East Pueblo Avenue was a street with wide lanes and single-level homes separated by shrubs exploding up out of cream-coloured dust. Three homes in a row were boarded up, and one of them was supposed to be my father's.

“The homes are foreclosed,” John said, pointing to the tape blocking the door. So many in the city had become this way. And where were the people who had lived in them?

Driving away, the desert spewed warm air into our open car windows, and we felt the warmth on our faces, as we passed skeletons of buildings with the

people missing, whole blocks of them. We drove in silence to see this region where my father had lived, to find a clue to what had happened to him.

It was the dry season in the desert, and as we veered back to the open road we saw trunks of cacti bloated with water. We traversed low hills, and went up and over and around, the night so dark we thought the road could take us anywhere. We lowered ourselves down along the side of a mountain. And I was accountable now, I thought, because I had descended from the top of it.

I saw the land for the first time without expecting to see Father, and this made me feel raw inside, and nearer to the earth, and sunk down to where I belonged.

After the unsuccessful attempt to track down my father, I stayed in our apartment for days looking out the window at the sun. I wondered if my own skin and bone and flesh and blood was all I could ever be, if I would ever be able to transcend the mundane. As for John and I, I had always hoped that our skin would take us further, help us find some greater knowledge. I thought that love should go beyond ordinary touch to something profound. But now, when I touched John, touch was all that happened; touch stopped with touch, flesh

stopped with flesh. What was beneath my skin spoke of a deeper yearning, and I mulled over this disconnect between my soul and body, convinced that my heart was now elsewhere.

The apartment in Mesa we had rented for the month of May had a scruffy grey carpet that looked like it would swallow John's cigarette ash and my clay chips. A small kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom cost three-hundred and ninety-five dollars for the month. If I were an American unemployed in Arizona that year, I might have spent my time looking for work, which seemed as aimless and daunting a task as wandering the desert at the city's outskirts. But we were Canadian and there in the July heat, so there was nothing to do but keep cool in the twenty-four hour Wal-Mart. Beside the shopping mall, roses were plentiful thanks to artificial watering, and synthetic landscaping turned dust to grass, which was sprayed an even emerald for tourists from the eastern states who found comfort in the greenery of their hometown. It was fitting that my father came here to find nothing, I thought, for he had found a desert that denies its own nature, a desert city that seemed empty.

Like the desert I began to embody emptiness, a lack of hope, and John and I grew apart. He went out for full days or nights. He said he went to pubs,

but it was a mystery to me how he found an open one in the city. I imagined where he had been. He probably sat alone, but it wouldn't have mattered, because I could no longer imagine being beside him.

iv.

I remembered the day before Father left Port Moody, when he tried to gather cherry blossoms in our front yard, but they blew away as he reached to grasp them. The morning he left they covered his windshield before he sped away. He was so desperate to pretend he didn't know that I was watching that he also pretended he could drive with the cherry blossoms blocking his view. I couldn't see his face, but I knew he was struggling to see out of the window, looking down to the yellow lines on the road, hoping that they would lead him, as reliable as his breath.

The Friday after Father left, Mum was wearing her brightest knee-length skirt for the holidays, lighting candles by the window. We lived then where she lives now and where she always lived, across the street from Soli's bakery where they sell golden challah and latkes that are thick and salty, where the smell of pumpernickel fills the place. Soli's was the only bakery where Mum could find her traditional treats, pastry baked in butter and cinnamon. Even Father had liked those.

Mum imagined she heard Father arrive home as she lit the candles; she imagined hearing his car door open, slam, his footsteps upon the walkway, the

latch on the front door spring open. She covered her eyes as she imagined this, and held the heat in the pocket she formed in her palms, saying the prayer over the candles that I cannot recall. Evening went black and her candles brightened as I approached her, noticing the bright blue of her skirt.

The next day, we stood by our shore, and for the first time I noticed her back where her bathing suit rubbed her skin, where it covered the curves of the body I came from. It was then that I imagined her sitting on the couch to feed me when I was a baby. It might have been seven o'clock, and her living room curtains were drawn, and a single lamp lit the room. I imagined her lower her head to watch me, tucked inside her robe. Her robe was made of baby-blue cotton and had a small green flower on the breast pocket. She wore it around the house for years, its belt sagging, half tied at her waist. Its smell was of baby powder and baked bread. This is the inside of memory.

I thought of John, and hoped for love to dampen what was dry in me.

Mum was ritual embodied: not only with religion, but also with daily life. Dinner was at seven pm and if my father and I were not at the table, there was trouble. On one occasion I was five minutes late sitting down and she whisked the plate

from my sight and sent me to my room hungry. I stayed there alone until at ten pm I heard the clink of something at the bottom of my bedroom door and the sound of footsteps scurrying quickly away, and when I opened my door there it was, the chicken cold on the bone and mashed potatoes coloured with pepper, margarine pooled and congealed. I wasn't hungry but I thought of Mum in her bed, her feet beside my father's feet, and I opened my mouth to eat what I could.

I thought of my mother's cold dinner and couldn't stop looking for my father. If he would not come back for me, maybe he would for her, I thought, and I felt a desperation to reconcile them, as I had learned through John a small part of what it was to be in love as she was.

I tried to find Father in the phone book, and when he wasn't listed, I called Aunt Sue, who said she lost touch with him a year ago. I called Aunt Kathy and Father's friend Rich and the business where he worked. When I finally called my mother, the ringing over the phone was endless. Not a day went by that I didn't wonder how my mother was. How could I identify the things in the world when I couldn't identify my home?

Once Mum had told me that if ever something was wrong, that I should

look eastward, and pray. She told me that I could write down my wishes, and make them small so that no one but God could see them. I wrote for hours in this way when Father left, left crumpled notes for him upon my desk and hidden in drawers. They were clues with which to decipher him, as if he were a colour in Karen's orchid, but I could not identify that colour, for it was a colour without a name. Why did Father unplug the coffee maker though it was nearly full and bound to get cold before Mum came out for her breakfast? A mystery. Why did the flowers Mum grew frame the doorway, but Father's new lawnmower sat in the backyard all afternoon, straddling our overgrown grass? A mystery. Small actions such as these were noted, each a code to break a secret. Father's address written on a small paper in my pocket was my final clue, but this too locked me into a sense of loss. Even tying my shoes reminded me of him. He used to place my shoe on the scratched wooden stool purchased by my parents in a yard sale. There he was, my father, kneeling in front of me to tie the laces, my heel pressed into his palm while I laughed, not wanting him to stop while Mum was yelling for us to hurry.

Emotions might have been complicated between my parents, but Father's leaving seemed simple, the click of a turned key in an engine. Likewise Father



named me Crystal to keep me simple as he was, never minding the way light refracts through the gem, that I would learn to see its depth, following light as it projects from it into a thousand directions.

I had dreamed that finding my father would be a peaceful search, that in the desert there could be a day as misty as a Saturday in Port Moody, with cherry blossoms blooming and splitting and falling. I wanted it as calm as it was when John and I left the city, when we watched winter close as gracefully as the heat rose. It was not this way. There was something inside of me that was not at peace.

What did I see that Father couldn't? What did Father see that I couldn't? I searched Scottsdale, Tempe and Chandler. My eyes were glued to the road, unblinking against the car beams coming the opposite way through the hills. I scoured the streets of Mesa. There was hardly anybody outside. They were taking shelter from the heat. My father would keep inside too, I knew, despite his postcard to my mother, insisting that the desert was a better place for him.

“Straight south,” Mum had quoted his postcard, “until there is nothing but a vast orange opaque sky, sand sifting under my weight.”

Stony surface, Father had called it; and in my heart, I knew it was a blank

canvas that he wanted.

When I was young, and I felt something was difficult to do, my mother would not hesitate to point out that Jews had wandered the desert for forty years.

To her this meant we could do anything.

But where did they find their water?

v.

Our neighbours kept us occupied, a guy named Tracy and a crazy lady who lived in apartments beside each other. The crazy lady liked John and Tracy liked me. But more than that, they wanted to be just like us, for they imagined that we were not lonely.

One night when John did not come home and I lay in bed awake, I heard noises coming from the apartment upstairs. Tracy came over, apologized for the noise he was making and handed me a beer. He hadn't slept and said he felt like a vampire as he stared out the window, tracing stars. Tracy had imagined I was not lonely, but I was, and because of this I confessed that I enjoyed hearing the clattering of his pots. They reminded me of John's apartment when we boiled potatoes or macaroni.

But Tracy had been moving his canisters around as if he did not know what to do with them. I assured him that I knew well the weight of empty things, and could tell that those he fumbled with were weightless. I decided that Tracy was washing the same canister again and again, just to keep it, empty and polished to perfection. Perhaps he found, as I had with sculpting, that sad people need ritual.

Tracy went back to his apartment. I knew he would doze at sunrise while I lay on my stomach and wondered where John could be, hoping I would smell his cigarette smoke coming from the kitchen. I pictured John driving home to me with one hand on the wheel and the other on the radio, exhaustion lines under his eyes that he didn't know about. Now everything he did seemed like something he didn't even know that he did. He didn't watch himself anymore.

As alienated as I felt, I still watched him.

For this reason, I tried to develop some kind of routine for us, since it was my fault that we were in the desert, and my fault that there was silence between us as heavy as my parents' silence.

Just as I wanted to help Tracy, John liked to help the crazy old lady who lived upstairs, and she would ring our doorbell all morning requesting favours from him regardless of me standing behind him. She asked John to carry out her garbage, and he winked at me and did it for her; sometimes she wanted a doughnut from the gas station, a cigarette or a carton of cream, and still he did it, and neither of us knew why, only that such events got us through the day.

On Thursday morning the sun was particularly bright, and John seemed like his old self. He said he was going to go for a jog, and as he left I stared at the

green wallpaper and listened to the percolating coffee, my bare toes feeling the cigarette burns hardened in the grey carpet. A knock on the door was the upstairs lady again, her eyes searching for John, holding a gift for him.

It was a potato.

I stared at the dried-up thing, like a heart in her hands. She seemed to think it could help strike up a conversation with him, or strike up something in him. But she did not realize, like me, that she had a problem.

I realized I really was in love with John. But I thought of my parents' broken relationship and the desperation this lady had and decided that I wanted nothing like it, and that afternoon I took the potato and fried it in garlic and served it to John. I put the bowl between him and the TV which we had found in the alley. I sat beside him, looking blankly at the screen. When we arranged the bunny ears to some invisible receptor in the sky we picked up the Wheel of Fortune on Mexican television. That day was special because of the answer on the game show that ended everything, and also began everything, sparkling in green and silver. The letters on the Wheel of Fortune spelled "Santa Barbara" on the screen.

California was the answer.

Karen had told me once that what you know, you know in your body. I knew that this was where my father had gone. Or I imagined it, which is as close as I had ever gotten to knowing.

vi.

I pictured Father in the desert beyond with a sunburned face and squinting eyes. He wanted relentless heat, no rain that chills you to the bone. Here in the desert heat fuses muscle, and the body moves as slowly as it would in winter frost. Here there is dry heat that makes your body the only thing you can think of. My father might have been hanging around at the gas station, or at the hotel down the street which has a coffee maker that steams like a shriek and a bell to ring for service. He could be along the darkened road. Where was he?

That night, I fell asleep to the sound of the question.

To Karen there is only one kind of death. It is sleep and only sleep, sleep complete in itself. There is no heaven, not even a light shining; only a single moment when Father draws the curtain and shuts the light and pulls the door shut behind him, and there is darkness.

To Karen death is a neutral place, not where a person goes to be convicted of what they had done wrong. Unlike my father when he brought me gifts, or my mother's eyes when she looked at herself in the mirror and thought she was not raising me well. To Karen it is simply sleep.

Salvation comes when we wake up.

John had fallen asleep on the couch in our apartment. He woke suddenly.

“What did you see with your eyes closed?” I asked him.

“I don’t know, Crystal, but we have to get some place. Let me take you home.”

I said, “What do you see with your eyes closed?”

There was not enough space between my father and I to divide our breaths; he was and always will be my reference for intimacy. But the vast land that had grown between us was within me, and it expanded every time my mother took me by the wrist and read aloud the words on Grandmother's silver bracelet: “Ani ledodi vedodi li.”

She said that the Hebrew means, “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine.”

When I thought about Father leaving, I thought only of love, and I began to think there was meaning to my mother's Hebrew. I took the words “to love” and “to leave” and I looked up the Hebrew translation for them. Hebrew can be like a code, my mother told me, touching the bracelet. The dictionary said that in



Hebrew, “to love” is “le'ehov” and “to leave” is “la'azov.”

In both languages, the words sound so similar.

If loving and leaving are one and the same thing, then I'll go to the desert to catch an invisible thing moving through the dark, the headlights of my father's Honda, his hair shining with sweat. I used to wonder how much longer he would drive quietly without music and without speech through the darkness. I knew for example that when he drove to Olympia for business the road was often not well lit, that it twisted and turned, and yet he insisted that he should push himself further, driving onward, going south.

Before I came to see my father in a new light, and night became starless to me, and polluted by the city's electricity, we were driving through the forest of North Vancouver until we found a clearing. Seeing it, he cut the engine and went out between the trees so that I lost sight of him. I heard him plunge into the water far off. From a distance it was murky with weeds, and I sat mute in the car, waiting for him to come back for me.

Where did he go down there by the pond that was shallow, only inches of water above the ground? Now down low is where he went, down to the desert he

wanted. On that long-ago day the sun had burned him, and he laughed, with mud spotting his jeans and water dripping along his chin, and afterwards, while driving, his hands looked like withered leaves against the wheel, his skin wrinkled. Driving with him there was no bell ringing, there was no sound.

Later, when Father drove away for good that morning, he passed the border of Canada, a border I had never crossed except with John. I knew that when leaving, Father had hoped to go east, but went south instead to the border, to get the hell out of the country before Mum woke. He hit Fresno. He hit San Diego Bay. He drove past closed food stops and gas stations, he passed them in fourteen hours which felt like fourteen seconds, and then he finally went east, and pulled up to dark sand where there was a plastic bag in the dust, brown glass and cigarette butts. He was in the desert, the place he always wanted and never wanted. The sky would be grey because that's how it always was to him, even in the burning sun.

## vii.

Mesa, May 2010. Light poured in through the apartment window. Dawn was breaking. Did the pink slice of dawn symbolize night? Soon the moon would be gone completely. The moon never does leave of course, but disappears from our sight. Still, I knew I would lose vision of it, and to reconcile myself with this I dreamed of walking down along the curve of a mountain where I would find John walking up the opposite way, where I could tell him that I was sorry. Indeed I was, but I could not say what for. For leaving, or for something I could not give him. Despite this something was opening, the door my mother closed after she shut the light and I sank into the warmth of night. I knew that the sun was coming, that morning would come.

I knew that John would sleep through it, through the heat that came at eight am and was blistering by breakfast. I took his Honda and drove thirty miles past the Bank of America, the Wal-Mart and Riverdale Park. Past these places there was no structure; past these places land was boundless. The sand rose high, then dropped into dunes, giving a hint of more to come. Beyond orange shrubs sprouting like stop signs, and past the crumbling rocks, I saw the red rocks. I was going to study the things that survive in the heat, the animals which scurry for

shelter in the early morning, which seek new resources across the plain when their old ones run dry. I wanted to see the animals that find water in dry earth, who go through life barely taking a drink.

When John and I had driven with the desert spewing hot air into our windows, he had told me to be careful to follow the signs, the specified places to park, the warnings of lizards, rodents and snake holes.

John had told me, “Keep to the road itself.”

But I was alone. I traced the way we had travelled on the map, and I went farther. With the sun in my eyes, I stopped the car in the dust and stood with the flat plain around me. The wind roared at my skin like a wave. I thought I could heal here in the desert, away from the open water which frightened me, and I walked into the sand. I smelled dust and raw earth carried by the wind.

It was comforting to learn that I was small, that I was nothing but a shining pin in an open land.

I had spent time in the city molding clay earth, and so I thought that to understand the earth I molded, I should let it mold me. I walked in the heat, saw the thick brush sprouting up from dust, and considered where it grew from. And

I considered my own beginnings, my mother and father who birthed me, like the plants which grew as a miracle from the dust.

Where the earth bore roots, I made my first discovery.

I should never confuse my beginning for my source.

I couldn't exist by the rest of the world's guidelines in the desert, the ones that told me to drink milk and clip my fingernails. Here, the wind would line my nails with mud. To make a mold from the mud of the desert, I needed to find moisture, so I took the leaf of an acacia and rubbed it against a stone until it tore. I lubricated the sand with its insides, and I did this over and over again until I could mix the mud and shape a pot and lay it in the sun to dry. My hands developed a brown sheen. As the wet earth dried on my arms, I felt like something was starting to fall away from me.

The light began to fade, and a red dusk came, and I knew that soon the sky would be purple but for the moon's arc. I was thinking about how much gas was left in the car, how far I would need to walk to return to it, and where I could park and sleep. I wished then that I could be strong enough to stay in the desert forever. Desert animals are protected from the natural elements, with ears to keep

their brains cool, tear ducts to keep their eyes moist, and the skill I wanted to learn the most: the ability to shut their eyes so tight that not a molecule of light can get through their skins. The second thing I discovered is that no boundaries exist between living things. When the temperature heats up, animals and plants turn away to avoid burning. Their bodies protect them. Such actions are automatic. Everything is connected, everything is one, and everything is the same.

But how do plants drink without burning? How deep are their roots in the soil? Cacti devour nourishment in stems and guard water in their spines, unlike my father, who was not one for the desert climate, for its refusal to give him what he thought he needed. What he needed was to look closer, to find the plants on the plain which have learned to eat sparingly, which age like monks, brightening by discipline.

These taught me my final discovery.

Everything that lives here but you, Father, had acclimatized to the dryness. They make their own water. There is water inside the Saguaro cactus that juts high like a fountain. But Father, when you came here you did not imagine the inside of its trunk. Your hand was on the oily skin of the cactus, but you failed to

sense it breathing. You failed to dig, and you failed to find water.

Have you really gone to the coast where it can be gotten by the wave?

Here the sun is brighter, and when the soil bakes, cacti are nourished by reserves.

But Father, where do you keep your reserve?

If the Saguaro had not been hard as a rock, I would have broken it to show you its trickling ocean, its living well. And then you might have found acorns, the small fruit trees grown in mud, which I held in the palm of my hand. Agave roots roasted to sweetness, and mesquite pods by the handful. You could have seen the rolling sand dunes, and the tilted red rock and pebbled hills. If there is nothing out there, there is nothing anywhere.

Mum said that Jews walked the desert for forty years.

Where did they find their water?

It's simple.

People make it sacred inside of them.

What Our Hands Can Do



i.

End of May, 2010. I recalled the times when I had seen the mountains in Port Moody, and I went north to the mountain city of Flagstaff, since mountains were familiar to me. I stayed in a hotel and walked the city for days without even thinking of passing back through Sedona, the red rock along the four hour drive to Mesa. The nights were short and chilly, and there was enough rain to sit outside and get my hair damp. Roses could be put out on the window sill without shrivelling, and at sundown, I watched a bloody orange colour fill the sky. It was a colour I would have liked to fall asleep and dream to, but dreaming was the one thing I could not do without John.

The room I stayed in reminded me of the studio I once rented with Karen. It was so quiet that my own sounds were audible; my breath, the shuffling of my body in a chair. Footsteps, or the scrape of a stool, or a nail dropped on the stone floor. Meanwhile, outside, the woods were darkening. It could rain. In the morning the trees might be sopping wet. I wanted to go out, then and there, but from the window I saw the air thrashing the trees, and knew the wind was tunnelling through the mountains.

There once were people who lived in this hotel, like there were artists in

our studio in Port Moody before they tore it down to build a condominium. But it is just nostalgia, and blind hope, of course, that convinces me that any past must be beautiful. What is real about the past is in the inside of us, deep down. This hotel had once contained a one-room schoolhouse. I was told that twenty girls boarded here. They filled the bathroom across the hall. I imagined them waiting their turn there, girls in loose dresses. What did they do while waiting? What did I do, when I was young, while I waited?

Buildings grow old as humans do. I traced my finger along the scratches in the tile floor, and, thinking of the girls who were once here, I heard a giggle in the distance. I envisioned a laughing girl running across an open yard, balancing on a swing, hearing her father's story. It was a laugh an adult could not have, for it was weightless.

Could I ever be so weightless?

Father acted as if things were hopeless. Had I listened to him, I might have accepted that love is a heavy weight, that a string dangles from my window and each foot along it has a bell that weighs down my heart. The bells would ring for me, and the future would come, but I would see nothing. I thought, if I forget my father, I can use my knife to sculpt the shape that I want, and I can

make purpose, and see what is right in front of me.

How should I live?

I imagined Santa Barbara where there would be a pink complex bordered by palm trees, where my father was living by the ocean. I imagined the water was a ten minute walk from his house, and a three minute drive; that he would be living by the ocean and would have forgotten the desert.

Like Father, I would leave the desert. It was the dry season when I had arrived, and the trunks of the plants were bloated with water. I recalled that as John and I had driven south of Tucson, the map was spread out like a scroll, and we tried to identify what lay between us and the sands of Mexico, and which direction would take us home. I had turned to the plants which were tight with water and I taught myself how to emulate them, how to reserve myself, how to be quiet.

When heat rose to a hundred I learned to hide underground, and stayed in tunnels like a pack rat, or a snake.

But I always admired the tortoise. His movements are slow grips into the earth. He burrows alone. Guarded by God, he keeps modest, and safe from the sun and sandstorms. His ear openings are small sockets, and his scales protect

him like a glove.

What rescue do I have?

ii.

June 2010. The morning that John and I had left British Columbia, Karen packed her bags and went east, returning to the place she loved when she was young. I left the United States and went to her.

The night I arrived in Toronto it was raining, and the skyscrapers were luminous, my first sight of the city.

Karen said, “God gave us night to sleep, to learn what we dream of.”

Going to sleep that night, I closed my eyes to find that the sky was again a blue curtain, that what lay behind it was, again, a mystery to me, that everything awaited me anew.

The next day we went together to Kensington Market and bought herbs from a kiosk, because Karen didn't have a garden in the city. We went to her apartment on Lippincott Street, a building with a narrow entrance with the paint crusting off. Karen used to tell me how in Toronto, low-rise elevators take longer to climb three floors than the ones on Bay Street do climbing fourteen. I saw from the slow-switching lights at the top of the elevator that she was right. When we arrived home, I smelled burnt sage, and saw her cushions strewn across the floor, where I knew she would sing at the top of her voice so that all the tenants

could hear her.

On the balcony after lunch, wind thrashed against the maples, and I was chilled. Wrapped in my coat, I found that things were scurrying across my mind, like the wind blowing leaves beneath the bushes, hiding them from sight. There was the sudden clang of a metal key dropped in the distance, and except for that, there was silence.

In the desert I had witnessed the wind as a force that moves everything, like water, but such elements could take things slow, too. I, being of these elements, could take things one day at a time. Staring into the dark purple of a leaf which brushed against the balcony, I thought of the purple wax of my mother's Hanukkah candle, and the purple in Karen's painting, and knew for certain now that I was lonely.

“God's colour,” Karen had called it once, and I had agreed with her.

Karen arrived home at seven that evening as I was cooking spaghetti noodles. She pulled off her boots that had been soaked in the rain. Her socks were soaked too, so I grabbed a towel and bent to dry her. Her hair was in an auburn clip on top of her head, and I could see that it was thinning. Her skin was rougher than I

had ever seen it, and she seemed older. I thought, she misses Joe, who was still in Port Moody. I could see it in her face and hear it in her voice. There was a crack, a place where her words parted, where her tone admitted an absence. She showed half a smile, and brushed a tendril from her mouth.

The next day I bought Karen roses wrapped in red paper and yellow ribbon and put them on the table. I admired them in a tall glass vase, elegant, each a pose of pink velvet. Sight was made for us, and I knew this even when I ran my hand along the ads in the employment section of *The Globe and Mail*, noticing how the type dyed my fingers with newspaper black, fingers that had once been a dusty white-grey. Did I miss the smooth clay? There is no measurement for the unbelievable proximity of its memory.

It stopped raining, and I missed that too, for I liked the quiet of the downpour, the trickling sound of water along the drainpipe, how the road glistened in a changed light. When I looked out the window I imagined the mountains, too. It was difficult for me to conceive of where my time in the desert truly ended, and where this city began; whether I should feel glad to be somewhere new. I couldn't distinguish an ending from a beginning. For when an ending comes, the beginning starts right away.

## iii.

Toronto, April 2011. Karen did not mention John to me, likely because she believed that everything was in the hands of God, and that everything was for the good. And I did not seek John; although I was lonely for him, I figured that everyone is lonely. Still, this new unhappiness was one I had never known, and I thought of him when I saw everything, in a leaf that fell in front of my eyes, and in the grass that spiked through tufts of snow. I imagined God whispering to me that I should be patient, and wait a few more months, until summer; that in the meantime, I should walk to the water along King Street, and see where Karen had spent her youth.

I followed Lakeshore Boulevard to Bay Street, where Lake Ontario spread open. In the middle of the city the lake seemed far away, but I boarded the ferry and the city was reflected in the water and appeared small. The wind was cold, and there was almost no one else on the boat. Being from British Columbia, I thought of how I was used to the cold damp, and that perhaps others in Toronto, with the exception of a man standing off to the right of me, were not as accustomed. The man, I noticed, was looking out at the water, motionless as the ferry swayed, as if he had been riding the boat for years, and was used to its



bouncing upon the waves. Sunlight splintered against the white body of the boat, and there was a wailing sound in the distance, a solitary note of a cargo boat across the water.

I walked toward the man who looked into the distance, hoping to catch a glimpse of what he was seeing. And then by his silhouette I saw that it was John, and the railing felt like ice against my palms. I walked across the deck to reach him, my body charged. He was pulling on his cigarette, a tall shadow across the deck darkening the remaining patch of sun. When I stood beside him, he smiled.

I looked ahead as the ferry powered on, passing a lane that led up to a house that was lit inside to a golden hue. I imagined that the people who sat inside must be warm. I watched the wind blaze a white water path behind us, as the water creased and folded in a trail that evaporated to the east, bullets of foam spraying up, water fanning around us.

I remembered the day I had gone to the dock by the studio in Port Moody, how I had been afraid of water, and as I looked back, I understood that I had not been strong. Now the sun was an orange light that blanketed us as we arrived at the island across the water. We walked along the boardwalk and imagined how we would spend the rest of the season. The sun made us too

sleepy to do anything but look at the open lake, and I imagined it like a land within me.

When we returned to Karen's that night, she saw John beside me, but she did not seem surprised. I felt ready to lie down, for night is the time God gave us to sleep, to close our eyes and to see what we can dream of.

John and I talked with our eyes closed, to see what colours each others' hands would take beneath our lids, to see if we could recognize the outline of each others' fingers. Through my closed lids I couldn't see him clearly enough, and I began to get drowsy. He was still looking at me, though, and he was quiet. And then I was quiet.

He went to the bathroom and took a shower, and when he came back to me he lay with his eyes closed, but we were no longer playing the game. I decided to let him sleep and I went out for a walk. I passed old men walking through Little Italy and I looked at their eyes, hoping to panhandle some wisdom. No one stopped. But I found some within myself. I told myself not to be stopped by fear. I told myself to see beyond skin, to look inward, to throw my mirror in the garbage. I told myself to walk toward sincere love.

In the morning there was a heat wave, and the air stuck to us without the flow of the ocean we were accustomed to.

John said, "Let's find water to cool off."

We walked east to the outskirts of Toronto, crossed a Wal-Mart parking lot, and walked along a cargo train track, careful to listen for the sound of a train in the distance. We noticed the grass to the right of us trail down to a bank, the water sparkling in the sun. We slid down, and John insisted we put our heads underwater. Any rigidity in him seemed to lift, his lips growing plump and red from the cold water, his face glowing.

John explained that at one time he had destroyed his own idea of God, but now it surrounded him. He said he felt that I touched the leaves that hung from the branches of the maple that loomed over the lake, even though they were, in reality, beyond my reach; that in his imagination, when he was beside me, he saw leaves such as these studded with a silver rain. He said I widened his mouth, that he had faith. He walked to the edge of the water where the grass grew in patches, and suddenly there was something different in him, something older. We sat in the mud beside bus receipts and trash, listening to the trickling of

water. We heard the sound the waves make within us.

“Did the pink slice of dawn mean morning or night?” Karen had asked Joe back then as the sun was red on the horizon, and the skyscrapers’ shadows loomed above them, and they shivered in the cold dawn.

Joe's hand held a cigarette, shaking, to his lips.

“In the beginning,” Joe told Karen, “The sky opens. Whatever you want to see, please catch it now, so it will not fade.”

John and I caught it and brought it home, the last ray of light to kindle the dark. From light I made a story, and we set it in our apartment in the living room, and all night as we slept warmly tucked in it flickered against the wall. And I imagined Grandmother stoking that fire, that she would want it brighter, more luminous, filling the room. She would want me to bring logs in from the frost and set them to dry by the flames, instructing me in a different way than my father had, to see life imaginatively; that is, crystal-clearly.

When I think of my mother, I wonder: is Father contained in a memory in her body? Is it her ankle that feels him missing, her ear lobe that recalls him there

beside her? I know Mum's body remembers, that she brings the memory back like the rush of a white wave. If her love is found in memory, then when her memory of him fades, what is left?

I think of the ocean when I think of my parents.

I imagined my mother in Port Moody coming home with the mail, but as usual, finding nothing in it that she longed for. I envisioned her wiping her boots of mud from the walkway where soaked leaves mixed with grocery store flyers and chip bags. She would go out again, late in the day, and she would be relieved that at least, it would be summer soon.

She would water her plants then, and the sun would refract light in the leaves, showing pink and scarlet colours. She would feel the water sink in, and imagine the leaves satisfied, the stems soaking, sucking and glowing. She would lift a chunk of wet earth against the light. And she might gaze across the lawn to the distance, where the last of the afternoon rays paint the dock, and a ball of crystal light rests upon the surface of the water. She might stop to look at it, but she would not know why.

John and I were living in a small one-bedroom apartment. The kettle had been screeching, John's oatmeal was burning on the stove, and I was immersed in

a sculpture in the back, in a room that was really a walk-in closet, with my boots scraping the floor and the clay chips falling with the cleave of my knife. I was focused when John came in, and without a word, handed me an envelope.

I sat on the floor in the tiny room, opening the envelope, my jeans white with dust.

Mum asked how I was, said she loved me. She asked whether I had finally found my father. She said she had been counting on me to find him, that a full year had passed since anyone had seen him. I knew that my mother had kept tabs on him, directions to the desert scrawled on napkins, feelings she'd been ashamed to show. What I knew, finally, I knew deep inside of me; that's the way I knew my mother. She was desperate, worried that she had lost my father for good.

I would tell her how I had found the love she lost.

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