

KATE WAKE

by

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Abstract

Kate Wake is a fictional narrative about two women, one contemporary (Katie) and one historical (Kate Wake). The multi-genre, poetic account also delves into the history of psychiatric health practices on the Canadian prairies.

Kate Wake is loosely guided by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. I understand this myth as a working-through of loss by an individual compelled to return to the original scene (of loss), a sort of underworld ruled by sleep, memory and the unconscious. Doing so is risky, but may also result in a movement towards recovery, reparation and renewal: even if uncertain, a future.

Drawing on lexicons of music, visual art, poetry and psychoanalysis, *Kate Wake* develops themes of loss, hope and possibility as they might be found in the struggle of making a work of art.

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Influences, fluency, influenza: On Writing Kate Wake

In her book *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart writes,

Poetic making is an anthropological project; the poet undertakes the task of recognition in time—the unending tragic Orphic task of drawing the figure of the other—the figure of the beloved who reciprocally can recognize one’s own figure—out of the darkness. (2)

Playing on the idea of “drawing the figure of the other . . . out of the darkness,” my creative thesis *Kate Wake* paints a picture of two women, one contemporary (Katie) and one historical (Kate Wake). The poetic narrative also delves into the history of psychiatric health practices on the Canadian prairies.

Kate Wake is loosely bound by a guiding narrative framework based on the archetypal myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, in which Orpheus loses his wife Eurydice to death and must travel to the underworld in order to save her. Because of his gifts of poetry and music, he is successful in this initial task. But he loses Eurydice forever as the two travel up from the underworld because he looks back at her in spite of the gods’ prohibition not to do so. I understand this myth as a working-through of loss by an individual compelled to return—in an imaginary journey—to the original scene (of loss), a sort of underworld ruled by sleep, memory and the unconscious. Doing so is risky, but may also result in a movement towards recovery, reparation and renewal: even if uncertain, a future.

A discussion of ‘poetic making’: Influences, fluency, influenza

I chose the words “influences,” “fluency” and “influenza” to discuss *Kate Wake* because I believe these will allow me to approach the mysterious and sometimes nebulous nature of the writing process itself, and the writing, or “poetic making,” of this manuscript in particular.

“Poetic making,” as Stewart names it, is not such an easy thing to discuss. She notes that the Greek word *poiesis* derives from the word “to make” and “conveys two kinds of creation: the inspired creation that resembles a godlike power and the difficult material struggle ... (*techne*), of making forms out of the resources available.”

The process of poetic making, she maintains, is a struggle in part because it takes place in a kind of “darkness”—without the convenience available to the artist of a predetermined course. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud suggests that, with the darkness of sleep, we are also pushing out into the territory of the unknown, toward a darkness that may challenge the rationality of wakefulness, and of knowledge itself.

Two of the three words I have chosen derive from an intriguing etymological origin that points to such a darkness, a secret or unknown territory. Both “influence” and “influenza” come from thirteenth-century French *influence*, which denoted “an emanation from the stars.” The contemporary and more commonly understood meaning of influence—“the action or fact of flowing in; inflowing, influx: said of the action of water and other fluids, and of immaterial things conceived of as flowing in”—originated with its astrological definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) gives a second meaning for “influence”:

The supposed flowing or streaming from the stars or heavens of an ethereal fluid acting upon the character and destiny of men, and affecting sublunary things generally. In later times gradually viewed less literally, as an exercise of power or ‘virtue’, or of an occult force, and in late use chiefly a poetic or humorous reflex of earlier notions.¹

The etymology points, significantly, to a pre-scientific era of causal inquiry. For me, it also lends intriguing depth to and resonates with the *Kate Wake* story, which explores, among other things, notions of fate and the nature of diagnosis or certainty.

The three words, “influence,” “fluency” and “influenza,” are all connected by meaning, specifically to the sense of “flow,” a word which is most directly linked to “fluency” in its etymology.

I see the influences—historical and aesthetic (and ethereal)—on *Kate Wake* as a matter of flow, a coming together of many things—a confluence of influences.

¹ **Etymology: influence, influenza** < French *influence* (13th cent. in Hatzfeld & Darmesteter) emanation from the stars (also inflow of water; affluence) = Provençal *influencia*, Spanish *influencia*, Italian *influenza*, late or medieval Latin *influentia* < Latin *influent-em*, present participle of *influere* to flow in. The astrological sense (corresponding to late Latin *influxus (stellarum)* ‘astral influence’, 4th cent. in Firmicus) was common in medieval Latin: compare Pico della Mirandola *adv. Astrologos* iii. 5. Sense 4 was already established in Scholastic Latin: Aquinas (c1260) has *influentia causæ* (Prof. Bywater). influence, n. Second edition, 1989; online version June 2011. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95519>>; accessed 11 August 2011. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1900. **fluent**, adj. and n. Second edition, 1989; online version June 2011. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72067>>; accessed 11 August 2011. Earlier version first published in *New English Dictionary*, 1897.

Influences

1. History and architecture

Of the influences that informed *Kate Wake*, the most obvious are my extensive research into the history of, and my site visits to, the former Brandon Mental Health Centre, upon which “Blue Hills” is based. In a broader way, my writing was also influenced by my research on institutional approaches to mental health and psychiatric history up to and including current institutional practices.

I first came upon Kate Wake’s small, simple gravestone on visiting the cemetery adjacent to the former site of the Brandon Mental Health Centre (BMHC) facility in the early spring of 2006. I could find no record of her name other than a brief obituary note online, of about one line, which I thought *might* refer to her, but provided no details of her life. Kate Wake’s character as it appears in my manuscript is—other the fact of her actually having lived—entirely fictional. That is, there really *was* a Kate Wake who lived and was institutionalized at the Brandon facility and was buried in the cemetery there; her characterization in my story, however, is purely imaginative, inspired mostly by the happy coincidence of her poetic name and, to a limited extent, by the history of BMHC.

I had been interested for some time in the history of mental health practices in the Canadian West. Just before the turn of the twentieth century, in 1891, the facility in Brandon was the second to be opened in the West, a couple of years after the facility in Selkirk. In Manitoba, “lunatics” were housed through the end of the nineteenth century in penitentiaries. When the BMHC building was originally constructed in 1890, it was

intended and designed as a reformatory for boys.² After two years with only one inmate (a nine-year-old boy) and several staff members in Brandon—and with serious overcrowding at the Selkirk asylum—it was preposterous to continue operations under such circumstances. It became the Brandon Asylum for Incurables. In 1912, the institution, rebuilt after the 1910 fire, was renamed the Brandon Hospital for the Insane. Its architecture was modelled closely after other such institutions built during a period of fifty or sixty years from about the 1850s on, all of which featured similar architecture.

Echoing Foucauldian themes, Carla Yanni argues in her 2007 study *The Architecture of Madness* that housing the insane is partly a story about architecture, and late-nineteenth to early twentieth century designs for housing the mentally ill explain much about the era's attitudes and beliefs.

According to Yanni, early North American architectural models for asylums (as with colleges, medical hospitals and prisons) emphasized authority, control, categorization and surveillance. Thus, the widely adopted Kirkbride design for asylums included (as in medical hospitals) a central diagnosing area, also known as a receiving or reception hospital or building, and grand, window-filled buildings to let in sunlight and fresh air. Based on the severity of their illness, patients were categorized by wards that extended outward from the central building.

Furthermore, writes Yanni, “In the prison, university, medical hospital, and asylum, builders expected the human-made environment to determine behavior” (8). The buildings as well as the sizable grounds, usually a mix of pastoral and agricultural design,

² BMHC history is drawn from Kurtland Refvik's *History of the Brandon Mental Health Centre, 1891-1991*.

were seen as potentially curative in themselves. They were the setting for a moral program of cure thought to be effected by occupational agriculture and other work, a program based on the Tuke treatment developed at the York Retreat in the late eighteenth century.

Social reform played a large role; Dorthea Dix's crusades³ throughout the second half of the nineteenth century did much to change the treatment of the mentally ill for the better in North America. Early in the eighteenth century, the insane were still considered to be subhuman. With its emphasis on care for and humane treatment of those considered to be insane, and on giving them a place to belong, asylum care was an improvement.

By the mid-nineteenth century, insane asylums had been operating, and psychiatry professionalized, in the United States for some time.⁴ The rise of psychiatry and psychology in North America through the precursors of the early private asylums and the mind doctors and mesmerists throughout Europe in the latter eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries prepared the ground that transformed former potential criminals and the indigent into state asylum patients, with a right to a measure of care, even if that care would later be considered paternalistic. As Yanni suggests, in North America—and particularly in the relatively new country of Canada—state asylums marked a new era in mental health and a more hospitable attitude towards the mentally ill.

³ Cornelia Johnson writes in her thesis “A History of Mental Health Care in Manitoba: A Local Manifestation of an International Social Movement” that, “Lunacy reform was introduced into Canada during the middle years of the nineteenth century by Dorthea Dix who crusaded throughout North America to persuade governments to provide asylum care for the mentally ill” (iv).

⁴ Yanni notes that “In the United States, from about 1830 on, psychiatry was actually known as ‘Asylum Medicine,’ and psychiatrists created a professional organization (the precursor to the American Psychiatric Association) called the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane (AMSAMI), whose name suggests that they defined themselves as caretakers of large organizations” (7).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, approaches to mental health were shifting rapidly, often in paradoxical ways. A growing understanding that environmental factors contributed to mental illness allowed for the possibility of medical intervention. The burgeoning social awareness and greater compassion for mental illness were due in part to the spread of psychiatry's prestige and influence, and, in the aftermath of the Great War, the scourge of shell shock, which left many ostensibly fit young men suffering with mental illness.

Mental illness was coming to be seen as something that could potentially be treated and cured. But even with social changes and reforms in mental health, notions of “mental defectiveness,” “feeble-mindedness,” or lack of “mental fitness,” did not die. In fact, as Ena Chadha notes in his essay “‘Mental Defectives’ Not Welcome: Mental Disability in Canadian Immigration Law, 1859–1927,” these prejudices continued to thrive and evolve, often merging with psychiatric practice itself. Both scientific progress in the field of genetics and the extension of Darwin's theory of evolution into social Darwinism contributed to the rise of the eugenics in the early twentieth century.

In Canada, according to David MacLennan's article on the mental hygiene movement in Canada, Helen MacMurchy, M.D., was one of the first social reformers whose aim it was to “to link medicine with social work.”⁵ Her endorsement of public health and of greater state responsibility included a moral campaign “promoted by a group of women reformers whom Canadian historians have called the ‘maternal

⁵ As a doctor, MacMurchy also sought to promote “the role of a ‘natural science’ (eugenics) in the study of social problems and the role of the medical profession in diagnosing the causes of social problems” (11), with the aim of eradicating social problems such as “disease, immoral conduct, unemployment, feeble-mindedness, crime and pauperism” (8). MacMurchy campaigned for public health reform that would “find and record mental defectives in the community” (10).

feminists,' that promoted an image of the ideal family against the deviations which could be measured and toward which deviants could be guided" (MacLennan 9).

In 1909, Clifford Beers founded the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in the United States with the support of Swiss psychiatrist Adolf Meyer and the physician and psychologist William James. Canada wasn't far behind; the Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene was formed in 1918.

With its emphasis on prevention and early education, the mental hygiene movement emerged from the theories of Meyer, who, as president of the American Psychiatric Association, exercised wide influence. Like Freud, Meyer held that environmental factors, and especially those encountered in childhood, had an effect on mental health. The ideas of Freud and psychoanalysis were influential, but it was Meyer's pragmatic approach that focused and propelled North American psychiatric practice.

Beers was a mental health reformer who had himself been hospitalized in an asylum for mental illness and had suffered mistreatment during his time there. However, as Cornelia Johnson writes in her thesis on mental health care in Manitoba, "The prevention of mental disorder was the cornerstone of this movement; the protection of the mentally ill, as Clifford Beers had advocated, became secondary" (51).

Additionally, because psychiatry was still young—and a relatively uncertain field in comparison to mainstream, physical medicine—the movement was co-opted by two other major concerns: extending status to this newly emerged science (not least, through scientific programs of diagnosis, prevention, treatment and cure) and professionalizing the increasing numbers of health-care workers needed both to work with the mentally ill

and to sustain the asylum system. The relationship between regular medicine and the practice of psychiatry—and between the nursing profession and what later came to be known as psychiatric nursing—was shaped by this desire for professionalization. All of this was taking place even as psychiatry itself was still itself being shaped.

Beyond tracing a real and noble desire to treat and cure mental illness, the history of psychiatry is, in many senses, a history of the drive and desire to institutionalize psychiatry and to professionalize its workers, in order to give psychiatry legitimacy and authority and to win acceptance and status in mainstream medicine.

By 1919, the name of the institution in Brandon was again changed, this time after lobbying by the superintendent, so that the “objectionable” name would “reflect more progressive ideals and changes in the aetiology of mental illness” (Dooley 61). It became The Brandon Hospital for Mental Diseases. In the same year, Winnipeg General Hospital opened a psychiatric wing (Winnipeg Psychopathic Hospital) that would, from its opening onward, as in other urban centres, take precedence over the large asylum-style sites. The latter were quickly becoming unfashionable, due in large part to the stigma associated with their fundamentally custodial nature and their often-abysmal conditions.

While the quest for professionalization played out, these massive mental health institutions were often all but ignored by the general medical profession, and, subject to the whims of politicians (and, in a larger respect, to market forces), were largely underfunded and overcrowded. In 1918, a report on the Brandon institution showed one doctor for nine hundred patients (Johnson 53). Of course, there were many more attendants, and eventually nurses as well.

The stigma never subsided, nor did conditions ever really change. Christopher Dooley writes in his thesis on the history of mental nursing in Manitoba that, throughout the 1920s and into 1930, “In general, old paradigms of custodial care persisted and working conditions were such that the [Brandon] Hospital was unable to attract the class of nursing attendant that the reformers had envisioned. [... T]he hospital and its workers remained on the margins of the nursing and medical community” (65).

It was in part this story, of the neglect and marginalization of the asylum system and of those who were employed and institutionalized there, that compelled me to write *Kate Wake*.

2. Visiting the site; an archives of the absurd⁶

The BMHC site was interesting in its abandonment. When I first visited the site in 2006, the buildings were vacant and the grounds deserted, the facility no longer in operation. [The buildings have since been reclaimed as Assiniboine College, with redevelopment beginning in 2007 and continuing.] The site of the former Brandon Mental Health Centre, as it came eventually to be renamed, is impressive: The buildings are formidable and imposing; the grounds are expansive and lovely and sprawl over several acres of the north hill that overlooks the small city of Brandon.

⁶ This is an allusion to Martin Esslin’s term “theatre of the absurd,” by which he identifies new kind of theatre of the late 1940s to 1960s, associated with Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Edward Albee and others. Theatre of the absurd was experimental and existential in nature, with a focus on the incongruities of the human situation and the degradation of language, communication and meaning, usually in a darkly humorous way, often challenging theatre conventions such as plot and character. Important precursors were Antonin Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty” and his manifesto by the same name (1938), which emphasized the direct, visceral effects of theatre (on an audience) in order to shatter theatrical conventions and, by extension, social conventions that he believed preserved distance from reality.

With former psychiatric nurse Jesse Little, I toured the main buildings and their odd, residual contents. Among the dusty remains of electric machines and patient and staff memorabilia, the strangest items of all were the reclaimed department-store mannequins set in various poses and patient-nurse configurations throughout one fluorescent-lit basement wing of the main reception building. These “displays” were part of a somewhat ad hoc museum that had been operated by Little since 1972. Clearly, the “museum” had never been in any way official. To all appearances, the museum displays had been fairly irregular to begin with, and they had been further disassembled by the time I toured the site. Both factors only made it more intriguing to me, and more touching.

And immensely inspiring to my writing. Though Jesse Little bears no relation in reality to either of the “Jay Small/Little” characters in my manuscript, she, her museum and the site itself stimulated my writing process. The character is a sort of homage to Jesse’s audacity and courage in setting up the museum in the first place—audacity that can only compare favourably to the relative silence (and possible chagrin) on the part of the larger medical community regarding the site and its history.

Indeed, the very unofficial status of the museum at the abandoned site, with its left-behind contents, conveyed a strong sense of desertion, both by society and the larger medical community, of the people who were housed—and often warehoused—there over

the years, many of whom died there.⁷ That the institution began with good intentions did not lessen the feeling of abandonment or desertion.

Roughly catalogued and hand-labelled (by the looks of it, with the aid a typewriter straight out of 1972), Jesse's mannequin displays were placed amongst wooden tables full of paraphernalia and beside derelict machinery and medical devices ranging from ancient switchboards to straightjackets, from mouth-gags to electroencephalograph machines, and in rooms that included nursing uniforms that typified various eras, photos of social events and art and crafts items made by patients. One female mannequin was stiffly tucked in under a blanket, plaster body prone in a hospital bed, made-up face turned to the wall, while a smocked mannequin-nurse hovered in unbending, pitiless watch over her. That all of the mannequins were female was, to me, also significant. The outmoded, exaggeratedly feminine character of the department-store bodies and faces in their implausible poses added an unintentional irony (and tenderness) to the "scenes of history" and highlighted the often-incongruous expectations placed upon women in nursing, as a "female profession."⁸ Nursing in these institutions could not

⁷ The strange nature of these "archives" violates the basic principles of what constitutes an archive, namely a place that both holds in trust and in authority, in a specifically systemized, ordered way, what is stored within it. Jacques Derrida, writing in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, describes the archive as an institution that comes from its Greek name *arkheion*, a word for the house of those who were in command, "the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded" (2). The archive is therefore in the original sense of the word both a "guardianship" and a "hermeneutic tradition," and "[t]his dwelling, this place, where [archives] rest permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public," which has the force of law and constitutes "the jurisdiction of this *speaking the law*" (Derrida's emphasis).

⁸ Christopher Dooley provides extensive description of the expectations upon women in the profession through the first half of the twentieth century in his thesis "'When love and skill work together': Work, Skill and Occupational Culture of Mental Nurses at the Brandon Hospital for Mental Diseases, 1919–1946." For instance, he writes: "Ideologically, the observance of strict discipline and rituals of deference contributed to the creation of a nurse who conformed to contemporary expectations of respectable femininity."

have been an easy occupation. The economic crisis of the late 1920s, however, did make it an attractive—even if temporary—option for young women at the time.

Jesse was forthcoming about and very proud of both the museum project and the history of BMHC. Given the ambivalent, and even controversial, nature of that history, her enthusiasm for it could be considered unique; the history itself, on the other hand, is far from unique. Such derelict sites sit abandoned all over North America, many of them similarly filled with dilapidated equipment and even old patient files.

3. Art and literature

In addition to the history of psychiatry and of the site, and the experience of the actual site, there were other influences on my writing. Most immediately, the works of many artists and writers influenced *Kate Wake*, my writing process and my thinking about writing in general. Some, such as Virginia Woolf, Rilke and Cezanne, I had read (or read about) and seen many times and regularly return to; others were new to me. While I won't mention all of these influences, I will note some.

The first that springs to mind is Stephanie Bolster, whose poetry I admire. A couple of years ago, for a creative writing course I was teaching, I used Bolster's brilliant poem "Girl" from her collection *Pavilion* as a starting point for a reading-writing exercise I'd invented, and which I called "dream poem." The exercise involves recording a dream in writing and arranging it as a poem by cutting up and rearranging words and images from the dream. Based on multiple readings of the Bolster poem, I asked student writers

to add two thought-provoking lines that stood out for them from the poem. After I used the writing exercise with my students, I shared it with my writing group.

Bolster's poem is both a personal exploration of identity and an intriguing study of the Vermeer painting *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. The two lines from the poem that struck me were, "What's at the back of the back?" and "When he was four/ my brother bit me/ because I was not him./ No one was." This latter image of childhood and complex sibling rivalry-love lodged itself beneath the skin, somewhere between my gullet and my heart. So did the line that invokes the impossibility of "back-ness" with its tenuous, sorrowful question. The lines resonated with a small painting I had done years earlier, of a boy sitting in the sun, back to the viewer, his shoulder blades visible and redolent of sprouting or clipped wings. I followed those lines and the image as they led me into, and through, writing *Kate Wake*.

My own poem that came from those lines was also an extension of my own interest in particular themes—love, flight (in all senses, and both metaphoric and literal), loss, fate, forgiveness, the past and memory, the magic of childhood, art, composition and creative processes (as well as creativity in the context of institutions), illness and recovery, transformation and metamorphosis, dreams and the nature of the unconscious, to name a few.

Ultimately, the poem that evolved from the image of the boy left behind and the impossible "back-of-back-ness" became the core of *Kate Wake*. These also provided me with a sort of back-through-time movement for the narrative, a movement that centred on questions about memory and the "stuff" of memory, to echo the subtitle of Mary

Jacobus’s insightful chapter in her book *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis in the Wake of Klein* on psychoanalyst Ella Sharpe, called “‘Brownie’ Sharpe and the stuff of dreams.” In Jacobus’s chapter, the “stuff” she examines in Sharpe’s language is metaphor, and in particular, in Sharpe’s practice of psychoanalysis with patients, metaphors which range from textile to film; in a similar way, I was interested in looking at the “stuff” that “holds” or “constructs” or “keeps” memory—from the mind’s eye to actual media such as paintings, photography and film.⁹

The working-back-through-time became a guiding principle for the kind of narrative I wanted to create. This quite literally influenced my way of writing the stories that comprise *Kate Wake*, segments of which seemed, at times, to develop of their own accord, from end to start.

I reread much of Rilke, including the two works translated by the wonderful writer Edward Snow, *Sonnets to Orpheus* (for obvious—and so many other—reasons) and *Duino Elegies*, as well as *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and *Letters on Cezanne*. I reread Carolyn Forché’s beautiful book of poetry *Blue Hour* and found inspiration in the title poem from that collection. The poem is about the hour before dawn, during which the mother of the poem nurses her newborn infant. The hour

⁹ Much has been written about the “stuff” of memory, of course, and memory’s function(ing). Thinkers, poets and artists through the ages have used metaphors and comparisons in an attempt to represent memory or theorize both memory and the “medium” (and media) of memory. In the modern age, this exploration spans from Freud’s seemingly rudimentary “mystic writing pad,” to Foucault’s famous genealogy of the construction of a kind of social memory that operates by exclusion in order to privilege or preserve certain concepts (such as “reason”) upon which social agreement and institutions are founded and continue to operate, to French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s provocative writings on Freud and the “archives,” to more contemporary media theorists, such as Mary Anne Doane, Jaimie Baron, Thomas Elsaesser and Alexander Stein. Each of the latter poses the question of memory in terms of the relationship between memory and (preserving or capturing, and, potentially organizing) media, both internal and external, both literal and figurative. They include in their wide-ranging approaches considerations of technologies and alternatives such as cinema, documentary film, music, noise and pure sound, the Internet and spam.

becomes a meditation on the nature of time, heritage, mothering, mind and memory. I reread Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station*, which guided some of the language of love in *Kate Wake*. I discovered the work of Derek Jarman, the filmmaker who died of AIDS in 1993, the year his transcendent last film *Blue* was released. For me, both this film—which consists of a long poem spoken over a blue screen without any visuals for the full duration of the movie—and his writings cultivated insights into the creative process as I developed *Kate Wake*. They inspired in my thought the possibility of a “filmic music”—poetic, spoken, without visuals; non-imagistic¹⁰—and, in this way, changed my thinking about the unconscious and how it might be structured or represented. (For me, Jarman's blue screen also merged with Bonnard's transformation of the line into colour.¹¹) Alexander Stein's work on memory, sound and music in his article “The Sound of Memory: Music and Acoustic Origins” confirmed, in retrospect, some of my own working hunches about the nature of memory as a kind of music, an “interiority made into sound” (60).

Music and musical structures played into my process in other ways. Music informed a way of working and of structuring the work, in terms of rhythm and codas, movements and phrasing and counterpoint, and acted as inspiration, a sort of ideal to which words could aspire. The poet Roo Borson describes this ideal relationship of music and poetry in her book of essays *Personal History*. She writes:

¹⁰ As Jarman says in his film, a “[b]lue [that] transcends the solemn geography of human limits.”

¹¹ Bonnard's declaration that “Line is sensation; colour is reasoning” is, according to Nicholas Watkins's *Interpreting Bonnard: Colour and Light*, a “reversal of the traditional academic hierarchy which assigned to drawing the mental, organizing principle, and sensations to colour” (31).

The first time I truly heard music (though I've listened to it all my life) I must have been twenty years old. I was walking across campus to my dormitory. It was autumn, Vermont. Here and there a brilliant red or yellow leaf came see-sawing down, and someone was improvising on a piano: the small music building acted as a resonating chamber for sounds that rolled out round and clear and amplified. I stood for some time on the sloping lawn, then sat, and after a while it came to me: the *quality* of the sound had changed. The ornamented, riverine surface of the music had become, abruptly, *articulation*—whose meaning, unfolding was perfectly obvious—and perfectly untransposable into words. John Wannamaker, in his program notes on “Sonata for Flute and Piano” by Francis Poulenc, says:

... this melody is no less than miraculous in that it begins with a flippant up-beat and has two playful trills inserted into the melodic line—and it is still beautifully cantabile. It is, of course, a melody that only the flute could get away with ...

Poetry is made of words, yet it is exactly as articulate as music, and as distinct from ordinary speech, the motion of thought is its real melody. Poor poetry, I want to say—fluteless, impoverished. But it is still beautifully cantabile. (12)

With the structures of music, and with the *rhythms, repetitions, assonance, sounds* of words (rather than their untainted meaning), and—just as importantly—through pacing and pauses, silences, caesurae, I tried to create a sort of an affective poetic interiority in parts of the manuscript—one that (I hoped) would also be *experienced, felt*, by a reader. While all of these considerations played into my process, it was still with the overall aim of telling an affective and effective story. I gave a great deal thought to the ordering of events (and reordering again) in order to determine just the right overall sequence of “movements.” Much of this process was one of trial and error and seemingly endless false starts; the entire work is, in this regard, a kind of formal experiment.

Two other writers and one artist whose works stimulated my thinking during this time were introduced to me in courses taught by my advisor, George Toles. The first was Janet Hobhouse in her book *The Furies*, a fictive auto/biography with a crisp voice that became something of a lodestar for me in terms of a brave, candid tone and intelligent style that was possible in the first-person. A second author whose work had immeasurable impact on my writing is Carson McCullers, especially her novels *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *The Member of the Wedding*. The latter influenced my work thematically in several ways, and structurally, through McCullers’ use of seasons and weather.

Finally, the painter Pierre Bonnard’s work was a constant accompaniment to my writing and thinking about *Kate Wake*—for all of the reasons Katie finds solace in the work, and more besides.

Fluency

Perhaps one reason Bonnard's painting was so significant to me in my writing process was because it illuminated a movement from influence to fluency. This movement is a transmutation I see in Bonnard's *oeuvre*, and in individual paintings. In Bonnard's work, ideas and theories and various other influences are all eventually left far, far behind as something else emerges: the flow of a secret language, an invention of a new lexicon of surface, paint, plane and object, of colour and composition. That, to me, is what is so exhilarating about his work.

Art historian Elie Faure wrote about Bonnard's work in 1924:

Like the rarest artists, he gives the impression of having invented painting. This is not merely because everything in the world—everything, every day—is new for him and so he expresses it in a new way, but also because he stands at the dawn of a new intellectual order. He was the first to organize it, following a rhythm of which we had been unaware before his arrival: the fine old harmonies that make us what we are. (Antoine Terrasse 81-2)

The artist himself protested that, "I invent nothing. I observe" (111).

Pierre Bonnard began painting in the late 1880s as one of a group of French painters that included Édouard Vuillard, Paul Sérusier and Maurice Denis. They called themselves "Les Nabis," a Hebrew word that means "prophet." According to Antoine Terrasse in her book *Bonnard: Shimmering Colour*, the Nabis used the name in the secret sense of "initiates" (Terrasse 17), which they considered themselves to be "because they went in secret to see and learn from the experimental canvases of the Impressionists, who

were then causing consternation and outrage in Paris, and whom their teachers were rejecting out of hand.” They soon followed instead, as Terrasse notes, the “even more radical art of [painter Paul] Gauguin” (17) in their use of colour fields that emphasized flat surfaces rather than three-dimensional perspective.

Individually, Bonnard was influenced by commercial poster art and “the possibilities of color lithography” (Terrasse 26), by theatre (for which he designed posters and sets and other paraphernalia such as masks and costumes) and by the Japanese art that was becoming known in Paris at the time. By early in the 1890s, Bonnard was continuing with the Nabi group but also striking out on his own, with commercial work and book illustrations, and his own approaches to painting. Many of his early paintings were of street scenes, and these embodied what Terrasse calls “a heightened subjectivity”: “He always loved the simple and the quotidian—the motion and bustle of life—and often chose it for his theme” (31).

In 1893, he met a young seamstress, a twenty-four-year-old woman named Maria Boursin “who preferred to use the name Marthe [Meligny]” (28). They soon co-habited, and she became a lifelong presence in his paintings. His family—his sister and brother-in-law and their children—held great importance in his life, and his nieces and nephews often appear in his work.

In the early twentieth century, Bonnard discovered, as did other painters of the time, the Midi (the south of France). This shifted his attention to questions of colour and light in relation to form. Terrasse says he was “seduced by color” (61); “Color, he said, was the rationale, the motive for the work” (79). This motivation sustained his work.

Bonnard followed “his instincts in the choice of theme” (65) as well. According to Terrasse, his oeuvre was one in which he returned to certain kinds of subjects “randomly and repeatedly, rather than in an orderly progression of series” (65). From his own sketches and drawings and photographs, Bonnard composed and pieced together his paintings in parts, with different motifs appearing in his interiors and landscapes. The two were often combined. Terrasse notes that he “was especially fond of the image of a threshold between two states: interior and exterior, light and shadow. Sometimes a figure stands on the border between them” (65). He worked from the sketches he did daily, often from memory, working and reworking, with several canvases on the go at once. Art historian Jean Clair called Bonnard’s work (and his bond and friendship in work with fellow artist Henri Matisse), “a place in which nature is the domain of faith rather than knowledge: where art is a daily activity, like prayer” (104).

As he and Marthe, whom he married in 1925 after years of cohabitation, retreated to a more solitary lifestyle, his work became almost exclusively confined to domestic scenes. The retreat was mostly due to Marthe, and possibly because of her lifelong illness. Accounts of their lives never detail the precise nature of her illness; perhaps it was never diagnosed—by some accounts, it was a skin disease that required her rituals of bathing—but from all accounts, there were other troubled elements beyond the physical. (Bonnard left a young lover at Marthe’s behest in the early 1920s, model Renée Monchaty, with whom he was very taken and wanted to marry. Monchaty subsequently committed suicide.) Most of Bonnard’s paintings include Marthe. Many are of her in the bath, a place where which she loved to spend a lot of time. These are the paintings for

which he is best known. Antoine Terrasse describes Bonnard's intimate scenes as being "sensitive to figures isolated within the silence of a habitual act as if in the secret world of a private dream" (87). His paintings show a nimble, precise sensitivity to space and form as they relate to the intimate and commonplace aspects of daily life.

In his later paintings and his self-portraits, there is something almost chilling in that transformation Bonnard effects within the world of the painting, a sort of simplicity, or distance, that is pleasing but also unnerving. It is "set apart" in a way I would call holy. Perhaps this is because, eventually, in his work, even the *thing itself* is left behind. The objects and figures are transformed, while still crediting "the primordial connection in Bonnard between looking and reflecting—between, as he wrote, 'the model before one's eyes, and the model in one's head'" (Terrasse 95). Beyond a sense of "everydayness"—and beyond any transcendence—it is, rather, this thrilling *daily-ness* that is evident in each individual painting, the daily-ness of ongoing, transformative, manifested practice. In Bonnard's view, a painting must "ripen like an apple" (104).

In regard to painting, Bonnard said: "[Y]ou will never succeed in rendering reality when it is already perfect. The point is not to paint life, but to bring painting to life" (Terrasse 106). This transmutation can be seen in the placement of windows, the vertical segmentation of some canvases, the parts and the echoes and rhythms of parts, the alternately shady and luminous reaches of Bonnard's colour, the way one's eye swims in this painted world, and in the figures that are never just figures but personalities, in spite of their peripheral placement. Bonnard goes beyond transforming objects in his paintings and creates a world of the painting, the world that is *created* by the painting. As Antoine

Terrasse writes, “Bonnard raised to a new level the intimate dialogue of man and inanimate object” (89).

“One never tires of looking at Bonnard’s work,” said a friend and fellow painter.¹² I, too, find Bonnard’s work incredibly seductive and moving—and it inspired me *daily* to seek a way of creating such a *world*, an atmosphere, an aura, a music, through words, through daily practice.

Both Bonnard’s approaches to painting and the biographical details of his life (as well as the details of Marthe’s life) informed my own content and methods at times. I experienced daily epiphanies simply from looking at and learning about his work.

All of it—Bonnard’s transmutations, new lexicons, the intersections of music, film and poetry—brought me to thinking about the nature of desire and alchemy, about alchemists who used the “language of the birds” or the “green language,”¹³ about the possibility to reach beyond metaphor to the “stuff” itself, Rumpelstiltskin-like, to spin

¹² Painter Maurice Denis wrote this in a 1953 article about his friend’s work; Terrasse includes the document in her book on pages 120 to 122.

¹³ There is a wealth of mythological material on special languages, esoteric knowledge and alchemy dating back to pre-Christian times. In the ancient Jewish tradition, according to Ellen Frankel in her book *The Classic Tales: 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore*, King Solomon’s request for wisdom results in his being given the ability to understand “the language of the birds and beasts.” A “language of the birds” also figures in the Sufi legend of the “Conference of the Birds” by Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar, which dates back to the thirteenth century and tells the story of birds that go in search of a bird-king. After their lengthy and difficult travels, the thirty birds that remain find the image of the bird they seek in the sum of their own reflection in water.

Joshua Gunn, in his article on Freemasonry, “Death by Publicity: U.S. Freemasonry and the Public Drama of Secrecy,” writes that alchemy was “[u]nderstood both as the proto-scientific quest to turn baser metals into gold and as a spiritual quest to improve one’s soul, [and] was protected and practiced from antiquity well into the eighteenth century. As with the Masons centuries later, alchemists recorded their studies and teachings in the ‘language of the birds’ or the ‘green language,’ a difficult cipher of symbolism, character, and code, because they feared persecution by religious and state authorities” (256). E. R. Truitt, in his article “‘Trei poète, sages dotors, qui mout sorent di nigromance’: Knowledge and Automata in Twelfth-Century French Literature” writes that those with secret knowledge “are described in elevated terms as philosophers, poets, necromancers, and wise men fluent in the secrets of the heavens, who fashion the automata ‘par enchantement,’ ‘par nigromance,’ ‘par art,’ or ‘par augure.’ Their knowledge is often linked with study, counsel, the seven liberal arts, and ‘cumpas’ (the knowledge of astronomy needed for reckoning the liturgical calendar)” (177).

straw into gold. I am reminded of Bernard, the narrator from Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*, which is also (among other things) a study of character and story. Near the end of the book, Bernard says, "I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. [...] Great clouds, always changing, and movement [...]" (183-4).

What is this fluency, this green language? I mention all of these influences as examples—there are more—because, for me, they feed, and did feed, into a fluency that is also a kind of gratitude for all of these works and where they brought me through my writing of *Kate Wake*. (Perhaps gratitude is the real "green" of fluency.)

Where is this green language? Here on this earthly plane, Rilke exhorts: "What if we're here just for saying: *house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit tree, window,*—/at most: *column, tower* . . .[...] *Here is the time for the sayable, here is its home. Speak and attest. (Duino Elegies 55).*

Influenza, and other undefended states

If there is a green language, it flows mysteriously from sources that (then) surface unpredictably, without clear causal or singularly identifiable paths. A dream drive that reaches from the concrete and flowers into infinity and back, it might be a language that proceeds, as Rilke wrote in *Sonnets to Orpheus*, without "the courting of some end to be attained."

Rilke writes, "Singing, as you teach it, is not desire,/ not the courting of some end to be attained./ Singing is Being" (11).

“Easy, for a god,” he adds.

That “being” Rilke calls “Orpheus”: Orpheus “when there’s song. He comes and goes” (15). His Orpheus must “disappear for you to grasp it ... he’s already in that other realm, where you can’t follow” (15).

Rilke points to a “double realm” (23) of the image and its shadow or disappearance, the image and its blurring, both here and beyond here, elsewhere. For us mortals, *being*, according to Rilke, is that rare openness, in which we are “finally open and receivers” (69).

Keats names this openness “negative capability.” Psychoanalyst and cultural critic Adam Phillips, in writing about what poetry seems to promise, what it seems to “offer—or disrupt—in psychoanalytic theory and practice” (2001: 3), also calls upon this concept. In Keats’s words, negative capability is “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Phillips 23). What poets do with language, Phillips suggests, is appealing precisely because it opens up space—uncertainties, mysteries, doubts—through words, “words hospitable to interpretation, words wanting to be subject to multiple perspectives. Words that are inspiring because they resist fetishization, because they are not propaganda” (27).

“Influenza” is the third word I chose to guide my discussion of writing *Kate Wake*, in part because I like the way its distinctly unscientific origin stains its meaning and opens it up, and how its etymology —of “astral influence,” of “emanating from the stars”—opens the word to a time not so very long ago, when medicine was ruled less by a

vocabulary of materialistic, scientific reason, of strict equations of symptom and cause, of diagnosis and cure.

In medicine—and especially in the medicine of mental health—diagnosis has always been the study, quite literally, of “deviance” from a model of (mental) health in terms of symptomology. By definition, diagnosis is “the identification of an illness or a disease by means of a patient’s symptoms,” and, often interchangeably, “a *conclusion* reached by analysis of a problem or situation”¹⁴ (my emphasis).

But there is always a sense in which, as cultural theorist Peggy Phelan reminds us, life’s vitality—its continual shifting and mutation—grows exponentially outside of the bounds of the known, and defeats any conclusion. This is also the sense in which the idiosyncrasy and particularity of the individual case—and the individual medical case history—exceeds the “category” into which it is to be assimilated. Some “deviance” always defeats a standard of “health.” *Diagnosis* and the *cure* cannot balance one another, nor cancel one another out; they do not perform a perfect equivalency. As Phelan writes, “Something central to the vitality to the body cannot be contained by even the most exhaustive psychoanalytical cure” (55).

My own research into psychiatric history was partly motivated by my conviction that psychiatry—with its increasing social authority and medical status—risks its own future through its refusal to look back at, and acknowledge, its history. In particular, it could reconsider the stories of its history that “exceed” or “deviate” from the current “case” it has made for its own status as a medical science. Rather than an attempt to

¹⁴ *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*.

“cure” that history of its unscientific, uncomfortable and culpable *messiness*, perhaps the messiness can be rethought—as more than just an embarrassing “glitch” in some progress towards a positivistic science of the treatment and potential cure of mental illness.

Christine Stansell writes about rethinking history in her brilliant article “Historic Passion: Dreams.” Following early modern historian A. Roger Ekirch in his assertion that “our entire history is the history of waking men” (241), Stansell suggests a less positivistic approach to history. The “historical consciousness” (250) she proposes draws on Keats’s negative capability and is inclusive of knowledge that is less easily classified. This historical consciousness, she submits, would exist

somewhere on a spectrum marked by wakefulness and analytical intelligence at the one end, sleep and dreams at the other, [so that] we can consider a range of intermediate states and the mental operations they facilitate. It is a task which requires an interest in fine degrees of difference and a belief in the flexible and inventive properties of mind. It is not a problem which can be illuminated by Foucaudian theory. [...] One legacy of the post-modern movement has been an overweening insistence on the disciplinary and surveillance function of knowledge [...] The Romantics redirect our attention to a different comprehension of the imagination’s ability to outrun discourse and outwit power [...] (251)

Perhaps this is also the kind of consideration that ought to be given to psychiatric history. The relentless quest for “cure,” in imagining or hearing the human condition only in terms of an *a priori* symptomatic deviance (as defined by the institution of psychiatry: an authoritative, pathologizing, unilateral literature), could be mediated by a history that is, rather than just medical case histories, a corpus of *literature*—the stories of bodies,

memories, dreams, desires, idiosyncrasies—of the people psychiatry purports to help. More broadly, this is a literature that could be recovered by listening with greater openness to stories about the human condition and its creative expressions generally.

Rather than the continual quest for cure, perhaps a return to the value of care would be beneficial. Cure closes the case; care maintains an interest. Care, whose meaning includes the sense of “carrying [a burden]” and whose etymology derives from words with meanings as “sorrow,” “murmur” and “a lament,” might be instructive as a sort of counterpoint to cure, whose meanings include healing and recovery, the resolution of a problem, and whose etymologies derive from words that mean “secure and free from anxiety; apart from.” While healing is never a bad thing, not everything is curable. And cure is not our only hope.

Sometimes, as Virginia Woolf writes in her humorous and poignant brief essay “On Being Ill,” sickness—that is, the lack of cure, a lack of resolution—has things to show us. In this it bears a striking resemblance to love. She writes, “The public would say that a novel devoted to influenza lacks plot; they would complain that there is no love in it—wrongly however, for illness often takes on the disguise of love, and plays the same odd tricks” (6)

During illness, our sense of the world changes in its entirety. Woolf writes, “[L]ying recumbent, staring straight up, the sky is discovered to be something so different [...] that really it is a little shocking” (13). From our prone perspective, the world has changed its shape. Illness leads the sufferer alone, says Woolf, through “[i]ncomprehensibility [...] with the police [of reason] off duty” (21), reaching for

obscure poets, in need of a “new language” to describe it, a “new hierarchy of the passions”(7).

Self-deprecatingly, satirically, Woolf tracks illness—something she knew a lot about. It leads her through “a snowfield where even the print of birds’ feet is unknown” (12) and into “the undiscovered countries” (3) ruled by the body, smashing the universes “the mind has civilized” (5), while nature and “the wave of life flings itself out indefatigably” and the “army of the upright marches to battle” (16).

Ultimately, in Woolf’s essay, as the editor Hermione Lee writes in her introduction to it, “a satire on conformity begins to make itself felt. The ill are the deserters, the refuseniks. They won’t accept the ‘co-operative’ conventions. They blurt things out [...] .” (xxvii). As Woolf characterizes it, “We cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters” (12).

Incurable: Notes towards hope

The filmmaker Derek Jarman—who, until his death in 1993, suffered from AIDS, a disease that was at the time incurable—commented on the ways in which AIDS activism, well-intended as it was, became a political cause that appropriated those with the disease. Jarman resisted this nomination, which he understood as a sort of co-optation that obscured his own experience as well as the lives of those he loved. As he put it in his final film *Blue*, “I shall not win the battle against the virus—in spite of slogans like ‘Living with AIDS.’ The virus was appropriated by the well.”

Summing up the complexity of his emotion towards death, illness and hospitalization, and his assimilation into the new category of “those living/dying with AIDS,” he noted, “The hardest thing is not illness but the institutionalization of cures.”

The institutionalization of cures, rather like any institutionalization, always involves a conversion, or an integration, assimilation, into a sort of regulation, an orderly arrangement and classification, an authoritative structure, a set of laws, customs or practice.¹⁵

Like historian A. Roger Ekirch’s counsel that we consider more than just the “history of waking men,” Susan Stewart’s “poetic making,” with which I began this discussion of writing *Kate Wake*, is a challenge to predetermined, diagnostic categories of knowledge and to a strict rationality of disciplines. Poetic making is making in which creative texts are born, texts that can’t be directly “diagnosed” or “cured” in terms of strict rationality, in the sense of solving a problem. Poetic making is an activity that draws on the nebulous sources and the weave and “matrix” of dreams, as Ella Sharpe named it, and that allows for negative capability, for the *sleep of reason* in which uncertainties, doubts and mysteries can flourish.

This sleep of reason is the “incomprehensibility” Virginia Woolf finds hopeful in an illness where the police of reason are off-duty. This incomprehensibility is at the heart of writing itself, Herschel Farbman contends in his article “Blanchot on Dreams and Writing.” At the heart of writing is the territory of sleep and the dream, where one

¹⁵ OED defines “institution” as: “The action of instituting or establishing; setting on foot or in operation; foundation; ordainment; the fact of being instituted; An established law, custom, usage, practice, organization, or other element in the political or social life of a people; a regulative principle or convention subservient to the needs of an organized community or the general ends of civilization.

experiences “the *forgetting* or loss of the work, the project of the work, and its possibility” (122, my emphasis). Farbman links this encounter of experiencing “the impossibility of the work that one has been trying to do” (123) with Blanchot’s “*sleeplessness* involved in the dream [...] a requirement of the changed night that Orpheus enters when he turns to see Eurydice” (121, my emphases).

We must, as Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “regard dreams as the guardians of sleep.”¹⁶ Dreams, as Phillips notes in *Side Effects*, are where we find respite for all that we can’t bear in the continual wakefulness reality demands. Dreams are “simple, intelligible and innocent in their virtuality; reality is complicated, bewildering, and we are never innocent in our dealings with it. No one likes the ways they lose things, so finding is preferred. Dreams are the way we talk about the unintelligibility of reality, about the ways in which we acknowledge this” (128).

The territory of sleep and dreams, as I noted at the start of this essay, sits at the furthest reaches from the reality in which the wakefulness of rationality rules—and from institutionalization, with its laws, its systems and classifications. It’s in this territory that we temporarily forget this reality, that it is not only held in abeyance, but is transformed, that the “sanity [that] tends to make a case for itself in the language of measurement and control” (2005: 44)¹⁷ and its defence—with its juries and ticking clocks—rests.

In this unknown territory, something else can grow that is inclusive of the gifts of sleep and dreams—reparative and otherwise—and that accepts the gifts of poetic making.

¹⁶ Quoted in Phillips’ *Going Sane*, page 124.

¹⁷ Adam Phillips writes in *Going Sane* that “Madness is equated with the loss of control, which is equated with doing forbidden things; sanity, on the contrary, is law-abiding, makes sense, and is equated with self-possession” (49).

Borrowing from the poet Robert Lowell (perhaps a benevolent irony, given Lowell's history of mental illness and violence) and his poem "Waking Early Sunday Morning," Phillips suggests that "something else" may be a "better sanity [that] would involve 'true tenderness'" (2005: 124).

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KATE WAKE

“To me it is the irony of fate,” she said. “The way they come here. Those moths could fly anywhere. Yet they keep hanging around the windows of this house.”

—Frankie from The Member of the Wedding by Carson McCullers

The first love is also there, running through the field as if he could escape.

—Carolyn Forché, “Blue Hour”

Two forces rule the world: light and gravity.

—*Simone Weil*, Gravity and Grace

She is running, breath moist, the air moist and glittering with threads of fog and frost. Her steps on snow echo bluntly in the close air, spruce branches slapping and pressing in like wet fur on skin, sticks crackling as she clears a narrow path. Run, run, running as fast as her legs will allow, a shivery spine etched out behind her in tamped-down snow. It's early spring, earth still hard under its fine veil of softening snow. At the periphery of a clearing, she stops, the sound of her own breath punctuating the calm in jagged notes.

Tall pines line the edges of the circular clearing. She looks back at the thick mantle of forest and up to where the vivid orange line bleeds into the night sky around the tips of trees, dark paper cut-outs.

In her mind she can still hear the anguished sound of the baby's cries through the hungry roar of the fire. *Precious child*, she thinks to herself, heart fluttering violently against her chest as she replays the scene, coming through the door after her lesson, coat still buttoned, the way time stops as Lena looks up with eyes strangely lit, a thick oily smell that she can't quite place and before she can think, Lena tells her, *Come, I have something to show you.*

Lena? she says uneasily, *Is everything all right?*

Oh yes, Kate, yes, everything is fine, and murmurs *fine, fine, fine* in a voice like glass, reeds brushing against glass ... and then *come with me,* and Kate, feeling light-headed and peculiar, follows her wafting walk out into the dimming evening.

It's chilly. Lena is walking quickly now, and Kate pulls her scarf closer as they walk, feeling vaguely bewildered, and sees that Lena hasn't even bothered to dress properly. Lena, though now a mother, is scarcely beyond being a child herself, and so whimsical, so unprepared, thinks Kate again, as she has many times. But she follows Lena silently, their steps crunching the thin layer of snow as they trace the entire perimeter of the large property, the apple orchard, trees barren and shrivelled with winter cold, the barn looming giant in the dark through the dense cascade of trees, and now past the back fence where the horses are stamping and neighing, unruly and impatient in the cold air with just enough humidity to signal the remote spring, before they return to the front tree where every year the flowers are planted, and which is still stiff with winter though dirt is starting to show through in spots around its base between the frost and snow. They are standing there together, Kate behind Lena, who has stopped and is now very still, head bowed.

Lena? Kate smiles and touches her shoulder. *Lena.* But Lena says nothing. When she swivels back to look at Kate, her face is lit by a wide, wild smile and her eyes are glassy, glittering electric green. The hair on Kate's neck stands on end.

Lena, what's wrong? What is it? Kate's voice is a whisper, stomach quivering. Lena drops to her knees on the ground beneath the tree and begins to weep, rasping sounds pulled from her throat. Kate thinks of something being gutted.

Dropping down beside her, she is startled by Lena's blind fury when she starts to claw at the dirt.

My baby, my baby. Clawing at the hard earth, her voice is coming in gasps and gulps now. *My baby.*

Kate is uncomprehending. Lena has been moody of late, wordless and crying mute tears during the day, crystalline filaments striping her pallid skin as she tends to her daily chores, wandering the main floor at night, unable to sleep. Kate can hear the muffled weeping late into the night, and Stephan has commented on it, pointedly. It happens often to women after childbirth, she wants to tell him, though of course she can't tell him this. Having seen his temper display itself more than once, she has learned to minimize Lena's fits and sensitivities.

To Stephan she is as much to blame.

The baby is in the house, Lena, be still, don't fret. Kate speaks quietly and firmly to call Lena to attention.

Lena starts, her movements are frantic, spastic almost, as she tears at her own clothing. *My baby. My baby,* she cries.

Lena! The baby is in the house—Be calm, she repeats, her voice rising. Kate leans in to grasp her shoulders, hoping to pacify her.

No! Lena shouts and shakes her off with such force Kate stumbles backward, momentarily stunned, and then hears the strangest sound behind them, and the black screen of night washes through with violet, a slight pulsing.

Her eyes blur, the ground tinted by colours that flicker over Lena's raw, chapped hands digging furiously at the earth, and for a moment it seems so eerily quiet that Kate hears nothing but the din of her own blood in her ears.

Everything jumps into hard focus when Lena looks up at her, eyes clear and desperate—Kate matches sound to certainty when she turns back to the violet-orange sky, lit up with flames.

Lena, what have you done? she gasps and then hears her own voice, screaming this time, as though it is coming from the air around her. *The baby—Lena, what have you done?* She starts to run toward the house, ablaze.

The haphazard fury of the fire, its power as it engulfs the frame of the house, all of it plays like a dream as she runs for the door. The handle of it as she gets to the porch is almost too hot to touch, the smoke so thick as she sidles in, and through it she catches a glimpse of the cradle on the far side of the room. Flames dance and leap, gleefully consuming the wood, the smoke is spilling so resolutely now, Kate can see nothing.

The crackling and sucking of the fire, the baby crying, they are all sounds that will haunt her. The way the flames lick at the windows, the house an illuminated etching, all blazing contour and outline. The vacuum of the inner room, windows blown out, floorboards collapsing, ceiling falling; nothing will keep it whole.

The child has stopped screaming. Angry columns of black smoke wind their way from windows to sky like ominous parade streamers. Announcing a death.

Announcing an escapee.

Above all, death leaves few prospects for innocence.

Kate's ears are buzzing and thumping with her blood, her fingers sting and she is chilled through, feet wet through the bottoms of her cracked shoes. Now that she's emerged from the forest, she can hear the sporadic shouts of the men, indistinct and diluted, as though calling from another world. Black spruce, white spruce tower like somber, waiting witnesses, a chain of trees arcing out on either side from where she stands, swaying, breathless. The cold coin of night shines from the opening of sky, slender light of stars reflecting dimly on the circle of snow beneath, a slice of ashen moon tossed to earth. Impassive.

She skirts the edge of the glade, careful now to conceal her tracks, and when she is satisfied that she can break away cleanly, begins to run again. Her steps thud like hammers on blunted piano strings, fish slapping against cloth in the bottom of a boat. Running, she can think only of getting to the studio; it is the only place where she will be safe, where she can stow away until morning, where she can conceive a plan for escape.

Despite the dark and her exhaustion, she knows the way so well her feet guide her. The dogs bellow behind her, far in the distance. They won't track her now. She draws the door aside, panting.

Hello? her voice cracks into the near-darkness of the vast room. A lamp burns dimly on the far side of the studio where William sits squinting over a canvas. His face flickers to life in the gloom, the tiny flame of light dancing over sharp cheekbones. Grasping the brush, his hand stills when he spies her with a quick intake of breath.

Kate! he exhales softly. The chair totters as he rises and moves towards her. *What*—? Outlined there in the doorway, in her dark coat, hair mussed and eyes gleaming with fear, she looks small and distant as an animal. And fragile. It takes him a little aback; she is strong and sinewy, not fragile. Isn't she?

From her odd stillness to the abrupt movement as she tugs at her scarf and coat, as though she were a picture suddenly come to life, he thinks, or a princess thawed after an evil spell. Kate is suddenly warm, unbearably warm, and trying hard to catch her breath, her mind goes blank, the fear—the horror—of the day overtakes her. With William close now, so close that she can smell the turpentine on his hands, the clammy acidity of perspiration, she staggers into his arms.

He steadies her as she tries to explain what has just happened. Guides her to and seats her on the bench as though she were a child, and finds a semi-clean handkerchief so that she can blot the tears and fluids issuing from her eyes and nose. She is crying now, shaking and crying so hard that she seems to be breathing in and out at the same time.

And again, he is unnerved. Though he has seen her at her most vulnerable, he has never seen her cry—a sliver of panic twists inside of him. She tells him in stumbling half sentences about the fire, the accusation, the chase. As she speaks he feels her panic leaping and stretching and swelling through him, as though they were one and the same person. She is usually strong and contained, upright; now it is as though she is falling, dissolving, and he is attached to her by a strong, heavy chain. The sensation of falling hurls through him. He has to fight the panic back down. He feels a sordid blackness rising, disquieting and solid, forgets for an instant what it is he's doing as he tightens his arms around her. Is he comforting her? Holding her in place? Stopping her tears? Stopping time?

The smooth curve of her neck, her trembling heat and mass in his arms convey him suddenly to a scene from his childhood, holding the sheep meant for slaughter, warm and aquiver beneath his fierce grip.

Sobbing into the sheep's velvety skull and long ears, the slow blink of the sheep's black eyelashes, like a wave, that tickles his nose which is snorting down over his lip and chin, he's stopped trying to wipe it, his father, angry and tall, standing over him, another wave, and the frightened animal is pulled away and he cries and kicks and squirms and screams bloody blue murder until his father pins him down hard under his big knee, square and heavy on his bony chest, and he wrenches his tear-stained face away, and he's trying to breathe, and breathing in dirt and mud with the bile rising in his throat. His father looking down at him in disgust, shaking his head over this *goddamned scatty lad*.

He's holding her, whispering her name into her ear, squeezing her so tight that he can feel her rib cage expanding and contracting under the cotton fabric of her dress, so pretty, that dress, its pale blue against her pale skin ...

He lets go.

And the next scene—he can't make any logical sense of the passage of scenes, one into the next, and he is shaking his head, as though he can shake out how it all leads to the end, it all happens so quickly: the swift, solid, granite rock of fate dropping to the bottom of a lake, its plummeting clarity through the cold, infinite blue.

One moment she is in his arms and the next, they are battering at the door, the wood shaking with their fists, the torch glittering in through the opening, and when the full glare of it finds them, he stands—apart from her and keeps standing there, silent, numb, hesitating. How does it come to be that they are shining the light in her eyes and then his, demanding he tell them whether he can vouch for her, but he can't vouch for her, can't vouch in the moment for anything but fate, flashes of half-completed canvases running like water through his mind, he can't still them, can't stop, can't speak or reach her through her distant struggle, she is fighting them so hard, her eyes wide and afraid and then, angry, disbelieving, *William*, she is saying, *William*

I don't know ... he hears himself saying. *I don't know.*

And they take her away.

Swimming, with this photo taken in the dark:

One day I rise to find everything rearranged
and unrecognizable, furniture a jumble
of unfamiliar shapes rubbed with years-old sunshine,
a silky thing inverted in the crevices of the eyes—

where left is always right.

Glassy door, a mirrored page, edges dulled—
a pirouette that ferries the secret world in, and out, and in—

stars appear one by one, falling

like petals

on glossy film, light staining

the glazed space between objects, falling

in and out of focus.

floating amongst, riddled with, crooked beds,
tumbled linens, bewildered wooden chairs, curious and cool
to my surroundings as Goldilocks. A story—

no, a picture.

In which, pictures line a corridor.

In one, a beautiful woman sits
for the painter
chin lowered, eyes lifted. Tangled
cotton summer dress reveals a starred sheen

of bare limbs that hover, watery
foreground against inscrutable folds,
interior green-deep, barely lit,
a continuous emerald—

in which, I can almost discern a child, a pet, perhaps.
A boldness in her eye betrays
something precarious, a reckless joy, glinting self-
possession, anger.

I think of a fish,
singular, mysterious, formal. Curving silent
and powerful beneath a threading green line, all metal
scales and jawed hooks, oracular. Its rose-blown
wallpaper gapes, entrails unfold like a constellation,
curve of a lover's garland, drooping,
crossed—

Recognition overtakes me, surges
through me, a pacific but insistent tide.

and the fish's implacable eye, shiny and remote,
forging its dispossessed, taciturn twilight,
casting back its whorled stare.

At distance I forgive thee; go with that.

When I show her the first poem and the script for KATE WAKE, she looks up at me from across the table where she is sitting and tells me, “I love the poem, Katie. Why can’t you make this into a series of poems about Kate Wake?”

She is calm. Her smile, tight and inward and a little sad, gives nothing away, though her eyes are misting over—I know that she thinks she is doing good for me but all I can think is that I want to reach over and pinch her to bring her out of her reverie, to make her see me, to make her understand. *Look at me!* I want to say. I am a real human being. I am not that child from all those years ago, I am not some dreamy poet who will tell the sad story of a beautiful woman who died senselessly in a past that has nothing to do with the present, Mother, Herr Doctor, as Sylvia Plath used to call her therapist. My mother loved Plath. She read her poetry to me as a child and after she left, I read it for solace until I realized that Sylvia Plath was attuned only to death, to the song that death sings. She was in the grip of that fascination her entire, brief life. And I did not want to be.

I did not want to write a series of poems soliloquizing my great-grandmother Kate Wake, I don’t want to write poems, single, solitary rooms each separate from the next, each one dislocated, fragmented—to sit lined up, a collection of cheap souvenirs from her life, my own. What did I want of that broken-down world, of a world where everything accretes in sharp splinters and fragile glimmers? All of which add up to nothing?

But I didn’t know what to do with the images and bits and visions that came to me. I tried drawing the images, I took notes when the images came in words, I carried a

notebook, I wrote out my dreams on index cards, constructed movie scenes, shuffled them to try to discover the correct order. I thought of them as a sort of stuttering cinematography, a shorthand of animation, an erratic snowfall in which the words and images might add up to a blanket of story, that I might read the surface of for meaning.

I remember you saying to me, just let it be what it wants to be. Do you recall, telling me that?

And so I write them down, I note them out, a notation that is part poetry, part story, part scenes from a life, and part something else altogether. I want to draw out these moments, to make some sense of them, to bring this character, these characters that surround her—and my own story—to life.

Time in this story, these connected stories I'm writing, feels layered, and all of them tumble out, some in poems, some in narrative, some in images—but I can't make sense of it as a whole. At times it feels sculptural, almost, and I begin to think of pages and pages of transparent paper, each page with words shining through from the page underneath, and then in a hard rain, the ink spreading and seeping upwards through the pages, the present like a large reservoir holding all of its past. And releasing it, all of the pages streaming away in the rain down the river, me watching until the last one takes on water and the ink smudges and the pages float away.

Perhaps this sort of surrender, oblivion, is too much to expect.

For years I couldn't speak about it, and did my best to put it all behind me.

Everything possible was done to stop up the gaps, to bar the openings, to shut and lock all

the doors and windows, and to bury deep that place where it was all housed, until three things happened that, in their sequence, forced me back into memory. I became pregnant. I was reunited with my own mother, briefly, after many years. I lost my child. And then it all tumbled out of me like music. I tumbled.

And here, I might suggest, perhaps I am in need of a reader who can help me through the story, who can hold my hand and guide me safely along until we reach some gentle vantage point where, together, as we look back at a path that seemed inevitable and senseless, with a little arranging there, a bit of shaping here, it will make sense. Perhaps here, it will finally acquire a measure of grace.

Perhaps you are that reader, after all.

WE DISCOVERED KATE WAKE together. Yes, I can admit now that we did. It was a small, quick shock to come upon her gravestone for the first time early in the damp spring, there in the cemetery outside Blue Hills. The ground was still mostly frozen and there were chalky clots of snow caught in the tree line around the square graveyard. That graveyard to me was the essence of prairie. I was drawing and writing almost every day, there were new lines and perspectives opening up to me, the world was expanding, the sky had rolled back to reveal its innermost secrets. The graveyard seemed to me a wondrous gift. Like so many other things during that time it seemed incredible, new and condensed as poetry, unfolding with possibility.

The cemetery was flat and two-dimensional as paper to horizon, with its man-made squareness, its staked-off shape. Curve of sky in every direction, tall, ribboned tracteries of the skinny coniferous trunks and limbs along the outer edges reaching up to it in a paltry wind shelter. Squared, set off, bared and open to the elements. Challenging, braced, I told you. Hopeful, and possibly self-deluded, I thought to myself. If a landscape could be considered delusional, a landscape with its own private inner life.

It was March and we had just met. The air was edged like crisp lace with a nascent sweetness, the promise of spring—that's what the prairies are like, I said to you, my beloved prairies, and you smiled. Or a threat, you said, and kept smiling. I closed my eyes and added, and the cemetery, this landscape is of the earth, of the very earth. Of the very earth? you asked, smiling. Of the very earth, I replied, smiling back.

You may think I am being glib but when you smiled, you completed my world, there is no other way to put it. And you smiled at many things I said, and this made me exquisitely happy. Your wistful, secret smile, your voice. You singing to me quietly in the dark until I felt I was participating in you, a divine communion between us that had already begun, in a shared past, a warm, secret life that had been dried and folded up, a tea blossom waiting to reopen, unfurling and blooming in warm water. Winter flower, a paper flower that had sprung to life. I felt I could stay still beside you forever. I felt that I could and that I would be happy and satisfied and complete like I had never been.

The threat of spring always had both of us scrambling our way back into the house. No summer necessary, we thought. But I do recall that first summer we spent together, and how green and full it was, how promising, it somehow drew its verdant lushness through the rest of our time together, tiny threads reaching their entire, tendrilly length into the seasons that followed. How we fell our way into fall, and fell and fell and fell. How I read Elizabeth Smart by the shady river, a trembling inside of me, delirious and impatient with love, awaiting your return, feeling you there like the greenest hook and line inside, tender, ever-present, a tugging that eventually led me to thinking, tentatively, for the first time that I would like to have a child. For the first time I understood the sweet, the

reckless, unsystematic, determined chaos of love, the silly hope and plummeting depths and tenacious breadths of it.

If I was afraid at the time to name a precise future, it was at least a gap, a silent door that had swung open just enough so that I could peer in, into a long streaming column of light. A tall, secret tree greenening and growing inside of me, rooting down deep in the silty, internal rivers of me.

I thought at the time that a place was growing where I could belong. A place where I would belong. I whispered it over and over to myself, before I fell asleep, brushing my teeth before the morning mirror or silently in my head when I caught a glimpse of myself in some dark passing window. *Someplace to belong.*

When John Henry came to live with us in fall, it seemed like the perfect arrangement. It was 1996; John Henry was fifteen and I was twenty-two. Everything was whole and good and right.

He was happy to be with us, I think. I think he could sense the warmth we were living inside of. To me it was like a good dream, the best possible dream. Perhaps he finally felt safe and secure, for the first time since he was a small child. It was difficult to tell what he himself realized through it all, but for a while we were happy, snug, content and blessed.

But all that was before Kate Wake. Kate Wake and Billy. And Wolf.

it's dawn

noctilucent cloud scatters
children in the schoolyard,
stirring the still air—

apples fallen to ravaged patches
of city lawn, the jade and lime and sea
and bottle greens tainted, turned to
ginger browns, dirty russets, to soil and worm
and earth

There is a boy.

WHEN YOU STOOD THERE beside me again, silent, holding my hand as you passed the light once more over the gravestone, I felt sad and apprehensive, and I started to cry, just a little, very quietly. It was the second summer.

I was so glad to be home, to bring home to the place where she was buried, to have you there beside me for this strange homecoming.

It's late, night, late summer. The quiet mushrooms out around us, vast and empty, then slowly filling with the flat, distant stirrings of night. The air is cool, indigo blue. Walking home, the street lights are just coming on, with a slight buzz, aquamarine fireflies against the sky, last dregs of twilight. You're home for a couple of weeks before you'll be off again.

John Henry was in care, as he was two days of every week, and so we take our time walking back. It starts to rain lightly, just a drizzle really, and the rain glints off the dark streets and under the street lights, and our small, ugly city is momentarily transformed into a lovely dark jewel and exudes that just-after-rain smell and we laugh as we run home in the rain and shake ourselves off and run up the stairs to the apartment.

When we got inside, you kissed me, and we kissed with such passion, and I loved you so much in that moment and we made love and you ran your hands all over my skin the way you did, as though you were trying very hard to memorize the contours of my

naked body and keep me there with you and understand me all at once down to the very core and it was all I could do not to cry again for the second time that night.

We drink red wine late into the night, talking, lying in bed, touching each other, our hands can't get enough. The apartment is lit by the streetlight, light shadowed through with rain. The walls glow night-blue. You are thrusting deep inside me, everything throbs with life and wonder, beating inside me like wings, tears run down my cheeks. Your fingers dig into my back, pulling me closer, and it's as if I can't have enough of you inside of me, I am arching myself up, flung back, hands grasping for the sides of your body, your buttocks, shoving my hips up to meet your cock. My belly pushes against you, your groin and stomach so warm we are moist with sweat seeping between our bodies. Your spicy, heady odour mingles with the cool air wafting in. Head back, I release my breath, open my eyes to the curve of your shoulder, smooth as a shell, your skin gleaming golden. The rain-streaked light shuddering at the windowpanes.

When I awake the next morning I remember: as we come to the end of the street, walking home and the rain just starting and we near a bowl of light formed by the next street light, there is a rustling in the wet, dark grass in front of us, just outside of the circle of light. I jump. We laugh. You move closer to it, curious. "A bat," you say, surprised.

And it is. Curled up and barely moving, it is an injured bat. Its furry little head is tucked sideways and one of its wings is extended like an arm, limp and splayed open, its hide thin and tender-looking, almost translucent, like the skin of a plum. Helpless, it hops feebly from side to side, clearly panicked. Before we can decide what, if anything, we should do, it gives a terrified little leap into the air and disappears with a flutter into the dark brush by the roadside.

THE FIRST TIME HE SAW Kate Wake—really saw her—he sputtered to life like an old engine coming to in spring after a winter under snow. His eyes gaped and then fluttered, his back, usually curled like a protective hand over his latest manuscript, blocking out everything else—he'd taken to writing after all these years—suddenly straightened right up. His entire bearing changed. It wasn't entirely clear whether the deep shift that caught him somewhere low in his abdomen and sprung up through his thorax to the roots of his hair follicles was simply from being startled by the thought of again having an impact on someone else's craft—not to mention, life—or whether it was just some form of instinctual fear based on years of practised solitude. Hell, he didn't even paint much anymore.

The sheer, haphazard ridiculousness of her name. And to his chagrin, the doubled irony of the effect she'd had on him when she suddenly singled him out, and he'd bristled to attention like a schoolboy. He felt some mix of revulsion and complete irritation at being roused from his incognito existence, by a woman, no less, and a woman who was, it could not be denied, beautiful. He hated that most about her, immediately. That, and her strained, almost-timid manner laced with underlying presumptuousness that prickled like light in a thick, dark grove of winter trees, the prepossession she infused in him. He didn't know what she wanted from him. Even after she'd told him outright, what she wanted, he still didn't know what she wanted from him.

It was raining. The prairie sky was ashen, smudged heavy with moisture. In Canada, painters were painting thickly impressionistic, strong works, mostly *plein-air*. But he hadn't painted since his wife left him, and then it was mostly paintings of her.

"Teach me," Kate Wake had said, when she'd finally found him at the small hotel where he sometimes sat in the evenings nursing whatever alcohol was available.

He looked up at her, standing there firmly in front of him, chin set. Her face was small, features delicate. Brown eyes with fine, straight lashes. Steady eyes.

"Teach you ... what?" he'd finally responded, annoyed, a little befuddled.

"Teach me how to paint," she said.

"Painting? ... Aren't you a singer?"

She paused. "A pianist," she corrected. "I don't sing anymore."

"And I don't paint," he said, finishing his glass.

Her face flickered with slight hesitation before resetting itself in an expression that he couldn't read but seemed to him somehow predetermined. Precocious. "You don't need to. Just teach me how."

He sat back, looking at her, as the room rustled with late-day activity around them. "I don't believe ladies are allowed in the establishment," he offered finally. He punched the word *ladies* so she couldn't miss his meaning. She stood still, very calm, but watched him expectantly, a look between hope and a warning, as though she were a schoolteacher and he her wayward pupil. "Come to my studio tomorrow afternoon," he said.

She sighed her relief. “Very good, Mr. Rast. I shall see you then. And I’ll be on my way now, as I am sure you have company joining you.” Her voice betrayed her triumph.

“William,” he said firmly, grudgingly.

She stopped, turned back. “Pardon me?”

“Call me William,” he said again.

“William,” she nodded, with a slight curtsy. Her eyes were liquid amber, clear, open, pupils wide. “I will see you tomorrow, William.”

She would indeed. William Rast was feeling resurrected. And he didn’t know what it meant.

He sat there for a while, had another drink. Stared out at the rain.

In the time-lapse photography of our lives, memories give way to immediacy and the past feels distant, like a dream dreamed by someone else. Does it seem that way to you?

A line from Rilke's "Lament" repeats in my mind: *I would like to step out of my heart's door and be under the great sky*. I don't know whether I'll ever send this to you, whether I'll ever have the courage to send this letter, but perhaps in time it will become something else, these words and images that appear to me as if from another lifetime, from another universe.

With all my heart I hope you are well.

It's so long ago now, and I've lost track of where you are, though I hear occasional news of you playing here or there, a composition of yours winning one award or another, you in town to visit your mother. Next to you I sometimes felt fledgling, with little more to commend me than an intense constellation of hopes, dreams and desire, much of which I had learned in the past years of my young adulthood to squelch in favour of extensive, fantastic inner monologues. I was often lonely, but I didn't spend my time alone; I had discovered the worlds of art and literature. They nourished me, a great, internal congregation.

February 1996. Running down in my bare feet for my mail from the grand front hall of the old apartment building we both occupied, I meet the new neighbour from 40d. You. Thin, with large expressive eyes, straight nose, bad teeth and a sly smile. I have just moved there from Quebec, to be near John Henry. You spied me first, as you always told me, from the enclosed balcony of your apartment which looked down onto mine, where I sat through much of that year and wrote, and drew. Both of our apartments were at the back of the building, the balconies overlooking the river.

I'd heard your music wafting through the hallways, sometimes from my own apartment or balcony. Often your stereo was cranked to full volume with one classical piece or another, or you were playing a musical phrase over and over on the piano.

You told me later that your parents brought home your first old upright piano tied down with rope and blankets on the back of a pickup, in winter. You had just turned four. They'd found it through the classifieds, bought and retrieved it from an old house by a snowy lake in Ontario, from some precious musical doyenne being moved into a care home. You'd inherited her musicality along with the piano, you half-joked.

It's winter and I am watching the moon out my window flicker through snow that's still billowing up from the drifts. It's all but stopped snowing now but the sky, violet-grey, mutely glowing, is heavy with churning flakes. I can't remember how many nights now

I've been awake, watching the moon travel its slow, low arc across the narrow glass pane, or imagining the moon, when it's absent, or masked by snow, and thinking how unchangeable, how relentlessly constant, is the snowy, wintry sky.

If you were here I think that I could sleep; if you were here I think that I could be still, that things would feel tranquil, peaceful. I think I would not feel so restless.

I would not be drifting off, at the unkempt ends of the night, to short sleep between starts, and dreaming in bits and pieces in ways that bring no wisdom, no relief.

But you are not here. And really I have no one to blame but myself. I don't know how I'm going to get through this winter.

The past is a coupling of phrases and images, the occasional image that shifts from one into another, a series of stills, some ancient zoetrope that's flickering its flipbook-motion pictures of scarcely changing scenes, a limb shifted there, a foot in motion that becomes a step at the slowest imaginable rate ... a bird whose wings lower and lower and lower and eventually gather air ...

dawn splinters
rusty posts, black swan trail
to ravaged patches

noctilucent
points of contact *click* from his back
sprout like wings

a boy in a t-shirt
his back a play of greens tainted, turned

to shadow and light, ginger
sunshine
spinning the fine, pink air around him

He stands, uncertain.

I've seen
him, have paused
to look at him

Endless night after night I watch the rose-crested sky, listening to the grey drone of telephone and electric wires. The provincial communications building looms in the dark windows, glowing, a little like a ghost town with its millions of telephone wires, computers, huge cooling fans, all of the lifeless technologies I imagine inside that have long outlived and replaced wooden and metal switchboards and human operators. There's something comforting about the idea of row upon row of switchboard operators holding watch over their city by night with their jaded, ordinary powers to connect you to a waiting voice on the other end of the line, efficiently punching through your call, rerouting with a crisp, "I'll connect you now." The building emits strange sounds at night, pressing outward, electromagnetic energy expanding and contracting and expanding again into the air around the building like a large simmering beast. The sound pesters my ears, my skull, invades like tiny insects that grow stronger, pulsating, the sound stirs and shifts through my body, the loose, tinny hum working itself into clefts and fissures. It's the vibrations that keep me up all night, night after night. One night becomes two, two become three, three stretches to a week. I begin to lose track as I lie there, night after night and think to myself, I must be sleeping, and just unaware. Is it even possible that I am not sleeping at all?

I can't sleep.

I can't sleep. The phrase sings through my head, softly, like a refrain, eventually sears. I am exhausted. My brain won't work properly in any sort of linear fashion. All it

can muster are refrains, musical choruses, old voices. It can muster repetition, and little else.

My husband carries on with his day-to-day life, work, the drive into the city from our sleepy suburb, long hours at the office. The last night I slept, he told me I awakened him at four in the morning with the words, “Be good to me.” I half rose from the bed, and turned to look at him, but I was sound asleep as I spoke them. I got up and went to the kitchen, which is where he found me later, in front of a window of winter night, with my hands stretched out before me, palms up. Like I was petitioning God, in the midst of a psalm, I thought later, praying for deliverance, for grace, for pity. I remember nothing.

“Does anyone really know anyone else?” I ask Elly later, feeling simultaneously mournful and matter-of-fact, when she’s preparing tea for the two of us.

“I tend to think it’s rare,” she answers calmly. “People understand possibilities for their own lives in others, see themselves over and over.” She pauses to pour the tea. “Rare that two people can see one another clearly, accept one another.”

I ponder this, surprised by her answer. Insight isn’t something I tend to associate with my mother. “I think people are mostly lonely and try not to think about it,” I say.

She looks at me sharply. “I think people are less lonely than you imagine.”

I shift my eyes away, uncomfortable.

She sighs. “You’ve had a rough go of it, Katie. Try to sleep, let your body rest.”

Elly plays the piano and sings to me, and I love her then. I love her so much. Her voice is quiet and wavery as a thin stream of water running from a faucet onto a soft

surface. She makes up a funny little song that includes all the letters of the alphabet, and, somehow, many rabbits. I'm smiling, the melody is beautiful, each line followed by a piano line of warm staccato notes, played softly, softer. I sink back into a blurred half-sleep, humming to myself. The deep pink eye of a pale, distant balloon punctuates a long ripple of ribbon that trails like afterbirth, a drained afterimage fragile as the palest, watery pink silk, floating petals on a calm blue lake. I watch as it is swallowed into a sky so blue it hurts to look at for long ...

I do sleep then, but wake again at night, shaky.

Elly leaves a few days later.

After she goes, I wake from a dream of a dark figure digging at the earth in front of a burning house, a woman running through winter trees awash with light.

It shakes me. I knew who the woman was, of course. I know the story. My great-grandmother, running through the woods, her accusers at her heels. I don't tell Ezra that the image is so powerful, so vivid, that its intensity frightens me, and as I continue my nights without sleep, it becomes more and more menacing. I follow, like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, I follow the running woman, she leads and I follow and I think, *this can't happen again*.

My mother told me about Kate Wake when I was a child. Singer, musician. Eventually, aspiring painter. Her grandmother. She spoke of her with awe, as though she were another life form, and in her voice I heard the wistfulness of the life not lived, the path not taken, of her own possibilities before she'd met my father, before she'd chosen him and their life together, before she'd chosen to stay with him in Manitoba instead of going back to California after their wedding that one magical summer. Before she'd become a housewife, with two young children. For women in those days, the many possibilities of life and the security of settling down were two very different things.

Elly, my beautiful mother. In photos she is all long limbs and shy grey-green eyes, pale skin and dark blonde hair styled into a sixties bouffant. Pretty, pink-lipsticked mouth. The wedding photos, my father handsome and impossibly young, my mother with her wary look fending off the camera. Honeymoon photos show her in a turquoise jacket and skirt with stylish pumps, elegant and adult. Though she was only twenty-two, the same age I was when we met.

She was a talented artist, although she never pursued her art. She drew for me, flowers, birds, this object or that, and once, my portrait. When I was very young, she would tell me about her year away in New York, her dreams of becoming a painter. She told me, too, about Kate Wake's painting. About William, my great-grandfather the painter. Once she read me a letter about them, what was it? As I grew older, when I asked

about her painting, she only smiled, her smile vague and distant. “Your great grandmother painted,” was all she’d say.

Perhaps she was vague because she’d never met her, perhaps Kate Wake didn’t seem quite real, perhaps it was all too close to her own story by then. Her grandmother, whom she never met but had only heard about through other people, through their stories, through the letter. Perhaps she, also, had reached back for a past as though it might lead her to a new future, like a children’s game, a prize at the end of the string. Length after length that she follows leads, instead, to nothing. It’s as if she never learned the lesson James Salter writes about, that one alters the past to form the future. I knew that in some ways my mother felt just as lost as I did.

In the summer of 1969, when she was nineteen, she travelled with her father back to Blue Hills Valley—where *he* had been born. There, as fate would have it, she met her future husband, John, our father, at a backyard party. He fell in love with her pretty much instantly. Later that summer, he drove his car out to California, worked at her father’s orchard over the summer and autumn, wooed her, married her, and then took her home, to Blue Hills Valley, Manitoba. A little more than two years after they married, I was born.

When my father died, something in her died. She went from a gloom-tinged vagueness to a sort of blankness swirled through with bewildered need. Soon after she disappeared to California I received a postcard, from Palm Springs, that read, *Mommy’s fine and here in Palm Springs, darling, you needn’t worry, please don’t.* The ink trails off

here, unsure, and then picks up again in her delicate handwriting. *I'll be home soon. It's lovely and always sunny here. Be good, help your grandmother, take care of your brother and kiss him for me. All my love.* The card's face shows Lone Palm Hotel, with palms lining the large rectangular pool. The back explains Palm Springs was named by a Spanish explorer who referred to the area as *la Palma de la Mano de dios*, or "The Palm of God's hand." Huh, I think grimly to myself, watching John Henry sitting at the table with nona. About a year later, a letter followed, full of my mother's guilt in her careful script, informing us that she'd decided to stay in California, she was very sorry but she would stay with her father there, he wasn't well. I didn't hear from her again until last year.

My mother called me at home. I'm still not entirely sure how she got my number, given we are listed under Ezra's name. Her voice is round with apology, as rich and comforting as I remembered it. Standing at the telephone, my knees are weak, I am numb.

Somehow, in our first conversation I tell her I'm expecting. Our first in-person conversation, that is. She rushed right over, and before I know it she is staying in the spare room. The other spare room.

"I'm so happy," are her first words, when I open the door. The sky frames her there, its late autumn blinding blue behind her. Our first meeting in almost twenty years.

She can't stop touching my face. "I've thought about seeing you for so long," she whispers, eyes bright with tears. "You're so beautiful, Katie."

She is still beautiful. I have never been beautiful.

"I'm pregnant," I blurt. "Two months." And invite her in.

Sobbing outright now, my mother is, and I hold her as I try very hard to maintain my composure. "Oh, Katie," she says over and over. Outside I'm cool, but my heart is pounding.

A month and a half after Elly appeared at my front door, I wake up sticky from blood pooling warmly on the mattress as I sleep. Ezra awakes a little while later to the sounds of my moaning in the bathroom. On my side in a fetal position, I'm rocking and clutching my belly in pain, the floor bloody.

Thanks to the medication she now takes before retiring each evening, which leaves her refreshed and blank as an empty page each morning, Elly sleeps soundly through the entire incident.

My husband carries me out to the car and we drive at dangerous speeds to the hospital. The snow-slushy streets are turning to ice, tire tracks streak the road, making it look transparent and blue. The car lurches sideways.

"Be careful, Ezra! The baby!" I gasp out between spasms of pain as we narrowly miss a car after jumping a light. I don't want to think about the irony of all of us dying en route to hospital, my mother dazedly occupying the house we've left behind, the house

Ezra the architect has designed and built from the ground up. His first house and his first project. Our house.

“I know what I’m doing,” he says, clamping his jaw and stepping on the gas.

Then the pain finds me again and mercifully sinks me back into myself, into the infinite softness of the blankets he’s placed underneath me, into infinite darkness, as the car accelerates. I have a final hazy moment of bemused, proud head-shaking. He is a determined one, my Ezra, I think, as if he is my son.

I come to to the sounds of voices. Nurses and doctors, I later realize. At first they look like alien undertakers, all dressed alike in their pale smocks, features obscured by masks.

“She’s a bleeder.”

“Blood’s making quite a mess here.”

“Bat walks into a bar, asks for a pint of blood ...”

Groans and stifled guffaws, one high burst of laughter.

“So that’ll be two Bloods and a Blood Lite?”

Ba-da-boom.

I'm staring up at (I swear) a large poster on the ceiling, circa 1983, of tall trees in a forest. The view is from the ground up, so that you are looking up the trunks of redwoods to the light of the sky—you know the one.

At first I think I'm dying, or that I've already died. And vaguely disappointed that death should be so cheap and clichéd, with bad jokes to boot.

Turns out I'm in a special emergency room in the maternity wing, a room that clearly hasn't been redecorated since a few decades back, judging by the hideous dusty-rose and blue colour scheme. The room is filled with outdated, badly varnished furniture and a basketed collection of stuffed animals in one corner, on the walls are more posters, these ones framed, bright and colourful with cheerful platitudes.

Could the inapt pan-spiritual poster on the ceiling be meant somehow to soothe? I think groggily. Its tattered anonymity suddenly seems ominous, as I lie there prone in the hospital bed spilling my blood beneath it, seems to tint the room with malefic humour.

What will happen to my baby if I die?

I moan for Ezra. But they have already ushered Ezra out, and I'm surrounded by medical staff. Amidst the chaos and general hilarity they suddenly notice I may be conscious.

"Oh dear, patient needs more sedative," an unidentifiable voice says from somewhere.

"She can't have more, she's losing too much blood," growls the doctor. I can see the whites of his eyes gleaming above me, pupils like dark pins. He looks very focused, I

think, somewhat impressed. I am also relieved that not only am I not dead, but that I (and more importantly, my baby) seem to be in very capable hands.

“Are you awake, dear?” manages the kindly nurse in a falsely calm voice. I try to make sound but can’t.

“She’s out,” the doctor settles the problem as he probes my belly and prepares to make an incision. The pain sears inside somewhere deep, I feel splayed open, frog-legged. I float in and out of the scene after that as though I’m falling asleep intermittently in the middle of a movie, sometimes inside my body looking out, sometimes nowhere in the room at all.

“Four months, four and a half, maybe.”

I know by now what our baby looks like because of the ultrasound, its tiny arms and legs and fingers formed. I thought I’d felt activity. I think about the room we are starting to prepare, I even think about Elly’s obvious glee.

I see my mother’s face floating above me, angelic and concerned. She reaches out towards me, extending cupped hands. Slowly opens her palms. Inside is a tiny flame.

Bits of the story continue as the faded redwoods gesture toward their mystical disk of sky through the crowding heads of blurred medical aliens, opaque black eyes staring down at me, flash of scalpel.

“Terminate.” The word rings in the room.

Angels

As a child I did not dream of flight. I dreamed of light. Of angels.

At the local coffee bar in Mont-Saint-Hilaire; it is summer, evening. The air is fresh and breezy; the outdoor patio is packed with young people. I am indoors, sitting by myself, I am nearly twenty-one, and I've enrolled in a drawing course and for the first time since I have lived here, things feel exciting, as though there are possibilities. I've been in Quebec for almost seven years now, mostly hating it. Next year I am planning to go back to Manitoba so that I can be closer to John Henry. He has been moved to a facility in Blue Hills Valley since my grandparents passed, closer to our nearest relative. Aunt Jane. I don't know whether she even goes to see him regularly.

Writing as the sapphire twilight lingers through the window. In the light, I see the beginnings of a film, something small, about a human-like creature who wants to fly. I can see the entire thing, frame after frame of her perspective without ever showing the character in full, rather, from a distance, or her shadow. I want to think about perspective with a camera in my hand but instead I write it all down. I think about all of the possible differences and similarities between interiors and outside. I can see it all in my head, the blurred focus, the odd switch-ups of depth of field, the periphery intruding into the frame, the lopsided rooms, the cupped ceilings, endless horizons ... pale colours bordered by deep reds and indigo ... there is only the voice-over saying, "This is the room where it all takes place, this is the room where everything happens ..." and then a series of rooms and

then a girl walking under the streetlights, in the rain, shot from far above ... and later, her transformation into this beautiful creature. She emerges, as from a chrysalis.

My friend Vicki from school joins me, and I tell her my idea. Why do I tell her? I don't know. Enabled, perhaps, by the something inside of me that persuaded me that there should be such a person in my life, with whom such conversation—about art, dreams, observations—would be possible. “Oh, like a flying dream,” she says. “Everyone has flying dreams.”

A few years ago, we had made a nervous peace after three years of war. Or rather, we had made peace after three years of her war on me. As the new girl, and someone who spoke French very poorly—largely unhappy and pale and morosely silent besides—I suppose I must have been an easy target. I was thirteen at the time, she a year older, having been held back a year. She was adopted, and *Eskimo*, she asserted with vociferous pride, even when the other girls mimicked her enthusiasm and called her names like blubber-eater in brave whispers behind her back. She always had a sharp retort in response, a bravado that kept the others wary of her and of what she might be able to do to them. She was, in many ways, as much of an outsider as I, but she was opportunistic enough, in that way that only junior high girls can be, to make use of my arrival as the newest unknown on the scene. Her strategy—one that allowed her to gain some social

collateral surprising even to her, one might imagine—was to chase me down at recess time, or any other time, such as on my way into or out of the schoolyard, and ply me with several of her famous bear hugs, which she said were Eskimo hugs.

She would spot me from across the schoolyard where she had gathered her newly acquired sycophants, who were impressed, I suppose, by her relative worldly wisdom in the rural French town, afforded her by having already gone through sixth grade once—bellowing, “There’s Katie! Here I coooooome!” as she beelined her way towards me, her hugs more violent from the momentum of the run. My gasping struggle for breath in her arms as she huffed and puffed and squeezed me tight, tighter, ugh, tighter—And—*a-un-deux-trois-quatre-cinq-six-sept—and-a one-two-three-four* huffing now—*five—six—and-a—seven!* she would say and then release and begin again, *A-one-two-three-four-five*—made the other girls laugh until the tears ran from their eyes. I was skinny as a rail, and she was big for her age, at an age when this kind of thing could be used to one’s advantage, even for a girl. Later, when her size started to be seen more definitively as a liability and the other girls were no longer so easily swayed by her sheer bluster, she had little choice unless she wanted to be completely solitary but to—if not befriend me—then at least team up, as all the girls moved in pairs and groups by then. And as I had already shown, to be completely solitary was to be suspect. When it became clear that her social cachet had run its course, she sidled up to me one day in the cafeteria and ate her lunch beside me without either of us speaking once and then walked home with me the next day and continued in this haphazard way to attach herself to me, less as a friend and more as a

kind of companion piece, as though we were two horses pulling a cart, or two separate wagons being towed behind a car, with a mutual general direction but not much else beyond this convenience to speak of. She continued her little bullying ways, even when it was pathetically clear that neither of us had any other option but each other.

We were both outsiders, both *Anglo* (we spoke English quietly, furtively, when we were sure no one was within earshot, whispering to each other our guilty secret), but otherwise we couldn't have been more dissimilar. She had no patience for books or quiet or for anything solitary, and when I wanted to sit and draw and write, she insisted we go for a walk, when I wanted to be left alone to read my book, she wanted to explore, take trails, be outside. And so I conceded, frequently and grudgingly. When I ignored her, she made fun of my drawings, of my silence, of my constant scribbling in my notebook. "What's wrong with you Katieeee, you're a strange one, aren't ya, and no wonder your mother dumped you for California, I guess you're just an odd kid, probably retarded just like your brother, aren't ya," she would taunt in her silly, singsongy non sequitur way, always saving the ultimate gibes—about my family—for just the right moments. For all her predictability in taunting me, she always knew how to vary it just enough to get under my skin, to find the thin places, to always make me feel a little like it was years ago and I was in her lunging, lardy embrace as the others laughed, my head being squeezed against the hard metal zipper and brittle red plasticky "Eskimo parka"—of which she was very proud, and which I was pretty sure was fake (she claimed it was a gift from her "real mother," something she'd declare adamantly about once per week and then insist, "she's

coming back for me,” on further questions of what happened to her mother, or where she was, or how was it that Vicki’d come to be adopted by a Québécois family out in the sticks) and which barely contained her already-developed (but always braless) chest—against her distended stomach.

“He’s not retarded,” I’d correct firmly, feeling my teeth clench and my eyes water and I would stay put as I grimly bemoaned the fact, silently to myself, that I had ever confided anything in Vicki at all, about my mother, my family, my brother, for all of my moments of weakness with her, that I had ever, in this godforsaken, backward place, believed in the possibility of friendship. At least back home, I was never partial to such illusions.

To her “everyone has flying dreams,” I say, no.

No. I am quite adamant about it. It surprises even me. I feel my face go pink in the glow of the indoor lights that are starting to take over from the now faded—oh, so faded—magical sapphire light of day.

“I’ve never had a flying dream,” I say.

She sets her cup down. If there is one thing Vicki is good at, it’s drama, especially the feckless kind, in which she only has to play the skeptic. “You never had a flying dream?” she says, incredulous. “Really! But I thought you wanted to be an artist! Or a writer!” she proclaims, as though my confession clearly shows a lack of imagination.

“No,” I say, a little jolt of temper charging through me. “You?” I lean down to sip my iced tea. I know by now what’s coming.

“Oh, yes, I have them all the time!” she says, smiling. “Up in the north, we specialize.”

“You specialize.”

“Oh yes, flying dreams are part of our spiritual quests. And I’ve had so many of them. On one I was even transformed into a bird. You’ve never had even one?”

“No,” I say again, my face hot, trying not to gulp my tea.

And in exchange for her one-upping, I was not going to tell her about the special experience I had had at age seven when I levitated up to the ceiling of my bedroom. It was before John Henry, and though my parents were fighting all the time, black, angry fights that lasted and lasted, the fights mostly happened at night, and in my seven-year-old mind the nighttime fighting seemed unreal, like the soundtrack of a parallel universe in which I didn’t really participate. It still seemed to me that they were relatively happy together, for the way their daytime lives entwined around me, and I couldn’t imagine one without the other. Anyway, what did I know, at seven? It was normal to me, the fighting then making up, my mother crying, my father slamming the door on his way outside so he could “think.” He never actually left the property. Looking out my bedroom window into the dark, I saw him once, walking as quickly as he could around the circumference of the yard in the dull blue twilight of early winter, very angry, muttering to himself. But one night my mother threatened to leave and there was something in the tone of her voice that put a chill up my spine. Much later, after my father came to check on me, I pretended to be asleep while I wept silently to myself, the pillow sodden with my tears. I tried to

sleep, tossing and turning. Later in the night I awoke to find I was six inches from the ceiling. It didn't scare me at all, it was wonderful, floating like that, looking down at my bed. I felt free, light, alive. And it was interesting, I thought at the time, and I wrote it all down faithfully in the locked journal I kept between my mattresses.

And when I was very young, I dreamed of the sky rolling back like a canvas, suddenly suffused with a blinding radiance, the entire sky lit up and filled with angels singing, the sky filled with song.

It was after we had attended Sunday school for the first time, with the neighbours from across the street, and there we had learned about heaven and the angels. How the walls were layered with jewels and precious gems and stones of every kind imaginable—jasper, topaz, amethyst—and many unfamiliar stones, which conjured beautiful colours and textures in my mind's eye. The street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass, each one of the gates was made of a single pearl, and an angel stood at each gate. The image was so beautiful it stayed with me for many months, the vision of that illuminated city of gold alive with magical beings. Every day I prayed to become one of them, and I felt like if I only prayed hard enough I might be lifted up, up, up towards them.

Christmas angel

In one of the clearest early memories I have of my mother Elly, it's winter. The snow is swirling outside, alternating between gusting fine whips and the big clumsy flakes floating slowly down as though the world were a giant snow globe whose only function is to make a fake snow scene look sparkling and magical to the observer. Standing in a greenish pool of light in the school gym after the pageant waiting to collect my brother, she is wearing a makeshift pair of angel's wings.

The wings are gawky and drooping, nothing like the magical vision that the local set designer must have imagined when he began. He'd attached tinsel to cover the gaps where they attached to her shoulder blades; all in all it looked like a homemade job.

But somehow, standing there waiting for my little brother, with bits of silver tinsel dotting her hair and shoulders, she is beautiful. Glowing, wonderful. I think my father must have thought so too.

It was the Christmas pageant. I was to sing onstage with two other girls, an idea forwarded by the new music teacher, who mistakenly believed that every child had innate musical talent. The other two girls may have proven her theory, not only because they had been groomed with piano lessons and voice lessons. I didn't even know enough to be nervous in advance. After all, I had practised (to myself, mostly, in front of the mirror in the bathroom); I sometimes used to sing at home. My father loved music and he would

hum along, low, a little off-key, and I liked to sing when it was just the two of us. But there on that stage, even the subdued version of “Silent Night” seemed to scrape, though singing it earlier—my father strumming the guitar, the two of us singing softly with our eyes closed—was the only moment of that holiday that had felt cautiously joyful to me. Heart pounding, mouth parched and moving mechanically, my voice, my breath, grating the sides of my throat in its faint, awful egress over which I seemed to have no control, I strained to see my father’s face through the harsh lights and could not find it. It was the winter before he died. He’d come to the pageant alone; my parents had just separated.

There looking out from the bright stage into the void of the darkened gymnasium, the entire concert of holiday songs and happiness seemed to float by me, ungraspable and unstoppable, like a quickly-moving parade, or a vehicle carrying beloved passengers I was trying to get a final glimpse of, as I blinked and blushed and tried to catch my breath in the blinding stage lights that glared directly into my eyes.

Afterwards we trudged single file to our exit, the strong square beam of the stage trailing off to the feeble, lit rectangle that echoed from the door at the back of the gym, beckoning us into the shrunken future. Stumbling down the stairs of the stage in the line of kids and down the long aisle, I looked up from the shiny backs of the shiny black shoes of the girl walking in front of me and saw his face glowing glumly in the murky, firefly-light from the back of the gym where he was slumped in his seat.

My scraping performance, reluctant, my father’s face shining with its queasy yellow-greenish glow, reluctant, my mother, luminous in her crooked tinsel angels’

wings, my brother clutching at her, all of them beloved, scarce figures on the margins of the hastily compiled, fast-forward documentary of my life, and as I walked, it suddenly transformed into a scene before me, suddenly it was not my life but a scene that drew from me an electric jolt so forceful that at first I thought it came from an outside, physical source.

They give me something to make me sleep. I don't want to wake.

Edging on morning I dream I am entering a tall glass-and-steel building through a tall door with brushed-steel handles, smooth and solid beneath my fingers. The door turns into a set of doors, of glass, and as I enter I can feel that I am somehow entering backward, through the doors into the building. I watch the doors shut behind me. It is not that I am invisible or that I am not there, nor that I am without a body, passing through the doors, nothing like that. I can feel the door solid and cold on my back as I move through it, I can feel it give way as it swings open, and it is as though I am viewing myself from behind. It is the feeling of seeing myself with my eyes closed.

I pass through the doors, and as soon as I do, I encounter another set, just the same. Moving like this through door after door, each closing softly after me. Closing on air.

The nurse shakes me awake the next afternoon. She flings the curtains open with a cheery good day. The light hurts my eyes and I roll over. The bed is cranked up to encourage me not to sleep during the day. I think about securing enough sleeping pills for me not to have to wake up.

I dream continuously. In another dream I am living in a high-rise building. A small fuzzy animal scurries over the floors, which I think at first is a cat. Looking closer, I see it is a rabbit. John Henry is there, too. I ask him, what is the best way to pick up a rabbit? By its hind legs or by its ears? John Henry looks at me plaintively. Finally I catch it, by its ears. It is tiny and trembling and afraid. White with pink markings. I hold it to me until it calms, stroking its fur. As I hold it, I suddenly realize that I have forgotten John Henry's cat in the basement. I am upset and crying, by now the cat is likely dead. I run down the many flights of stairs to the basement, a dark labyrinth of dirt tunnels and caves. John Henry is calling his cat someplace far above me. In the dimness, overhead lights swing by threads between pillars and posts, and an object appears at my feet. It seems to be a cylinder covered in rabbit fur. I look at it lying there and I say aloud the obvious: *This is a bad omen*. When I reach down to pick it up, it jumps out of my grasp, and beyond my reach. I reach again, again it jumps beyond my grasp. The third time it happens I see that there is a yellow ribbon attached to it, long and curling. My eyes follow it to someone in

the dark holding the other end, just a shadow. I decide I will try to catch the perpetrator, and as he runs and I run after him, the fur-covered cylinder and the yellow ribbon are trailing behind him like a cartoon, bouncing noisily between the walls and floors of the tunnels as I race after him, determined to tackle him and discover his identity. Several twists and turns later, it appears I might catch up with him, but then he slips through a mirrored door. I follow, breathless, catching a glimpse of myself as I do, and the next door opens to a group of people sitting in rows arranged in a vee, facing me like a jury. All are wearing white balaclavas with rectangles cut out for eyes. As I open the door into the room, the jury turns to look at me with one choreographed movement. I wake up, gasping for breath.

The days pass in a blur, days to weeks, time meaningless. I dream about my baby, about John Henry, my parents, Kate Wake, about you. An animal sadness takes up residence in my body, as if to replace the fetus. I curl myself around it. The nurses come to unclench me each morning, sometimes during the day.

WILLIAM IS SORELY AWARE of the irony inherent in the situation. He, an old painter with more of a reputation in recent years for his sullen and cantankerous nature than for the painting that had once made him famous, town folk having long ago given up on claiming any of his fame or even his oddness for themselves—and he'd always been a bit odd, and just a touch too uncaring, even proud, of his difference from the normal, uncomplicated folk surrounding him, never making any more than the barest conversation when he saddled up his ancient horse (most were already driving, the Roaring Twenties had come and nearly gone, after all) and ventured into town for supplies, after years of hushed whispers and knowing, pitying, half-vengeful half-glances when his young wife had left him after the war, the way all of them had always suspected she might, and the way he surely deserved, since what was he thinking when he had taken up with her in the first place and left his own perfectly good first wife when she was ill, no less, practically on her deathbed, and finally, as everyone knew, what goes around, comes around. It had given the town folk a good deal of delicious satisfaction at watching their moral system in such visible action. It was a vindication of their faith, as it were.

But that was years ago, really. Now that he was older, fifty at least, and somewhat stale and relatively mild, with all of the remaining vitality strapped down and scarcely visible, with nothing on the surface that could possibly be construed as an insult to their way of life or to their sensibilities—indeed, he often seemed scarcely cognizant of his surroundings at all—they mostly couldn't be bothered with him. They were, in fact, warily tolerant of him, though mostly because they weren't called on in any way to

acknowledge his existence. In their mutual unspoken agreement to tolerate—more accurately, ignore—one another, the relationship between William Rast and the rural good people of Blue Hills Valley had slid into a kind of truce with only a dim bubbling of hostility remaining around its edges.

Only Jay Small, the nearing-middle-age nurse who worked over at Blue Hills Hospital, “the Hill,” as it was known, and was quick and fearless, visited him. She had been at the hospital for years and years, going back to the days when it was still an asylum and the work was more custodial than curative and, as far as she was concerned, more honest for it; her attitude was definitively unmodern, perhaps even anti-modern—she didn’t trust the quote-unquote mental hygienists, didn’t see the need for any of the newfangled approaches, and the Florence Nightingale strain of nursing drew a private sneer from deep in her gut somewhere, so forceful that she had to work to suppress it to face the pink-cheeked, pretty-ish young nurses who came from proper, if poor, families with their upright, industrious Christian kindness and endless decency and gratitude intact and who were too aware (especially in relation to Jay) that they had their entire lives ahead of them and saw themselves as beginning a true professional career in nursing (unlike Jay, who would have no diploma, no certificate, nothing on paper) with no inkling whatsoever that mental nursing was no nursing at all. Not to the outside world. And barely in the world of the asylum, either.

Her own feelings of antipathy weren’t relevant to the job at any rate, and she mostly kept them in check by keeping to herself and simply doing her job and

simultaneously drawing great satisfaction from the authority provided by her years of experience and store of knowledge, and power of the sort the young nurses just starting out couldn't yet imagine but began to implicitly understand, as if by absorption, by contagion, merely through coming in contact with her. Great satisfaction from knowing that many of the most optimistic and starry-eyed among them would fail outright and leave within the first year. And she derived great satisfaction from knowing that no matter what, the privilege of their naïveté would be irrevocably shattered, and possibly their goodness as well, which in her opinion wasn't real, not a practised goodness, only a moral veneer that crumbled or eroded surprisingly quickly in the end, in spite of its radiating persuasiveness at the start. They knew nothing of anything. But they would.

Being senior enough to now do so, though not old, since she had started work at the age of fifteen some twenty years ago, she avoided the Blue Hills social activities at which the nurses and other attendants were expected to volunteer and attended during their time off, which, in the seven-day-a-week work, was very little. She had worked through the asylum years and through the great fire of 1910 when the entire building was razed, and through the rebuilding and reform-driven and/or lackadaisical tenures of one superintendent after another after 1919—when it became the Blue Hills Hospital for Mental Diseases, as opposed to the Hospital for the Insane before that and the asylum moniker before that—and finally under Barrger's superintendency. Barrger, who after almost a decade of lobbying the provincial government and nurses unions and regular

hospitals and doctors, was eventually driven away due to the labour unrest under his own watch.

That's where zeal got you, she thought with the tiniest bit of pity for Barrger, whose blind determination always seemed overreaching, like an angry child drowning in a foot of water.

"Come along now, Mr. MacDonald," she says to the scrawny man lingering in the corridor. He seems to be very focused on scratching his shoulder. "You know where you're wanted." The man looks at her, eyes agape and still scratching, as she grasps him firmly by the arm and leads him to the room where several inmates are engaged in a game of jacks at one table, checkers at another and, in a far corner of the room, chess.

"The lichen," he mutters. "Under my skin."

Set-mouthed, Jay ignores his rantings. "Where were you playing, Mr. MacDonald?" she says quietly as she continues to lead him along.

Mr. MacDonald was one of the quiet ones, one of the easy ones. There weren't many of them on this wing.

Jay *was* happy about the new nurses' quarters that had resulted under Barrger's tenure, and she (privately) allowed that the few years leading up to 1919 with a roundabout of new supers represented perhaps the most awful time since she had worked at the asylum,

but other than that, she paid as little attention as possible to the changes, in spite of the pressure to attend medical lectures, to learn the medical science behind the work, to become “trained”: in short, to become the kind of nurse that Barrger felt concurred not only with his vision of the insane, but also with his view of himself as an important medical personage residing over an important medical institution and not merely a penal colony, or hospice, or worse, a charnel house where the unwanted and mentally unfit waited out their days—he had served in the war and had treated soldiers for shell shock and had studied psychiatry thereafter in New York and Boston. He thought, first of all, that insanity was curable. She found this view ridiculous.

Barrger’s wife, a trained nurse herself, had also served in the Great War, and thus they saw their path together, assured, leading only to selfless service and higher causes, bringing the new religion of mental hygiene first to the great unwashed, warehoused masses, and more urgently, to the bureaucracies and governments that regulated their confinement. Other social reforms of the time had fired some of the Barrgers’ enthusiasm, though it was tricky. Regular hospitals and their doctors and nurses and administrators were not as enthusiastic about extending social democratic reform to the mental hospitals, about giving official status to its nurses.

On his arrival in 1920, Barrger had just come from tours of state-of-the-art hospitals in New York, Boston. Swollen with new knowledge and the possibilities for his own advancement and status, still reverberating with the horrors of war, he did believe in the possibility of cure. Of course he did. He had to. It was entangled with everything else.

Mrs. Barrger fought with equal resolve for her husband's success. They both wanted it so badly, thought Jay, that they reeked of it, they were engulfed by the aura of their own self-satisfaction, perfectly contained. She couldn't stand it, couldn't stand being close to them. Nothing worse than an opportunist who saw himself as a true believer, in her view. And certainly, nothing worse than an opportunist who was also a reformer and with a wife to reflect it all back to him, relentlessly, to bathe him in the glow of his own goodness. He couldn't address someone without imagining how his words sounded coming from his mouth, how noble, how grand, how virtuous and intelligent and worthy.

She herself was perfectly satisfied with a good deal less. She did not believe in the moralist's way of reform, the hope in the supposed inherent goodness of people, nor did she feel any disappointment with the larger society's slowness to adapt, nor did she feel any surprise, impatience or despair about it. No. Jay Small's kingdom, if there was any kingdom, was a personal one. And she was satisfied, most of all, with the virtual levy she extracted from those around her, not only inside the Hospital but in town as well, of being somewhat respected, if grudgingly, and more than a little feared.

Except from William. Jay Small did not want her toll from him. She did not want his fear, nor did she want to overpower him with her very formidable power. Jay Small wanted something else from William Rast. Something more akin to love. Or perhaps affection. She had her, as they say, beady eyes on him, and not for nothing. For his part, he remained largely oblivious and didn't mind when she brought him pie.

Only Jay would say hello, continue to bake him the occasional pie, and in spite of her decided lack of domesticity, stop by to see him, often painfully awkward and swinging unsteadily from too formal, then too casual, in her greeting, emotional hunger leaching from her face like so many tiny invisible jewelled tears, furtively watching his reaction to the food or drink she'd put on offer. Eventually she'd also offered to clean. At first he'd said no, but he was no match for her stalwart insistence.

And so every Saturday, after she was done her final shift at the hospital, Jay would clean the Rast house. And soon she was also stopping by weekday mornings, fixing him breakfast, setting out meals for the day. She appointed herself his official keeper, coming and going rather officiously.

She was sharp-featured and birdlike, but strong as a hawk. Her hair, which she'd eventually began keeping shorn due to work and the inconvenience of having to pin it up, was thick and dark, echoing the shadow of her upper lip, the lightly pelted curve. She might have been a handsome woman had she not been so tiny and severe with darting, suspicious eyes and her bearing giving such a strong impression of being pointedly capable of shutting you up, perhaps with physical force if necessary. One only had to see her with the patients and inmates to understand the almost instinctual power with which she was able to control the roughest, most ornery and foul-mouthed amongst them.

Seeing Rast as quite sensible and not one of those, she was not in the least frightened of him. Indeed, it had not occurred to her to be frightened of him, in that way. She was, on the other hand, a little intimidated by his ... maleness. And in spite of herself

and her outward robustness and her durable toughness, she could feel herself shrink a little in his presence, and her heart gave small flutters that she could not explain to herself. Not that she gave a second thought to the sorts of frivolous things the other female attendants (she couldn't bring herself to call them nurses) did or might do in their free time.

“Good Morning,” Jay would chirp upon entering the house where William would be already up and sitting at the table, coffee in hand. And while she was making his breakfast for the one hundredth time, or washing the floors, or polishing the unused silver, she snuck furtive glances at him and sometimes felt her heart pounding when his gaze met her own. A secret smile came to her lips when she thought of him as she went about her hospital duties.

She couldn't help herself, she liked him, felt her inner compass swing over and reset itself due William Rast, like a sort of homing device.

It was a while before Jay noticed that William was making use of his studio again. The studio was a large room off the house that had not been used for years.

“Yes,” he'd said when asked, distracted, “I'll be painting then.”

And so she'd added the room to her cleaning routine, at first cleaning very gingerly, around the horsehair brushes in tins, avoiding the canvases altogether. She

knew nothing about painting, and little about William Rast's painting. She knew that Rast's second wife had left with a young painter who, it was said, was under the tutelage of Rast. Rast had been his mentor. But Jay could not fathom what it was that called artists to paint, to pour their lives into it, nor what it meant to spend so much time making something that had seemingly little purpose. She didn't know why it existed. And therefore she never looked at anything very closely, though she did move everything to and fro for dusting with a certain reverence, a certain kind of awe, for the mystery of it, for though she didn't know why he did it or why he would want to, she did know that at one time William Rast's name was known as a painter. That he had shown in the best galleries in Europe and was well travelled, had lived in Paris. She knew that he was famous for his painting and beyond that, Jay didn't see anything of interest to know.

She did make it her business to know everything about William's house. In fact, she'd privately come to think of it, with the exception of the studio, as—if not in part *hers* exactly—then at least as *her territory*, her jurisdiction, the place where she had the right or power to administer justice through cleaning and washing and to apply laws of regular meals and laundry days—and, occasionally, to sit and read. When William wasn't there, of course.

He'd stumbled in on her once, after late-afternoon drinks at the Valley Hotel. He was more than surprised to find her there like this, in the rocking chair that had belonged to his wife. His first wife. And then his second wife. He was a little taken aback at seeing her there, calmly rocking back and forth, reading a seed catalogue, her mouth moving

with the words, her finger following the lines, completely engrossed. She had jumped up when she saw him, catalogue dropping to the floor, the chair swinging back wildly. “Oh!” she said, her voice squeaking uncharacteristically. “I didn’t realize you were going to be here so soon!”

“I didn’t realize you were going to be here, either,” he’d mumbled in response, slightly embarrassed, uneasy at her presence in his house looking ... settled-in. He’d paused at the door, looking at her. She had been so oddly ... what was it? So oddly ... still. Yes, that was it. She was more likely to be moving, dusting, cooking, washing, when he saw her.

“I was only ...” she protested, and then hesitated, smoothing her skirt and apron, touching her hair and neck self-consciously. “I thought I might plant some vegetables in the yard next spring.

“If you don’t mind,” she added quickly.

And then he had seen before him, suddenly, a handsome, wiry woman who, it must be admitted—in just having leapt up from her settled-in state—was a little unsettling. What unsettled him *precisely*, he couldn’t quite say, but there was something about the *familiarity* with which she had moved away from the chair and returned, presumably, to making supper.

It had disturbed him. It had pierced his heart a little, had stirred up a strange, intricate sediment at the bottom of the muddy, secretive rivers of his heart. He had felt what could only be described as an abrupt rush of gratitude.

“That would be fine, yes,” he said brusquely. “I’ll ensure you have some money.”

And with that they had gone back to their usual positions, he sitting at the table, she standing, in motion, then standing at the stove, her hands trembling, heart skipping. She, too, had detected the change which had christened him there in the instant of seeing her, her having leapt up in such a way as to *register* her—finally—plain Jay Glydis Small, never married, never kissed or even considered, in the nether regions of William Rast’s long-presumed lost humanity. Heart, even? Feeling, at least.

She’d had to steady herself against the stove, and had gone so far as to hold a finger against the hot cast-iron pan. And then, for good measure, bit down hard on the inside of her cheeks to keep herself from smiling, as she concocted the rest of the meal.

She plants vegetables in the long-ago abandoned garden and, after ferocious weeding to recover the soil, flowers along its borders. With the addition of some of her own meagre funds, she purchases two precious rose plants, which, after much painful consideration, she installs on either side of the door to the studio. Jay Small is not inured to beauty. The path to the studio door runs alongside the garden, wild with grasses and other plants.

Those were sweet days for Jay Small. All that she had disciplined and shut down and nipped and pinched and restrained in herself for years and years, all that she had shunted off as frivolous and unnecessary and certainly not for her, now seemed both worthwhile and, more significantly, possible, after all. The low cloud that had for so long weighed over her—back, back, beyond even the long, joyless hours at the hospital, back to the one-room shanty with too many siblings and only she to care for and feed them and an angry, drunken father whose only role seemed to be to make them all more miserable and to inquire at regular intervals what good she was anyhow—lifted.

She felt light, gay. Younger.

“Is everything all right, Miss Small?” said one of the nurses reporting to the night shift duty being supervised by Jay that week.

Jay turned slowly towards the young woman, still in a reverie. The nurse’s eyes, full of piqued curiosity, brought her back to the present. “Yes, of course,” snapped Jay. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason, ma’am,” came the nurse’s reply, quickly.

Jay did not esteem openness in another person. She felt the world was too full of people who were only too willing to share the details of their lives with you, even when it was very clear that you had no desire to hear them, had no interest in them whatsoever. She suspected that the reasons many of the poor souls ended up here might have something to do with their inability to keep themselves to themselves.

Then, one day, as Jay let herself into the studio for her weekly tidy, she discovered two canvases of a young woman, almost nude. In a green dress, bare limbs shining, hair shining. There was something about them that was so arresting, almost startling. The canvases were fresh. In one the woman's eyes were shining and direct; in the other, her eyes were closed. Jay didn't know what to make of it.

it's dawn
earth and a quilted blue
sky, leaves on the trees are still, minute
tremors stirring the soil-thick air

apples fallen to patches of lawn, sea
and bottle greens tainted, turned to
ginger browns, to soil and warm
earth

There is a boy.

You and I, together we were discovering the world, it felt that way to me, did it to you, too? It was an escape to a world safe and contained, the safe cube of our letters, your music, the bookshelves and books that lined my tiny apartment with tacked-up photos of my left-behind life. We were reinventing it all. Reinventing sadness, the individual limits that had trapped us, which we were each so desperate to flee.... Together discovering and rediscovering music and art. We played a game: you adding a single adjective to a composer. You loved quirky Satie and sensitive Mompou, lovely Debussy, difficult Schoenberg, brilliant Mozart, subtle Schubert, your eyes alight with love and energy. And poetry, painting, beautiful Bonnard, Cezanne, Rilke. We were discovering ourselves, the world, each other, discovering each other like a ship discovers shore, each so delighted, and so terrified, to reach this glistening, mysterious shore so early, each of us wondering what it meant, each quietly worried that we were never built for port at all. But there we were, early, together, and it was still and it was beautiful.

That is how I remember it. It's how it sits in my mind.

There is something about you, in my mind, that is covered this way, in finely spun string, as though a giant spider had landed on your back to twist you into its silken fabric, to cocoon you like an insect, protect and cover you. I see your back, like that time at the lake, shoulder blades first, two tiny clipped wings, cobwebbed, slender, streaming, continuous, contiguous, drawn-out. You are fading in and out of focus, hazy around the edges, like a photo taken with a pinhole camera.

It begins with the shoulder blades, with the painting of you on the beach in the cream and yellow-grey light, a coriander sky levelling the wide, sapphire-brilliant tinfoil lake, wide as the sea. Waves like tiny wings rippling the surface.

You have just come to shore from the water, I can still see you walking towards me, there is a cut on your knee. Blood and water flow from the cut, dribble thinly down your shin. I want to lick the blood from your leg, to draw my tongue slowly over the bone, like a cat.

I lean my chin on your back as you lie down on the blanket, I am staring back at the water, I am still seeing you walking toward me, watching as the water laps the shore. An image on repeat. Hearing an occasional gull crying from somewhere high above, a distant sound. The lake holds the proportions in the scene, lake weed floating, drifting and swirling like hair just below the surface of the water, alive and swirling, swirling with possibility and lying there, your sun-warmed back beneath my chin, I feel like the calm centre of it all. Your calm is seeping into me. It's you who are the calm centre.

Even when I look back at you lying there, your cropped blond hair glistening, neck brown with sun, there are wisps of sand swirling around your head, fine sparkled glass aloft in air, pixie dust, and you are there, so solid, content with the ground and lake and sun and sky and warmth. You roll over to look at me, eyes reflecting the grey of the lake, gaze steady.

He stands, uncertain, I've seen
him, have paused

to look at him

gaping
up into the cupola

I think it was John Berger who coined the line. The line about the dream, I mean, about dreaming someone else's dream.

How lovely those days were, how caught like a burst of breath beneath ice, a tiny comet under glass. A beautiful paperweight or our own private menagerie, we turned it over and over to look at, in awe, wondering at it, how we'd stumbled into something so powerful, how extraordinary, how precious, I think now, looking back. How still.

Here's one scene I recall, an early February morning: waking to the smooth light on the skin of your back, I roll over to the winter light from my window, open just a crack, the delicious icy chill wafting in, cinnamon smells of the nearby bakery drifting up, even in the cold, doffing blankets in the clear snow-blue light—pure, purer, purer than any light that had previously spilled to earth—touching my feet to the chilly, polished wooden floor, and a feeling of anticipation. I felt ... happy. Lucky. Blessed.

Was it reading Berger that shifted how I saw memory? A photo's seeming ability to fix a moment in time, but also its ability to fascinate, to mesmerize, to draw in, as into

another world. Painting as photography's opposite: photos capture what we forget, a painting captures what the painter remembers.

Memory was painful, paintings were another world, another form whose possibility made me endlessly glad, filled *me* with possibility and joy. That such a thing could exist.

Memory and the past felt like a homeland in a way, recognizable and infinitely inaccessible—an Eden from which I'd been banned, a land to which I had only a certain kind of access. Memory's capacity for accumulation beyond the flattened surface, a pentimento of myriad traces on the page after page of the day after day of our lives, memory as an archaeological dig, a door into another civilization, with its own logic and economy and rhythms.

Later, coming back out from the cabin you are sitting there, book tossed aside, specks of sand glistening on your arms, on your grey T-shirt. You are thin, bony almost, birdlike, wiry. This always kills me, looking at your back like this. It is a direct dagger to my heart, you can never know that. It makes me want to hold you, protect you, nurse you ...

It makes me fierce, puts fire into me.

But there is something about you that does not stay singular, that blurs into its surroundings. Inexplicable, except that I cannot look at you directly; I can't see you, can't

take all of you in. I have to move my eyes around your face, your body, and still see only parts of you. In my mind's eye you are always ... beside me, never across from me, shadowy, blue. And your other colours, pale yellow, grey, cream, gold, silver, white. Colours like the sound of a voice, swirling like the sound of your voice.

You ask me, would you like to go back into the water.

I don't answer.

I know that you are wondering whether I have heard you at all, wondering why it is that I rarely talk about myself, rarely tell you what I feel. I savour you waiting there, savour it like the thin lozenge under my tongue. It tastes bitter, medicinal. I keep my mouth closed, sucking, keep silent.

You sigh.

I know you through and through and through, as though I had known you in a previous life. Something shared that joins us. I can pinpoint the precise moment when I started to feel that way. You were lying there beside me, we had just made love—I say, made love, because it was the first time sex felt that way to me—we had just finished making love, the room smelled salty, briny, of sex.

You are turned away from me, the moon shines in through the window, casts its pale light on the sheets, on your shoulders and back, you look so vulnerable ... suddenly there is a lump in my throat, I can hardly swallow, you are so beautiful. I look away.

a boy in a t-shirt
his back a play of greens, turned

to shadow and light, ginger
sunshine, shouldered

spinning the fine air around him

Under the trees in the yard
this room is pale yellow laid with gold cracks
“the walls are cracked with gold cracks”

in the pale light, leaf-transparent
the window above me,
light, spider-frail.

We stare up together at a kaleidoscope of gulls, churning in every direction, their
white bellies catching the light of the late-day sun, like a handful of gold coins flung high
up into the air.

I suddenly feel something unfamiliar: it is hope.

Those were the days I first took out the photos and mementoes I had saved from my past and thought of working with them, a new religion that would realign and rearrange and re-frame my past as something precious rather than only something fraught with pain and anger and dread. Suddenly I could recognize it and see it, as I never could before, and for the first time I could allow it to be *there* and not here, less relentlessly and continuously *inside* myself, less relentlessly *of me*; I could, quite suddenly, *see*. This was the simple, slow, lovely budding that occurred outside of me, where I could wonder at it and watch it come into being, while it worked its careful, miraculous unearthing, the steel-wool smudge of black pain, with its still-tender centre, scarcely inching its way out of the protective, fragile shell of the past where it had stayed in fearful hiding for so long. I suddenly saw that the images and photos I had were, that my past was, something precious I might save ... *save*, in all senses of the word. Everything seemed to reveal an intrinsic capacity for being drawn into an associative universe with life forces that were both fierce and charmed. All, even the bad memories, were radiant with refracted light, dusted with comet dust, sprinkled with the light of shooting stars. All was possible, everything felt suddenly and categorically redeemable, as I slowly reworked the memories.

It was the stillness that marked that time with you. I felt calm, satisfied. And yet, how could I have been satisfied, I hear you protest, given that I ran away from all of it, I

suppose I did.... But I was satisfied, with you. Difficult to understand how it could have been both true and not enough. Because in the truest part of it, the entire world was contained, past, present, future. Self-sufficient, sufficient. Beautiful. It was my one experience of true beauty.

But how could I sustain this?

Bonnard once said, "Anything can be turned to beauty."

Expanding on this in an introduction to an exhibition of Bonnard's work, John Russell wrote, "The art of Bonnard is not an art of anecdote. It is an art of situation, in which everything has been caught on the run in the life of everyday."

the foil sky, a cupola drawn
back

inkling
that braids and unbraids
sweet blue, to soil and worm

cloud scatters
children in the schoolyard

fence links between apples fallen
from the camera

facing away

INDEED, WILLIAM RAST HAD until recently believed himself to be beyond the embarrassing vagaries of irony, and of this particular, inflamed stripe, until Kate.

Kate as in Katarina shortened to Kate, and along with Wake, it rang like a silly, musical chime that repeated itself in his mind, insistent as a small barking dog. Kate, Kate Wake. Kate Wake, Kate Wake. Who had a name like that?

He'd never met her before, though of course he knew of her. Everyone knew of her, she and her family, one of the region's wealthiest grain barons, her youth, her beauty, musical talent, and her silent return to Canada after she'd taken up with the charlatan of a music producer who told her he would make her a star while proclaiming his eternal love for her. She'd sung all of the operas, the future was bright. She was beginning to shine. But with her success, the music producer became jealous, obsessed her, locked her in a room, insisting that she no longer sing or take the stage. Escaping, and broken-hearted, she took refuge with other artists she knew in France, then Spain. He pursued her and found her in Spain, cut her throat. Now she could no longer sing. Eventually it seemed that there was nothing for her but to return back home to Canada.

But not in shame. She refused it. Kate'd gone to Europe before she was twenty, and now she was twenty-four, or was she twenty-five? Her family had all but disowned her thereafter, they were definitely not on speaking terms. She disliked them anyway, refused their money. If Europe had taught her anything it was that another kind of life

was possible, and that there were others who, in contradistinction to what she herself had been taught, were not so wed to habit and status, nor so bound by convention.

Kate Wake determined that she would live a life less governed by convention.

She found work teaching music in Blue Hills Valley, and what's more, enjoyed it. After a year or so, people had grown accustomed to her and largely found her to be unthreatening since she indeed was an excellent music teacher, though her dark and mysterious, or darkly brilliant, past, depending on how one viewed it, could never quite be forgotten. It glittered there like an extravagant black diamond at the river's bank, abandoned, washed over by sand and silt and dirt and muddy water, baked by the sun. There was the limit, said the people of Blue Hills Valley to her silently and solemnly. You found the limit and returned, and we—though without the power to forgive you for it, which of course we could never assume—will be with you in, if not quite forgetting the past, at least pretending that you are almost one of us. With all the unspoken but understood conditions of her acceptance, everyone clearly benefited. Her sin, perhaps that she had left in the first place. That her gift allowed her that. It was expected that Blue Hills Valley was the destination of her go and sin no more.

Stephan, Lena's husband, greeted her with a frown that was to remain more or less permanent throughout her tenure as resident-companion to Lena and sometime help for the child in exchange for room and board. She'd made up a past that included much previous experience with children, and in spite of Stephan's suspicions, was approved to

live as part of the household due in large part to Lena's instant partiality to her. Lena was several years her junior, but her simple, trusting nature made her seem much younger.

Kate had her own suspicions about Stephan, one of which was that Stephan would not tolerate anyone who did not do his bidding unquestioned. Her other suspicions ran darker.

Several times she's caught glimpses of the purpled bruises at Lena's neck, blossoming over her upper arms and wrists.

William's house sits on the rolling slope of the north end of the valley, looking down onto the city of Blue Hills Valley and the river to the east. To the west are the modest Blue Hills outside of the city, and after which the valley is named.

The large room attached to the house, formerly a barn, he uses as his painting studio. Its contents, unlike the house, are piled here and there, hardly as minimal as the stark house, but with an equal sense of stillness, emptiness. It is not an emptiness that frightens you, not like that emptiness of long ago, in Paris, it is not an emptiness with frightening edges, but with safety, with depth.

Now that William is painting again, he sleeps in the studio, eats there. In summer there are apples on the table, picked from his orchard. You bring a tablecloth for the table. You bring wild flowers, laughing.

Kate bursts through the door of the studio, eyes shining. He can hear her breath coming just a little quicker as he nears and he watches a kind of excitement lodge itself in her, a tiny potbellied stove ...

It strangely moves him. And he does move, as though propelled towards her, and takes her wrist and lifts her skirts roughly. Her skin and thighs are warm, he feels a spinning in his brain as he buries his face in her neck and hair and gives himself over to the spinning and whirring and the sparse echoes of nighttime sound through the open windows and lies her down there on the cold wooden floor of the studio. The dank odour of the wood merges with earthy scent of sweat and sex as their bodies collide and finally join.

After, he fumbles for the fur throw and spreads it over the floor. They lie there, feeling the cold of the floor seeping through, the night wind still moaning through the walls. He's closed the windows now but they can hear it, and it makes the inside of the studio, with black glass panes reflecting candlelight, feel cavelike, protected; the dank night air mixes with the pungent warmth of turpentine and oils; his brushes sit on the table where he's left them with the half-finished canvas.

She inhales sharply when he begins to run his fingers over her clavicle, his touch firm. He lets his index finger slide into the hollow of her throat, draws a slow, vertical line down her breastbone and then across the top edge of the fabric of her dress.

Unbuttons her, one button at a time, all the way down, spreads her open like that to continue the vertical line down the breastbone with his hand, nudging the concave slope of her abdomen, just beneath her ribs, as she is sipping in breath, she feels expansive, infinite, under his fingers. When he sweeps his hand back up under her breast and squeezes, she is almost frightened by something she feels stirring inside of her so urgently that she can't speak. The tremulous, muscular feeling in her midriff reminds her of the feeling of singing.

He finds and follows the snaking scar, traces its river back up to the larger one that uncoils thickly in a horizontal line across the hollow of her throat. His thumb presses. She swallows and then moans and shudders. She is hot all over, as though the sudden sunrise of an unexpected horizon has flashed somewhere inside of her, before her, through her, she can't tell which. A liquid radiance spills through her, moving from the inside out, from somewhere near her mid-spine and seeping through to her extremities, her elbows, her ankles, the backs of her knees.

She is happy, happier than singing, happier than she can remember being, ever.

"I used to remember it when I closed my eyes," she whispers into the darkness of the room after a while. He shushes her, holding her close. Tells her the Persian myth of the congress of the birds, of a new, secret language.

She wakes at first light to the sounds of birds. He paints her for the first time that morning, while she is in his bed.

Sometimes when he is painting you, you get the feeling that something inside you—perhaps small, perhaps essential—is being seen, perhaps even taken from you. An inkling that someone is taking a sort of pleasure in you, *from* you, an inkling that you can feel at some deep level, tingling inside of you.

That this ... life, is a sort of gift you possess, and all that has to be done is to slowly, carefully draw it out as though it were a pet, to breathe it to life like glowing embers, with an unflinching assurance of the body's minutest, boldest lessons. The desire to life, above all, to live.

In trade, you are granted an understanding of what it is to bring something to life in this way, to transpose it and recreate it outside of itself, an alchemy of the highest order, brimming with the most joyous, raucous magic. This is what you receive from him, then, what he unknowingly gives in return: You begin to see the world around you.

The world is a puzzle, this is what William teaches you. The world is a puzzle built of wonder and surprise.

Mostly, you paint. The world comes alive there in that room, in those windows. You are moved to paint and you do. Joy makes your fingertips nimble, unfastens the beauty of the world around you, unfolds the geometry of the moment.

That second winter, while you were away, I try very hard not to slide back into the feeling I had, of belonging nowhere, and to no one.

I write to you while you are away, I write to myself. I keep myself busy. I write to remind myself what the real world is like, the inner world that we are not allowed to talk about or even to feel, how everyone walks around in their fogged-up, fucked-up, stupid world views thinking about patio furniture and how to get back at their co-workers and what they are going to make for dinner when they get off work.

I'm rude to Edna, the middle-aged cheery career-waitress I work with, who doesn't deserve rudeness. I am willing everything to disappear, to leave me be. I want to keep myself pure from the outside world.

I am reading everything by Rilke and Simone Weil, looking at Cezanne, loving Bonnard. It feels like a way to stay sane. I quote to myself (and to Edna, who rolls her eyes, thinking me daft) from "The Tenth Elegy" of *The Duino Elegies* while I avoid thinking about my life. Not that I understand it:

How we waste our afflictions!
We study them, stare out beyond them into bleak continuance,
hoping to glimpse some end. Whereas they're really
our wintering foliage, our dark greens of meaning, one
of the seasons of the clandestine year—; not only
a season—; they're site, settlement, shelter, soil, abode.

I quote solemnly from Simon Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, and think about the spirituality of attention while I pay none at all to the haphazardness of my own situation.

I love the possibilities for my life, myself, in your eyes. I hold very hard to those possibilities, with a kind of fierce blindness. I work harder, I read more, I look harder at Bonnard.

I ask you, How it is that you enter a room and see nothing and everything at once, as Bonnard said ... the *all* and the *nothingness* at once?

How is it, I think to myself, that I look like this into my own memory?

Memory the eye that collects the object, tumbling, sweeping the room, the fish-eye that amplifies details, angles, proportions. Is the eye is secondary to memory? Does memory paint the present? The eye, susceptible to feeling, to emotion—and one doesn't like to think of one's eyes as being susceptible to emotion. But of course, yes, they are.

And one must lie, Bonnard said. To recreate it. *Il faut mentir*.

So Bonnard's objects sit with each other, discrete and toppled together at jaunty angles, as though they'd been added—no, remembered—one at the time, and then soaked in the particular light of the room, threaded through with colour, with reflected light, with

lines that waver and ferment under the influence of colour. It was Bonnard who suggested that colour, and not line, was the real geometry of painting, the true composition.

Drawing—getting the lines down, in place—is sensation. Colour, he said, is reasoning.

I tell you about it, speaking to you again over a crackling telephone line—you are thousands of miles away, Italy, Modena, I think, or someplace like it, you tell me one time, and you tell me you've written my name in the telephone booth. I think of my name in some anonymous phone booth in Italy, where I've never been. I imagine hazy Italian light the colour of apricots, perhaps, diffusing the greenery of olive groves amidst cathedrals and terra cotta tile roofs.

It could be considered paradoxical that I'd intended to study Bonnard, who painted from memory. I stumbled onto him, really, but his was the ongoing brightness I came back to, that felt like the closest thing to home I could imagine.

Well before then I had closed securely all of the doors to my past life and our past lives, shut them tight against unhappiness, against any possible proliferation of memory. I didn't know what to do with memories, I couldn't explain them, I didn't want them.

Well, (Freud knows) this may not have been the best approach, but it became a habit and haven. I felt responsible, after all, not just for myself but for John Henry. We had each other, and from far away, it often felt like less than enough. I can't imagine how it was for him in those days.

Painting caught my attention early. Ozias Leduc's painting *The Ferryman's House* captivated me, the quality of its colour and light, its eerie beauty. As a child in Quebec, I had seen the work as part of an exhibition by Montreal painters of the 1920s at the Museum of Fine Arts. The excursion was also the first outside of the small village of Mont-St-Hilaire where I was living with my aunt and uncle at the time.

The surface of the lake water drawing the bird-egg blue of the sky into its cobalt depths, flowing from the tender fawn shade of the foregrounded ferry. Light from all directions, from above and down the rolling hills, from within the lake itself, diffuse and cool on its face; icily, heart-stoppingly bottomless in the Prussian blue-green shade of pines pulled over the lake's surface. Light absorbed into the doubled house, its dainty parchment-white reflecting both out and onto the lake, beckoning faint welcome from the far, darkly horizontal shore that hovered forebodingly in spite of the lift of twilight.

There were two paintings I remembered from the exhibition, the one by Leduc, born nearby, and another by James Wilson Morrice, both modernists of a sort. Leduc was something of a known entity, even to me: His religious murals were scattered in French churches and cathedrals, several of them near Mont-Saint-Hilaire.

In his religious and his secular work, Leduc used light to signal the spiritual or the mystical, the most significant attributes of art and nature as he saw it, and his light has the depth one might expect from such symbolic weight.

Morrice claimed the possibilities of light upon a visit to Venice in the early part of the twentieth century, but even his early work shows a pleasing handling of light, though different than his later works, and different still than Leduc's approach. In the early work the light is less weighty than Leduc's, but more solid, with clear forms. A secular painter who returned each year to Montreal from Paris, where he had made his home, his work *Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré* was the one in the show. In it I saw Canadian winter light for the first time.

Both of those paintings are a sort of precursor to my interest in Bonnard, whose work I discovered a few years after in a book about modernist painters by the writer Janet Hobbhouse.

In those years that I waited for you I fell in love with his work—I say, years, as though it were years and years. It was just two. I waited longer, but after two years you were gone. I fell in love with Bonnard, as much as for his painting technique as for the objects and figures that populated his paintings, as much for the bonhomie they displayed. But mostly, I fell in love with his profundity of feeling, the humour, love, sorrow, acceptance there in his painting. For the smallness, the fullness, of this world. His painting took my breath away.

But I clung to Bonnard for his devoted, active vision of an everyday, beautiful life, pretty surfaces that pulsed with life and feeling. I saw it everywhere, in the tender shapes and figures, the crooked, fragile objects assembled charmingly, with seeming haphazardness, on tables; it rushed at the peripheries and pulsed between patchworks of oppositional colours, in the odd combinations of hot and shady, of delicate and ripe.

Or, as his friend Maurice Denis said, “One never grows tired of seeing Bonnard’s work.” For my part, I read everything I could about him. I looked at as many of his paintings as I could find in books.

Bonnard, from January 15, 1934: One can take great liberties with line, form, proportions, colours as long as the feeling is intelligible and well visible. Intentions are of no account.

The bat house

When I return to Blue Hills, I'm alone. I'm looking for the bat house I'd heard from one of my regulars was located on the roof of the main reception building. A bat house on a bat house. Just like Billy to find that hilarious, a very public, private joke, with himself.

Blue Hills itself is grand and oversized, with large pillars attending the front building. Institutional, imposing, a bit spooky in this light. More commonly known as "The Hill," it sits on a hill north of the small city of Blue Hills Valley, which it overlooks. It's been deserted for a while now. They moved the last patients out sometime in the mid-1980s, I think.

The huge, hulkingly authoritative property sits empty and abandoned, like something gone desperately out of style, like a bad fad you didn't ever want to admit you'd liked much less indulged, hovering like an embarrassing relative over the city where the new community-based facility doesn't include any accommodation for lodging, much less any for history. Don't look back.

You have just left. School and then touring, playing the piano, something that seemed completely foreign to me. In my world, art was something private, mostly imagined, and at best, something intimate, to be shared with one or two others.

For me the experience of art coincided with religious experience or feeling—you knew without doubt you were in possession of a sort of gift that transcends, an experience that surpasses, rises above the everyday, extraordinary. In those ways, it was something

that could be experienced, perhaps, in a communal setting, as I had sometimes experienced during mass, overwhelmed and unnerved by grand cathedral architecture and impenetrable liturgy and ritual and awash in feeling, kneeling and invisible in the crowd, or very early on, when my parents took me to church, and the entire congregation sang, raising their voices together. That was where my internal experience and comprehension had been refined, completed and impressed upon the trembling substrate of my inner being.

When it came to art, I had never dared direct action or agency, not understanding it could be mine to claim. Disconnected from the spontaneous vigour of childhood, shame and uncertainty and fear had crept in where once active joy and engrossing pleasure reigned, and so, when you were away already practising your art, you were far, far away from me, further than you ever realized, and in spite of how much you said you missed me when you called to tell me about the endless, repeating rehearsals and then tours and the exhilaration of audiences when all I had before me were endless shifts at the local diner, repeat customers and coffees and breakfast orders of poached eggs on toast with a side of peanut butter. It seemed like a sort of cruelty, one you were enacting without awareness, which did not make it feel any better, and one I was experiencing without being fully aware of its true nature or cause. It fuelled the passion of our relationship while we were apart, and it cemented my need for you when we were together.

And while you were away, along with the mutual loneliness expressed in our letters and our laboured verbal shorthand and silence over crackling long-distance lines, there was more fear and hostility than either of us could admit, probably even to ourselves, and the distance was more than we could manage. Certainly I had a craving inside of me that was stronger than anything I would ever admit or anything I had ever felt and it amounted to a sort of envy and distrust, both wanting to believe you missed me, to accept what you were telling me at face value—but even more, to truly believe you existed, someplace, out there, where I'd never been—and a stubborn inability to believe through my suppressed rage and anxiety at your distance, because you were so far away, and you were far away from me because you were with yourself in a way that I could not be with myself and my journey was just beginning. Only I didn't know it then. I only knew I missed you, terribly, and that I experienced my loneliness as a sort of equally terrible and relentless inner restlessness.

It was getting darker now, and I used the flashlight to guide me as I crossed the grounds and over the gravel road that ran alongside the property. When I came upon the cemetery again, this time pausing to look at markers, it was the row upon row of mostly unidentified graves that struck me, with a scarce handful of upright stones scattered throughout, a few markers here and there. It upset me to think that there had been so many unclaimed bodies, so many orphaned souls housed there over the years, unwanted, perhaps unloved, to their deaths ...

And then, there it was again: a small, simple rectangle set into the earth so that its slightly uneven surface was almost flush with the ground. No birthdate, no date of death, no epitaph. Only KATE WAKE, in uniform, crisp upper case. Like many other things by now, I had thought that maybe I'd imagined it.

One corner of the flat stone was cracked, but the name was intact. The stone sat on the edge of the site, in one of the few rows that did have markers, all clearly standard-issue, cheaply made, the letters chiselled out without any embellishment or additional information, all very stark and unsentimental and grim. The cemetery ground seemed so flat and isolated after the large, monumental buildings all leading one into another on the rolling property, and by now it was dark as pitch around the weak glow of the flashlight.

Kate Wake, my great-grandmother, my mother's grandmother. I'd never met her. She'd died there, without anyone to claim the body. I don't know whether William visited her, I don't know whether he was there when she died, I don't know whether he ever knew my grandfather, his son, existed.

Walking back he'd stopped me, Billy did, frowning, asked me what I was doing there. As the night groundskeeper, he patrolled the grounds, but it was generally pretty quiet, I suppose. He was skinny, almost gaunt, and had a peculiar presence, something about him that creeped me out, something I couldn't quite define. It set me on edge. I was just leaving, I told him.

"All right," he said quietly, looking down but holding his ground.

The first time I did anything like the photo-painting pieces, it was Billy who nudged me along. It wasn't like I was a photographer or a painter or anything like that. If anything, at the time, I was a wannabe poet, a novice, a dabbler, but I'd always drawn. Dream images, sculptures, paintings, photographs, they all mesmerized me. Billy encouraged me to expand the visual experiments, which (almost to my surprise) I was eager to do. It was almost like I just needed someone to suggest it. I thought about Bonnard, his drawings. I thought: Yes.

I wanted to see the kinds of blended images that I had only shaped and conceived in words—pre-poem notes, pre-sleep visions, that I didn't know what to do with. Suddenly I find I want to bring these possibilities to life.

The bats were suddenly part of the line I was tracking towards these possibilities, you see. I was spurred on by the desire that was slowly coalescing inside of me, and pinching and prodding me on to possibilities that were new and nebulous and undefined and a little frightening, but pulling me toward them nonetheless. Like the creature-character I'd brought home with me from Quebec, nameless, yellow-eyed, mute, whose ambition it was to learn to flight, who has dreams of flight but no means, who travels in search of the secret of flight. Sometimes the vision is soothing, sometimes frightening.

These strange, nocturnal creatures fascinated me. Everything about them seemed odd and exotic as I learned more about them. I liked the idea that they had the added talent of being able to orient themselves through sound, emitting sound that echoed back the necessary information about their surroundings, conjuring images, I liked that they spent most of their lives upside-down (perhaps I could relate?), hiding, then falling into flight.... Little brown bats. Often mistakenly assumed to be rodents, but of course they're not. And as Billy told me later, it's gravity, on the weight of their bodies pulling down, that keeps their talons locked when they are hanging. The bat flexes muscles to pull its talons open and release its grip, and a bat will continue to hang upside down if it dies in that position.

I'd just watched the bats disperse, en masse, like a flurry of dark confetti tossed into the sky, startled, then stunned by the noise, what started as a remote rustling, like a fire throwing crackling sparks and ash, and grew and gained in intensity until it had become a furious, continuous flapping overhead, a gathering thunderhead, a black rain. The cloud of bats gathered and moved so quickly that I almost wondered whether it had really happened.

A few moments passed and I stood there in the dark and the encroaching chill of night, I suddenly made out Billy's face in the dark. It was so pale, he shone. And again, his presence alarmed me. Upon hearing my slight intake of breath at noticing him there, he spoke. "I have a painting of her," he said, simply, tonelessly. He chuckled, almost inaudibly, knowing he had startled me.

“A painting of ... who?” I said finally.

“Kate Wake,” he replied.

“Where did you get it?” I asked flatly, suspicious of his claim. I looked at him closely then and thought to myself in that fleeting moment that he might be more interesting than I’d initially given him credit for.

“It was left behind here with all this stuff. If you come back sometime, I’ll set you up with Jay, she can give you a tour of her museum. Seems Kate was something of a celebrity back in her day.”

That guy was a bit strange, I thought as I walked up the road towards town. And moving away from the site, I shook off my unease, and Billy was forgotten. And once, when I ran into him again, he seemed friendly, and quite normal, and I couldn’t recall clearly why I’d been afraid of him.

He started coming into the restaurant where I worked nights, sometimes with his brother. My job at the restaurant on the outskirts of Blue Hills Valley was neither challenging nor particularly stimulating, and frankly, in addition to being lonely, I was bored. I’d just gotten off my shift and was cashing out in the almost-empty lounge, which transformed into a strip joint on certain nights. During the week, though, it was mostly just bad karaoke and beer-soaked regulars, a few of whom edged their way closer to the

stage with every drink, eventually drawing up the courage to sing the song or two they had rehearsed in their minds for the past week.

Billy. His face, his skin, was like a startling, symmetrically rectangular white concrete building under an azure sky in full, low sunlight, pale and smooth and filled with light between sharp angles. There was a slight scar above his lip. I wanted to photograph him, to paint him, and he was willing. There was you, on the one side—far away—and then there was Billy, near, available and willing, open to anything, up for everything, and most of all, intriguing. Indeed, seductive.

“Back story writer,” he told me after he’d sat down at my table and I’d asked what he did in addition to his seemingly lackadaisical work as groundskeeper at Blue Hills.

“You’re a back story writer?” I say, amused and wary, thinking that I’ve misheard.

“Yes,” he says with those brown eyes threaded through with amber and gold, that looked hurt and equally bemused. At the world, at himself. His face is long, his hair, thick and curly.

In the red light from the tawdry stage, his skin glows eerily. The guitar of the country song is twanging in the background, someone stumbling along to the lyrics. “Ha,” I say, still thinking that he’s somehow putting me on. But nothing was ever straightforward with Billy, and that was part of what intrigued me from the start.

I felt guilty at first, but being with Billy was like residing in a parallel world that took place out of time, in some robust, flowing universe with possibilities present and real, if completely fantastic. In addition to his work as groundskeeper at Blue Hills, he was freelancing for a local production company, writing back stories for TV and videogame characters. It was ludicrous and completely compelling. He was also making his own film, and he encouraged me to help him. I was ecstatic at the mere thought of it.

He brings a large bottle of Jack Daniels with him when he first shows me inside the abandoned institution, which he then drinks none of, offering me cup after cup as we walk through the echoey halls covered in faded 1950s linoleum, checked hospital green and white. He's filming there, some kind of small, impenetrable project based on a ménage of video game characters he's been developing for years—mostly with his tiny portable camera, or setting up shots for upcoming weekends. He carries a notebook in which he continuously scrawls notes, he'd work during the week to make enough money, rent the real equipment from the local film group on weekends.

He led me down to the back of the main central building, the reception building, where they used to welcome patients. Where the diagnosis is made. A small door leads directly to the basement, wooden, with peeling white paint.

foil sky persists its sweet blue, chained
fence links between rusty posts, black swan trail
that braids and unbraids the gravel sea
in two

points of contact *click*
like Dorothy's shoes

You write me letters, terse, wonderful letters about how much you miss me, long, newsy letter, about twelve-tone composition and emancipated dissonance, beautiful descriptive letters about the town and landscape near where you are studying.

You call. Sometimes I hear your voice on my machine when I get home, I rewind it to listen to it over and over. I don't need to memorize its particular tone, the faltering hitch in it when you are tired, the sweet hesitation when you say you miss me, how you'd like to talk, your voice spills into me, as though my ear were the direct line into my heart. I think of you, far away. I listen wistfully to you chatter on about a piece of music you had just played for your teacher. You quote from Schoenberg: "All music, all human work has a skeleton, a circulatory, a nervous system. I wish that my work should be considered as an honest and intelligent person, who is saying something he feels deeply."

The trouble is, our conversations are becoming musical pieces that you direct, as I listen. The rhythms of your voice are so familiar to me, I miss you as you talk.

“I think that I *understand* it now,” you finally declare as your description of the concert you’ve just attended draws to a close. Your voice is urgent, almost reverent, resounding with passion.

Your declaration hangs there in the air between us, deserves some sort of an answer, and I attempt to think of something to add, something that will allow me into the conversation, something that will allow me into this *place* with you. “What is it you understand, then, something about life?” I try stupidly, sounding comparatively *tepid* in response.

“Something *about the music*, about what it *is*. After we came back from the concert and my teacher played it again and then I played it, bit by bit by bit....”

I can imagine you closing your eyes as you recount it, so clearly in the grip of this inner world.

“Yes,” I say, agreeing. But I don’t know, not really, I think to myself, almost guiltily, with not a little resentment. I don’t know what it is like to be inside of a piece of music the way you are inside of it, I pout to myself. I don’t know what it’s like to be inside all of music, as it suddenly seems to me you are, as though you belong there. I feel hollowed out and inside of nothing.

“Something just *wrenched open* inside of me when I heard it again.”

“What piece was it?” My throat is aching now.

“Piano Concerto Op. 42,” you say. “It’s this ferocious piece, nearly impossible. It seems like it should technically be impossible.”

“What does it give you?” I ask lightly, trying to draw out this world, to stretch it out, perhaps I can draw it out enough for it to include me, too.

You pause, and then declare with a mix of incredulity and awe and resolve.
“*Beauty.*”

Of course, I think. I almost hear you add in my own head, as though you’ve just remembered to whom you’re speaking. Oh, you poor, earthbound creatures, who don’t understand, and who can’t understand, what it is to be inside this thing called beauty. To participate, to make beauty.

There is an awkward pause. In the silence, which lasts forever, I think to myself how awkward the pause is, how clumsy and odd the word itself is. Awkward. Awkward. Awkward, my mind repeats. The pause drags on.

“Well,” I say lamely, “I guess I should go.”

The sky outside the window is pale. It’s starting to snow.

I think back to a piece I’d done with Billy, an awkward photo collage with paint, a winter landscape in black and white with sepia shadings. The body of the piece is white and shines in a wide, white swath. Daubs of dark bright rusts and cadmium red to the fence running perpendicular alongside one edge of the picture and towards the foreground and to the branches of the two trees that stand in the centre background, then yellow to the lighter background fence that runs the width of the frame, the boards in

variegated columns. The winter elms. Elms are beautiful without their leaves. They are gnarled, complicated systems that look in need of pruning, I love their strong vertical lines and the thick, anchoring branches setting off the more diminutive ones.

I understand nothing, I want to say suddenly. Nothing from within. Only from the outside.

And in fact I've been nowhere, nowhere except Blue Hills Valley and the tiny rural town in Quebec where I lived for those years before coming back to Blue Hills Valley. And you, you call from place after place I've never been, don't even have mental images for.

I tell you in a sort of fever, I will fly to meet you. The next time you call you tell me you've dreamed a set of red wings on a bed. Wings made of thin wire and red threaded gauze. You don't mention my offer.

At home, I have dreams about humans who are not human, their embryo selves swimming like tiny birds in amniotic fluid.

In my journal I write: *The past is a lost film that flickers its random, occasional images through my mind, an image or two stilled long enough to be recognizable, a smattering of words. The past is a foreign country—that unknown novel with the one first line that will live on forever, destined to be forgotten but for the one opening sentence. The past is a film, most of which you've forgotten, the past is a movie still, perhaps two or three stills that you can shift around from here to there as if judging for veracity.*

John Henry had finally fallen asleep, though he wanted to stay up to wait for your call. I wait and wait. And wait. I think I've probably gotten the time wrong, you'll call later. I make tomorrow's lunch, feeling pleased with myself. And tomorrow's dinner. I pour myself a glass of wine, thinking you'll be calling any second. But you don't call.

Eventually I drift off in the chair beside the telephone table. I dream I am with my parents—figures that approximate them as they were when I was a child—in our house. I never really see them face-to-face. We are on the top floor looking out the window at a tsunami of slick black oil roiling over the land towards us. As we set about transferring the furniture upstairs, photos, boxes, tables and chairs, it becomes clear that it won't be enough—we have to leave. Soon I am following them on the path I presume they have taken, it is dark and they are gone.

I come to a bridge. The bridge is of dark wood, broken, cracked in half, I look down at the dark rapids and across to the other side of the upturned edge of the split bridge. There are white reflective markers on the underside of the structure, warnings? Pointers for the path? I'm uncertain. I see, far ahead, my mother and father. My mother glances back and hesitates when she sees me—"Katie," I hear her say softly. "Oh, Katie."

She turns back toward me. Stands there, her pale eyes and blonde hair taking on the light with a look of pain, and as I begin to approach her, before her appears a new bridge, long and narrow, over a river. The bridge is white, as though lit from underneath. Streetlights reflect off the water. I begin to walk towards her but when I arrive at the

bridge I stop, suddenly paralyzed by the image of my feet and the wooden planks beneath them, the water between the planks through the gaps, far below. My stomach flip-flops.

I see my father far in the distance, a small figure moving rapidly away into the dark without looking back. I look down again at the rickety wooden planks and dark, rushing water. When I look up this time, I'm poised before the white bridge pointing a camera over to green meadows, and my mother has disappeared.

In her place is Kate Wake running in a bridal gown, being pulled forward by William. I can't see his face because he is looking ahead of her but I somehow know that it is him, William, my great grandfather. Holding her hand, he pulls her into the future, she is following but she looks back at me laughing with an open smile. Her face, dappled, prismatic, like a diamond refracting light.

After my parents separated, my mother took an apartment in the city. John Henry and I go to live with my grandparents, my father moves to Saskatchewan, to look for work. Or so at first he says. But he stops working altogether after a few attempts, starts collecting books in a sprawling old house in Saskatoon, gains massive amounts of weight in an astonishingly brief period of time, and I think, from the phone conversations I overhear, between him and my grandmother, he rarely ventures out. She continues to urge him to expand his world. Which he does, in a sense, by eating, ensconcing himself

in a large two-storey house, through his ever-mounting collection of books. After he leaves, I seldom see him. Twice I'm put on a plane to visit, he flies back with me once to see his parents, my grandparents, where John Henry and I are living. He becomes a flickering (large) version of his former self, as though insisting on his continued existence and simultaneously extinguishing his former self, and perhaps his present self as well. It's a heart attack, predictably, that kills him, less than a year after he leaves Manitoba. I mourn him in my foggy, childlike way, through vague anger and misery, my images of him vacillating between him as he was when he died and the way I still imagine him, before he left us.

A WHILE LATER JAY SMALL found a matted set of pages crowded with drawings and partial still lifes, and with several sketches of hands. The lines were delicate, sure. The drawings were signed “KW” and looked as though they had been rifled through, fussed over. She knew instantly, and with a sickening feeling growing in her belly, that William had looked at them for Kate Wake, the woman he had mentioned would also be painting at the studio. Jay had never seen her. She suspected that the new paintings she had found by William weeks earlier were of Kate Wake as well. She looked around the studio with a shivery feeling.

Examining the pages more carefully, she could see that their corners were bent and bruised. There were smudges on the white edges, around the drawings. They sent a charge through her being, those smudges, started a tingling low in her stomach, one that continued up her throat into her mouth, under her tongue.

They were messy, erotic, parts of the paper sleeked with a slight shine of sweat. She imagined his fingers following the lines on the page, imagined him speaking with interest to Kate about improvements that could be made to the images.

It bothered her. At the hospital she took liberties.

Poised beside a bed at night, her hands supple and searching, she perused patients as though they were Braille text, moving lightly over surfaces, feeling for the subtle fissures. She never touched them in a sexual way—no, no, that would be wrong, she

knew, but nevertheless, being so near them, her hands suddenly didn't know, quite, what they were doing and she gave herself over to a sort of unknowing. She was troubled by her own sudden shamelessness, but still she prodded and poked, pushed at those sleeping bodies.

At night—everything was so different at night. Certain lamps were kept lit for safety but there were floors and wards where things were so dark one couldn't make out much at all. Most of the patients were sedated for sleep at night, anyway.

She wanted to take things from them.

Small things, broaches, hair clips. Ribbons. Her collection of the small items filched from patients began to fill various crannies of her small room in the nurses' quarters. She arranged them and rearranged them, as if they were artworks and artifacts, her room a gallery, a museum. She imagined herself telling about each one. Never did she let her mind go too far in this direction, since she always felt guilty to the point of nausea after indulging this way. Still, the collection grew. There was a small enamel locket, with a dainty bird painted on its porcelain face. The bird was painted in shades of bright blue and dusty yellow against the creamy background of the porcelain, with tiny daubs of orange for its legs and beak. This one was reserved for the spot just beside her bed, on her nightstand.

At night she dreams hands stitching fabric. Every time she closed her eyes the hands moved, threading through, graceful and methodical, gentle and firm, fingers held

firmly between thread and needle, fixing knots at the ends of a line; a mother's hands, a woman's hands.

She adds to her collection, tending it carefully. She tends the garden less, and with more caution. Something has changed, it takes a while to understand what it is.

She realizes, with a start, much later, at the hospital, that they are Kate Wake's hands. Of course, they are Kate Wake's hands. Jay goes from non-knowledge to knowledge with a kind of forceful rush of embarrassment from which she never recovers. She feels like she is constantly blushing. Her feelings are all over the place, for them both.

Your fine brown hair, your fluttering hands. I knew, instantly, just what kind of a lover you would be, and were. I knew that you possessed that precise combination of firmness and compliancy, that you were comfortable with some power, that you knew how to hold your power, that you knew, also, how to surrender it. How you furrowed into me, from all sides, before I even knew what was happening. Before I knew I'd been invaded.

William's hands looked different, too.

The Hill

Billy and I spend more time together, and I ramble on to him about my life. He takes an interest. Edna thinks he takes too much interest, but I don't care. I'm lonely, feeling desperate.

We visit the asylum almost every day, and every weekend. He hangs out in the lounge most nights, writing feverishly. I have respite help for John Henry during my night work hours and for mornings, when I sleep. JH is still in a form of school two days a week, but the rest of the time I drag him with us, because he loves exploring the inside of the buildings on-site.

Once in we can roam at will, among the abandoned machines and beds and gurneys and wheelchairs. The interior is uncanny and enchanting, and added to the sense that we were inhabiting and also creating another world, a world that in some ways had nothing to do with us at all. It was all happening there outside of us. It was liberating.

The buildings are completely abandoned, in spite of their sprawling, intimidating presence. Impossible to ignore, situated on the hill just outside of Blue Hills Valley, overlooking the city—everyone looked up to the abandoned buildings whenever they looked east. You can say, don't look back all you like, but there it was.

And though the buildings were completely abandoned, the amazing thing was that most everything inside had stayed as it was, or at least had stayed in storage. It was all there. Perhaps it was because it was all so horribly dated, and besides being devoid of any real function or use for contemporary medicine, the contents were also a very real

reminder of psychiatry's arcane origins, its muddled, disordered pathways and generally flawed and uneasy history. But some undaunted someone had, sometime early in the 1980s, set up one of the buildings as a pseudo-museum, complete with all the abandoned equipment, a former psychiatric nurse who'd worked there through the formative years of the institution, through its time as an asylum and mental health centre, through all of its various incarnations.

Her name was Lily "Jay" Glydis Small, and she was not one to be bothered by embarrassment. In fact, her unspoken motto seemed to run along the lines of a certain sly delight with any type of attention. Everyone called her Jay, same as her aunt, the original Blue Hills matron, and another reason why Billy was interested by her in the first place. Billy'd somehow fitted her as a character into his ongoing project and film about the Hill.

She was eager to show us the museum she'd set up there, was available whenever we asked her to tell us about her life as a nurse. She had great stories. And in the museum she had a painting that she declared was "of a patient named Kate Wake, who had been a singer and very famous, until she got her throat slashed and had to come back to Canada, but a real beauty nonetheless, so sad what happened to her." I was astonished by it, feeling my whole body tingle when I saw the painting, the one that Billy had—truthfully—claimed to me that he knew of. Another painting by Kate Wake, of roses and wild greenery in a mason jar on a table.

No one knew this stuff existed. It was pretty clear that the museum was not in any way an official museum.

Located in the basement of the main reception building, it was the first thing I saw when Billy took me down there. He howled with laughter at my bewilderment. But it was the oddest space, everything haphazardly tagged with typed labels and some archaic system, a catalogue system that included letters and numbers, some with dates and brief descriptions, and I wondered whether the museum itself had been a once-semi-official abandoned project that she had taken over.

He called her Jay Little, and had her narrate parts. She had to be at least eighty, and she *was* little, wizened and shrunken and small, with leathery skin, dark, darting eyes and a brisk, efficient walk and a wary way about her, as though her instincts were at odds with her body's efficiencies. She'd started work there while still very young and was the niece of Jay Small, who was about twenty years her elder—and like the site itself an unguarded storehouse of information about what had really gone on back in the day.

There were straightjackets and rickety ECT machines, restraining devices and 1920s-style wooden wheeled chairs. Gurneys under 1970s velvet paintings of roses, framed black-and-white images of nurses, under cracked glass, faces upturned to the heavens, which in turn shone down on them directly. Yellowed hospital certificates, hung crookedly. Endless clunky electric machines and archaic medical devices, patient artifacts and confiscations, pills and rudimentary, homemade tools and knives, crude art patients had crafted in workshops. There was a diminutive clay "Last Supper" after da Vinci, a long poem titled "The Key," carefully lettered, illustrated and framed. She took us through it all, her unfettered enthusiasm almost uncanny in itself.

Oddest of all, and this was purely Jay's touch, she had somehow procured ancient mannequins from old department stores and had dressed them up as nurses and patients, and so on, so that when you went into one or another room you might see an entire "psychiatric history scene" laid out before you, a tableau of badly painted, chipped, life-sized dolls with bad wigs and painted-green eye shadow, looking right at you from their unrealistic, stiff poses, patient-mannequins in beds (facing the wall), nurse-mannequins hovering alongside, arms outstretched, presumably ready to administer treatment or restraint. And of course they are all female.

Wolf

“That’s Billy for you,” he laughs sardonically when Billy tells him about me. They have stopped by the diner, it’s 1:00 a.m. and I’m on my break. Sitting there with him. Billy’s gotten onto some tear about our movie, my family story—what I know about it, at any rate.

“He’ll get all of your information and suddenly you realize you know nothing about him at all,” he finishes.

I laugh uneasily.

Back at home

After a few weeks when I am moved back home, I set up a temporary bedroom with a flimsy cot we keep in case of guests, in the room adjoining the sunroom so that I won't wake Ezra. Though I am not sleeping much now.

I live between there and the sunroom. I don't know how the time passes, but it does. It is spring, it is summer. The weather warms and I unfasten the windows of the room, I feel like I'm unfastened, too, now there are only screens between me and the street, between me and the trees, between me and everything.

By then Ezra is on about week six of his project to hunt down and exorcise all of the clothing moths, which have somehow invaded our closets, tiny golden wings fluttering when we get dressed in the morning, when we pull fresh sheets and blankets from the linen closets. They feed on natural fibres, he says angrily, grabbing clothing out of drawers. I've stopped cleaning, he's having difficulty keeping up. I see the lines around his eyes deepen but I look at him as though he is someone I scarcely know.

His anger, though, affects me like something toxic being sucked directly into my pores. So does his movement, so does everything.

The news reports that there are forest fires everywhere, north and to the west, in California too. Huge tracts of land devoured by flame, infernos creeping up on houses, entire neighbourhoods evacuated. At night the television tracks developments at the bottom of the screen, a tickertape parade of worsening disasters. The news filters into the mélange of details that animates my world. The news readers are robots, paper dolls,

dryly clicking words with their unreadable expressions, their wide, clean eyes. I see quite clearly that the tickertape parade is the only real thing about the TV.

One weekend, Ezra and I drive back from the lake with the canola fields glowing yellow—the days are still long enough that the light is both day and night at once. All of the colours are bright under the full moon, crashing yellows and bright, violent greens, everything luminous and rising up.

The shape of the lake changes as the day lengthens, its own animal skin at the mercy of the animal, burgeoning with character, a dramatis persona with shifting circumstances. Towards dusk it swells to a silvery blue, and appears more solid and substantial, like a serene object. Earlier in the day, in the hazy, lemonade sunshine, it's a fine navy blue line cut against a coriander sky.

One morning the woman from across the street is hoisted onto a gurney and into an ambulance and taken away.

I don't know her, except as the woman from across the street, but I see her almost every day in her striped skirt, sweeping the walk of leaves and dirt, sweeping, sweeping, sweeping, day after day. I see her leading the shuffling old man who lives with her and together they go by almost every day on a walk, she gripping his elbow to keep him from

falling, the sound of his slippers scraping the concrete sidewalk. They walk slowly, slowly, to the end of the street. And back, she leading him all the way, he shuffling blankly. Sweeping, shuffling, sweeping, shuffling. He goes with her in the ambulance.

The woman from the house across the street doesn't come back. The house is put up for sale by a youngish couple who don't touch one another when they come by to remove the furniture. I expect that they are siblings, children of the couple. The For Sale sign stakes out the front lawn. The house stays empty for months. I watch its empty windows. It takes on a personality, like a companion, a pet.

Sound all around me as I sit here in the sunroom; it's breezy and the leaves rustle first as one immense sound and then in discrete parts, until it seems that sound has taken account of each leaf. And these individual points of sound continue, simultaneous and sure, while time passes like a freighter, silent and self-contained, its own entity and nothing to do with the rest of the world.

I stay in the sunroom. I draw, I write. I think. I sit. And sit and sit. I age as I sit, I have been here for years, I will be here forever. I am on medication now, which is not making me feel better.

I'd imagined a photo of a boy in a t-shirt
sitting in sunshine, facing away

from the camera, back a play of shadow and light.
and shoulder blades that sprout like wings

I'd rendered that photo of the mind
in paint, in creams and yellows and greys,

so that the shoulder blades sat
in the foreground, the figure

almost completely abstracted. Mere incline, angles,
slope and slant, a certain tilt of the head,

the grey and cream light soothing
the shoulder ...

So vulnerable, I shuddered to think of it.
So vulnerable.

what's at the back of the back?

I sleep that night, I dream about John Henry. It is a flying dream—perhaps a dream about a flying dream, more accurately. I am in Mont-Saint-Hilaire, the first week after moving there. I've spent the day in the small room that is to be mine, staring out the window at the landscape and the green mountain. The entire village is picturesque, really, and perhaps it would have seemed that way to me as well if I hadn't felt so out of place in it all. All I could think about was the prairies and the flat, beautiful ground I'd left behind, John Henry at my grandparents' place, and when I will see him again.

But I float out my window at night, over the picturesque town, and fifteen hundred miles back to the prairies, and then I am flying over my grandparents' farmyard. The sky is black, an inky rolling sea dotted with tiny phosphorescent sea creatures, decorating it like a necklace on black silk, jewelled treasure that had floated to the surface after shipwreck. I look down from high, high above as I survey the farm, I can see my grandparents, my parents, the dog, my cat, everyone except for John Henry. They are all waving up at me, even the animals, their smiling faces shining tiny dots, getting smaller and smaller. And finally as I am pulling away and I can hardly make them out at all, I notice John Henry, sitting up on the highest limb of the big old tree behind the house where we used to play on the tire swing. He doesn't look up, he is just sitting there, perched quietly on the tallest branch. "John Henry!" I call, "John Henry!"

But he doesn't hear me.

John Henry

In her memory is a girl cartwheeling across the lawn. You, standing at the bare periphery of green, are watching, waiting for her to finish. You call her name as her limbs circle in the air against a strict line of trees, the astringent blue sky, but she doesn't hear you. It's a strange day, a strange time for her to be cartwheeling across the lawn, as inside her mother weeps, surrounded by attentive mourners, by neighbourhood husbands who may be a little too attentive.

And strange, she thinks now, how the child does nothing, says nothing after he calls her name. He is somehow outside of the scene, outside of himself even. He is the afterthought, the after-child, the hanger-on. The observer who calls your name.

And now she, observing the observer.

She, who goes back to animate the scene. She, who mimics the memory of childhood, its glimpses as mysterious to her as they are to others for whom she projects them.

Miniatures. Still lifes. Slow timelines, where little happens, and nothing happens quickly. She understands the miniature, and the impulse of the miniaturist. She understands the desire to protect, that small space that wants to be preserved, that wants to be given over to no one else, that wants to be kept.

Yesterday I was drawing again, a series of images that came to me full and furious and insistent as rain, a figure with head thrown back and streams of light coursing from his open mouth, shaped in a perfect O—streams of water, fabric threads, maypole ribbons. I sketched them, inking the fine lines, filling in with coloured pencil, the delicate streamers of light, ribbons, one at a time.

She thinks of John Henry sleeping, his tiny body sweet, sticky, in sleep ...

The child sobs as he is forced to leave the grandparents' house. He wishes to stay there but his mother wants him to nap at home, in his own bed, in spite of the fact that his father is now gone and his mother will soon be gone as well, although this is yet unknown to any of them. She simply leaves one early morning in June, two years after the heart attack that killed her husband, their son. And once she's gone, really and truly gone, little is spoken of her. It's assumed—is it even assumed? perhaps, barely—that she might still be in California somewhere, where she'd come from in the first place. An embarrassed silence lingers around her name, around her existence, a delicate avoidance of old photos in which she is included.

There is a boy.
He is so clear in my mind.

He stands, uncertain, I've seen him
at lunch in the schoolyard, standing
apart from the other children, watching

(he'd approached
a group of children playing
"knight," and asked
"Could I play?"

They pause to look at him
through narrowed eyes, mute
incomprehension spinning
the fine air around him, he is drawn back

like a mouth, a stroke of first paint poised over canvas.

The inkling splinters,
he never sees the danger.

"No,"
they say, after his question composes them.)

He had been told that the grandparents' house will also soon be his home, he knows, since his parents have told him that they intend to move into the house the following summer. It is a special place to him. And his parents have told him the stories of how he will come to inhabit this place, how this place is being prepared for them, in anticipation of their upcoming move.

And so when he is there, he is at nona and popa's place—but he is also at the place he will soon come to live. And inside of him over time has grown a stubborn entitlement, to the place, to the great lawns, to the trees, the barns, the machinery, to the grandparents themselves. When he comes to live there, he is sure that they will be there too, and they will all live together. It will be just as it is now, and he does not want to leave. He is impatient to move into his dream house, his promised home.

Nona, nona, nona, he calls ...

Nona comes in from the back room, face crumpled in worry, and he allows himself to be lifted up into her arms, his body stiff as it usually is. Nona, nona, nona, he repeats again and again, and buries himself in her, flinging himself forward into her. Her face is greyed, dim, as though it's been painted over with wax, an encaustic surface through which her worry buzzes and filches out in occasional jolts—she is some minor, relatively powerless and benign deity that can sheathe him only temporarily in comforting concern, as he turns towards her, her arms folding him into her, fusing the two of them as though they are unthought versions of the same shape, a simultaneous, latent geometry. She is dimming. I see, also, the shape of time in her, it is there like an ampersand, I can see it, even with my naive adolescent eyes, or perhaps because of my adolescent eyes, and I know that it is a matter of the merest, slim interval, before she will be gone, the softest blink without any sound or warning, a blanket coming unfolded, I can see her death already coiled up inside of her, waiting to release itself and stretch her out, to flatten like a thread before that final cut, and at the moment I know, definitively and forever, that we are on our own.

What is it that they see there in each other, what do they hold on to, what do they reach out for, reach into, what is it there so limited and hidden, familiar, comforting? Surely she sees her son in him.... And for his part, he won't let anyone else hold him this way, nor comfort him at all. Her silvery hair, neat and curling at the nape of her neck, his small fingers, still pudgy with need, hand, blue-veined and translucent, creaturely, reaching, grasping at her, tugging at her hair. Though John Henry is often quiet beside me, reflective, calm, intent, he has never reached for me in that way. When I am beside him we are two children standing hand-in-hand, watching an endless sky twist and widen above us.

I see you there in your crib, watch the way you rock yourself on your knees, back and forth, back and forth, with that strange, eerie, blank rhythm, watch you fling your head into the pillow, flail at your skull with your tiny hands, deliberately, pummelling and flapping, your breath coming fast and then still faster, shallow bird breaths, you are the tiniest bird.

In my dream,
a man sits, rifle
cocked

waiting for the children to leave the schoolyard.

Is he waiting for the one, that boy?
Or will any one of them do?

I scrabble him to safety.
To a house.

(The house is familiar.
As I enter
I realize that it is a house I have built,
it is near where I grew up. But it has changed.
Inside, a tall wall divides the space in two diagonally.
The light is astounding, clean, brilliant, warm, the bed high,
Piled with blankets, all white.)

The moment is locked in time like the one in the back room she has just come from— where years ago I lunged for the chair you were sitting on when it lurched back, propelled your skull hard against the wall with a sick thud, my stomach lurching in time to you, as I lunged for you and caught you by the shoulders and I could feel my face assemble itself in a naked panic; leaning over you, frozen that way, we make a *Pietà*, but for your wrenching away from me after that one still moment when we are locked together, your eyes filled with half-formed tears and terror and recognition, reflecting my own, and then that violent moment when you pull your head away, you breaking the thread between us, refusing my fear, refusing my conclusions, my version ...

I remember I thought then that there was nothing I could do, that I was a casual, upright observer moving alongside the mumbling, stammering, stumbling, stubborn, internal drama of your life. But I was wrong.

Every instance of your voice, crying, is the same: distressed, unhappy, insistent. She pulls you closer into herself and you cling to her, wrapped around, two frail bodies entwined.

Nona, nona, nona, you cry.

Nona, another word for fate, the Fate who spins the thread of life. Nona, the Roman, Clotho in Greek mythology, she's the first of the Moirae, the three fates, daughters of the night, those apportioners, along with Decima or Lachesis in the Greek and Morta or Atropos. And Nona is also Ninth, the Roman goddess of pregnancy called upon by pregnant women in their ninth month when the child was due to be born. Clotho, the spinner, spins the thread of life, Lachesis, or the "allotter" or drawer of lots, measures the thread of life allotted to each person. And the final fate, Atropos the inexorable, the inevitable, literally the unturning, the one who cuts the thread, of life. Choosing the manner of each person's death; and when their time has come, she cuts their life thread with her 'abhorred shears.'

The Moirae appear three nights after a child's birth to determine the course of its life ...

Nona, nona, nona. Are our fates held inside of us, I wonder, are they there in triplicate, do we reach for them from the womb, and continue as children reaching for the unknown, sometimes wise children, mostly indiscriminate, swallowing them, nurturing them inside until they are ready to sprout? Do we sense when we are pulled too close to that forever-spinning, heartless wheel of fortune, with its centrifugal forces, its own vortex that may pull us in? Can we outwit them, our fates?

Today when he is forced to leave he breaks into a wail, a sound that is pulled from someplace inside him as though from the bottom of a deep, dark well. He sobs as though broken-hearted. He carries a sock monkey with long limbs, its arms Velcroed at his neck. His mother has fastened them there for some sense of comfort, though, being a boy, this clearly must not be made obvious—least of all to him, least of all to them, or anyone. It is simply his toy.

He wails, mouth falling moistly, muted into the monkey's soft head, embarrassed, he muffles his crying into it, the sound foreshortening into the fabric, eyes full of tears, his face flushed, cheeks rosy, pretty, transparent streamers of mucous and spittle running between his mouth and the pillowy animal softness.

It is a singular, private sadness, he is turned completely into himself, as if he has intuited his father's death, of which he has not yet been told, as though there were some unstoppable and bewildering narrative that he senses is about to arrive.

I remember that sound, as I remember you on that day, the way your thin body shakes with sobs, taut shoulder blades trembling like tiny frangible bird wings at your back, rising and falling unsteadily with your broken breath, your premonitioned brokenheartedness.

She has already been told.

Plans to move to the farm change and they are shuffled between relatives as their mother returns to work, and then breaks down completely. When their mother finally leaves for California "to visit an old friend," they are shuffled off again, this time to their grandparents, their father's parents. Here is where they stay for some time.

At first California seemed like a good place for their mother to go. Everyone approves. There is the thought that there might be a cure in sunshine; the grandparents are thinking of becoming snowbirds themselves, the 1970s have finally given way to the eighties. After a while it becomes clear that their mother is not coming back.

Eventually when Katie is thirteen almost fourteen, it's thought best to send her to live with a vigorous great-aunt in Quebec, her grandfather's youngest sister, who is large and loud and speaks to her mostly in French. In the mother's absence, the grandparents are quietly desperate, overwhelmed with responsibility for the children. John Henry stays with them until two years later when nona dies and their grandfather is too frail to care

for him. John Henry is taken into a care facility. She writes to him, weekly. She receives a photo back in the mail, of him in his small room, John Henry sitting on his bed looking hesitantly at the camera, almost smiling, unblinking. Delicately crooked tracings of John Henry's hands, pictures of animals and carefully lettered alphabets and numbers on lined pages. She carefully stores everything, feels like she is waiting and waiting for the right moment, a painted sky of swelling cloud, dense and low and sore and dark, just about to rain, cloud that, instead of raining, stays and stays, pressing lower, lower ...

There are things that can't be explained.

What one of us lives through, each must, so that this, of which we are part, will know itself.

Her brother is three in that scene, she is ten. Cartwheeling defiantly across the lawn with him watching mutely from the sidelines.

Upside-down trees behind him poke at the lousy, painted sky, an upside-down figure standing there forlorn and alone, his mouth and forehead pinched in a woolly frown, grey eyes solemn and glossy as marbles, fixed on her, wire frames of his glasses glinting in sunlight that's just broken through the cloud, in that single strange moment before it reverts to low, dull cloud again ...

A sudden rage goes through her like fire as she is twirling there in space, she is giddy, dazzled by frustration and anger and the unfairness of it all, what cannot be stopped, his upside-down waiting, standing, lingering, just waiting there soundless and still. She wants to break those glasses, to take them off his face and stomp them and grind them into the ground. Interrupt his serious gaze.

*When he was four,
my brother bit me because I was not him.
No one was.*

In another series of drawings of figures that come to me, a radiant cloaked figure kneels over another prone one, cup in hand, pouring liquid in the sleeping figure's ear. It is a cup of poison.

... and this may be the difficulty: in forgetting.

Many weeks after the fall but what do I remember? A week or more of lucid, liquid dreaming, dreaming awake, awake, awake, hallucinating, wandering the streets like a stray dog. Thinking all were watching, waking after, finally sleeping. I could hear the houses' insides, humming like my own insides. I think of all the houses, and of all the people in the houses, all the people sleeping in their beds, on their sides and backs and stomachs, all sleeping, unaware, all at the same time. A truck passes by, side panels whitewashed, in one corner these words remain: Time and money. We'll save you both.

We'll save you both. *We'll save you both, we'll save you both, we'll save you both*, flutters through my mind like a tiny, razor-winged butterfly. If I finally arrive at the end of myself, will you be there? *My child, my love*.

Let words be words, I beg the universe, and no more. Let my observations be benign.

Finally, rain—the beautiful smell, the sounds of rain ...

The script

It's Billy's idea to have me play both Kate Wake and a version of myself—Kate Wake's granddaughter. I tried to explain to him that no, in fact, Kate Wake was my *great-grandmother* but such distinctions don't register with him.

Was it also his idea to have me do the voice-overs for both characters? It may have been my own. It was all voice-overs, except for the parts where I directly address the camera. Later, to further complicate things, I'm also doing a version of my own mother, Billy's story becoming more myth than reality to me, anyway.

"What does it matter?" he shrugs, looking at me in an amused and impossible-to-disagree-with way. "It's fiction."

I shake my head but I'm only shaking it to myself. He's not paying attention. What does it matter? I think. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe he's right, I think.

Soon enough we are engrossed, both of us writing scenes, words for voice-over, words for characters. The new cast of characters—my cast of characters—has pretty much displaced his own. He's taken them on as well, taken them over in a way, I feel. And it's exciting.

The movie starts with me walking down the street in the rain, as my mother, shot from overhead.

It changes

What is this?" says Billy a week or two later. His voice and look are brusque. I've asked him to read the piece I've been working on.

"I don't know," I say, for lack of a better answer. "I'm not sure yet."

"Is it a film script? Poem? Is it someone watching a film? What is it?"

"I don't know," I say again, fumbling for an answer, a little surprised at his hostility. "I don't know what it is. I was just inspired lately, I guess," I add lamely.

"Funny how you stick so close to your own reality," he says, dismissively.

It is exciting. But for me it is often—too often—exciting in the way that feels only one small misstep away from danger.

Billy comes in breathless one morning, brown eyes with their yellow threads flashing. "She knew Kate," he says, breathing hard.

"Who?"

"Kate. Kate Wake. She knew her."

"Who knew her?" I say again, frustrated. Billy is manic with excitement.

"Jay," he says. "Jay knew her." His voice wavers between wonder and triumph.

"Lily knew Kate?" I say, incredulous.

“Yes,” he says, pacing furiously around the kitchen of the asylum. “Yes yes yes. And this will tie it all together. It’s all going to come together.” I watch as his mania shudders up his arms, his body atremble.

“Billy,” I say quietly, stepping towards him. He looks up at me, startled. “I am going to have to leave here, we are going to have to leave. John Henry ...” I break off.

“Everything is going to be fine, don’t you see?” He is adamant. Desperate to make me see that everything will be fine.

I dig up and read part of the script I’d written then, reworked in winter, the parts with my mother and me, voice-overs for the walking-in-the-rain scene. Billy wants to shoot everything in black and white, put in some colour after, pieced-in scenes, so that they feel discontinuous. That’s his idea. He wants to make each scene very separate from the next, with blackouts in between scene. He imagines the black and white scenes are going to be something like an Antonioni film, maybe like *L’avventura* or something. A mother and daughter in search of their past, someone disappearing without explanation. But that’s not what happened, I tell him.

KATIE

Under the ...

Under the trees in the yard

MOTHER

a room, pale yellow and laid with gold cracks

“the walls are cracked with gold cracks”

KATIE

in the pale light, leaf-transparent

the window above me, light spider-frail.

The closing bridge of day spans into evening, final
strains, its last music, timpani have sounded; a heavy pause:

MOTHER

A storm looms

KATIE

[very quiet] a hand grips another in the dark

MOTHER

Your mind slips between worlds,

the shy blue of twilight, the glass-translucence

the shatter, you'd broken, around you were breaking

how we don't see significance in our own worlds and
must read it in others ...

KATIE

Later

her glass shoulder

furrowing into the winter bed,

sucking the under-the-tongue seeds

she turns again
head pressing down-
white, writing the pillowed night sky
as it pulses violet: a stitch in her side beats

tiny silver threads of sky, an alphabet:
the distance between the stars, between letters
are wounds, light mends them

MOTHER
hand stitches
a year-after-year threading of highway
home, silver bird cutting and mending the skies

KATIE
I bit my tongue

MOTHER
while she watched
for betrayals, vigilant

KATIE and MOTHER
and thought how you must learn to take
your consolations from smaller things, ever smaller
ever smaller

I start to worry about Billy. One night he smashes out a window, the sound is otherworldly.

His cheeks are flushed red whenever I see him, he is agitated for seemingly no reason and seemingly without himself knowing why. After work, back at the Hill when I turn to ask him whether he is all right, his cheeks and forehead glow of their own accord. What is it, I say. He pretends not to hear me. When I ask again, he says quickly, nothing, nothing. Are you sure, I say, hoping he might light on something that floats up through his contentiousness from a deeper emotional level accidentally, that it might overtake his agitation and show some emotional raw cause, but I see instantly that nothing has stopped; everything is teeming, proliferating, going, in perpetual motion.

There is no stillness in him.

That is why, perhaps, I am exhausted, feeling distressed.

It's all happened fast. By now we are all staying on the grounds while filming; he's completely committed to living there, camped out, sometimes sleeping inside the building, sometimes just in his sleeping bag under the stars. John Henry and I sleep inside.

Billy's involved him as well. And Jay is stopping by every day, thrilled to be recognized for her "museum," happy to be incorporated into the film, happy that something seems to be happening with all of the stuff she's catalogued and collected.

We've been staying there on and off for about two months. I've missed several of your calls.

Billy wants John Henry to play some role of a patient who was in Blue Hills with Kate. John Henry is very excited. He is going to be in a movie.

Billy explains the scene carefully to John Henry, and then to Jay.

It's strangely hot for October. The air is thick and still.

Billy's filled one of the big tubs with water. Jay's in her nurse's uniform, and he wants her to tell the camera how hydrotherapy works, which she cheerily does. He wants her to tell how it came to be that Kate dies after hydrotherapy, after giving birth. They'd put her in there to calm her, he says, explaining carefully. Jay nods. After taking her child. We have to re-enact this? I think.

It was all getting too intense. Why do I let him? Why do I go through with it?

The sky that day was the colour of aluminum, I called it a tintype sky because it reminded me of the tintype plates they used to use for printing photos, like a metallic taste, the colour of nothing.

Billy directs John Henry to sit on the sill of an open window for the upcoming scene. He sits there, facing out. He looks back at us for his cues, and his face with its solemn cast, takes on the colour of the sky.

You look back at me, you slip forward, you fall into nothing. One second you are there, the next you are gone.

Billy is so manic with filming the tub scene he doesn't even notice until I scream.

Scene: You leaving me.

Int., shared apartment

After

“I will not survive it!” I tell you.

“You will,” you say.

There is a long silence, the kind that no words can ease.

“I need to go,” he says finally. Quietly, firmly.

“I am angry,” she says, “that you cannot locate any safety in me anymore. Only distance, fear. Chaos. That you cannot understand.”

He looks at her for a long while, eyes grave, then brings himself to his feet.

(he leaves)

A month after John Henry's funeral, I was still trying to contact my mother, without success. Everything that's happened still feels unreal to me, except that I am numb from crying. I have no more tears left.

The doorbell. When I go to answer it, standing there outside my door is a tall man in a jacket and heavy boots. Piercing eyes, he looks familiar. "Katie?" he says.

"Wolf," I respond, dumbfounded.

He looks at me for a full few seconds before he seems to be able to match my name to my face. There's light in his eyes, light like something hidden behind a wall.

"Yes, it's me," I say, still puzzled about why he is here. "How are you? Come in." Billy's brother, Wolf. Short for Wolfgang.

"Fine, fine," he says, looking away, then at the ground. I notice a wedding band on his finger. I hadn't seen him in nearly six months, not since before the movie.

"You and Lainey finally tied the knot?" I say lightly.

"Yes," he says. He shifts from foot to foot there at the door. "No. Not Lainey. Someone else. Uh, we're expecting."

There is an awkward silence, but he doesn't offer more information. I don't pry. "Let's sit down, in here, at the table," I say instead.

I smile uncertainly at him, to show him that I like him, perhaps, in spite of everything. I hesitate, wondering whether to bring up Billy. And then because there is nothing else to say, I do. “Um, so, what is Billy up to these days?”

“Billy’s why I’m here,” he says in a clipped tone as he sits down heavily.

I’m startled. “What do you mean?” I manage. Sitting with Wolf there in the tiny kitchenette, I see the space as if for the first time since you left and John Henry died. I need to leave here, I think suddenly, wildly.

“Thanks,” he says distractedly to the glass of water I give him, running his hands around it, tapping his fingers on the glass, then the table. Water’s all I have in the apartment, besides the remnants of whatever alcohol that might be left. I’ve been at it pretty steady myself. “Last I knew he was mostly working as a lab rat.”

“A lab rat?” I say, confused.

“Someone who looks for medical studies to participate in. Apparently they pay quite well if you hit the right ones.”

“There are enough to make a living?” I say through my numbed state. “Here?”

“He told me he was planning to travel around the world. Apparently you can, if you’re willing to travel.”

He’s silent for a while. “How are you, Katie?” he says softly, looking at me.

I feel further confused, put my chin up, feeling defensive, still thinking about Billy. “I am planning to enrol in university,” I answer, apropos of nothing. I guess I’ve just decided that.

“Good,” he says, looking down. The sun streaming in through the window is shining off the coffee-coloured wood of the table. It’s a pale winter light, prismatic snow and sky-reflected shades of blue and apricot, it catches his face and he moves to avoid it.

“Billy is dead,” he says then. “Suicide.”

I’m shaking my head, still in the track of our earlier conversation. “I assume that you don’t hear from him much, then.” I say stupidly. The music I have on, something Joni Mitchell, something from *Blue*, I think, “All I Want” or “A Case of You,” now sounds completely off-tune to me, and for a moment I’m not sure whether it is my ears or the actual sound. My ears can’t distinguish tone, timbre. Her voice washes over me.

My body suddenly remembers tears and I am blinking furiously.

Wolf stops tapping and turns to me. His gaze is unwavering. “No, we don’t hear much, not much at all.”

I can’t speak.

I try not to look at him and then do, after all. The music ends. He is looking at me, eyes blue-grey and cold, accusing, direct, fierce. In the silence I can hear my breath. I am still looking at him and realize that I’m still shaking my head, eyes now dangerously full of tears. I try to think of something else, I try to look away but instead, can only think of everything—Billy, John Henry, you, how I am so tired.

Without warning he leans in to kiss me, a kiss that is stern, not at all tender, and before I know it we are kissing and I am kissing his face, and then his hands and then I feel his fingertips pressing at my lips, forcing my mouth open onto his fingers, and he is

spinning me around, forcefully, holding me to him, I can feel him hard through his jeans, I hear him whispering my name into my ear, over and over, and then something shocking, dirty.

He pulls my jeans down, roughly, pushes me against a kitchen chair, tugs my panties aside. His fingers are in my mouth and then they are in my vagina. One hand thrusts into me as he undoes his jeans with the other. I hear the jangle of his belt and thud of his jeans as they hit the floor and he pushes me forward over the back of the chair and in the next second plunges into me. I gasp, a mix of pain and pleasure and then pain.

He fucks me, hard, fast, pulls out just as he climaxes. I turn halfway back to see him coming all over the floor. There's a shining round pool of ejaculate, a lopsided moon shimmering, floating, against the parallel lines of butterscotch-coloured hardwood.

I stay leaned forward on the chair, my hands on the table, breathing hard, smarting, trying to process what has just happened. I hurt. When I turn back toward him, I see a small bloodstain at the bottom of the white T-shirt under his open shirt.

It's not the sex that kills me but the way he thinks to pull out right at the end. I start to cry for real now, while thinking about how men hate it when women cry. Which only makes me cry harder. Wolf has always been a bit of a he-man type. How could he help it with that name: inevitable, I think, my brain storming off in random directions.

"Katie," he says, reaching for me. "Katie, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know why ..."

“I’m not,” I interrupt defiantly, looking up at him resolutely with blurry eyes, my lower lip trembling. I see now that he’s also on the verge of tears.

“Fuck, he was my little brother, you know?”

“I know,” I say. “I know.”

“And I know that John Henry was ...”

“It’s okay,” I say. “I know.”

“I mean, Billy was crazy, but ...” he breaks off again, crying. “He was still my little brother. He hung himself in that stupid place.”

“It’s all right,” I repeat then, as I hold him and he sobs into my arms. “It’s all right,” I say, knowing that it’s not and won’t be.

We hold each other; he stays the night. The next day, I consider asking about Billy’s funeral and then change my mind. He leaves mid-morning, after a sparse breakfast and some instant coffee I’ve dredged up from a cupboard, hugs me hard before he leaves.

“Take care, Katie,” he says. “Call me if you ever need anything.”

“Good luck, Wolf. All the best with being a dad,” I add awkwardly and then wonder why I’d said it.

He hugs me hard again. “Thanks,” he says. And goes out into the snowy day.

I'm still hurting when I speak to my mother after I finally locate her with the help of the California police. She's disbelieving, in shock, John Henry William was her baby, named after his father and her own father, now close to death, who is frail and dependent on her for support. I enrol in university. It's here that Ezra and I meet. We start out as friends, I like him a lot. One night we share a bottle of wine and one thing leads to another. Shortly after he asks me to marry him. I say yes without a second thought.

As I sit
in the sun, my own back warm, watching

the lake, holding a sun-warmed stone in one hand,
I thought of it again.

He was almost always in my mind,
a background noise, a crisp white shirt that fluttered

on a line against the sweet blue of sky, fluttering
there like birds' wings, cut like gemstone and abstract

at once, visible and unarrestable.

As I dig my toes into the sand, the weight
of the rock a solid piece, memory in the manifold

of sound and pattern and sensation,
waves, light, warmth.

I calm him, whisper in his ear and tuck
him in, make him tea.

A storm looms

a hand grips another in the dark
My mind slipping between worlds,

the shy blue of twilight, the glass-translucence
the shatter, you'd broken, around you were breaking

caught, I'd run with such force, those webs
gossamer threads, following, moving away from you, this line ...

and with a burst, like a gasp to the air after resurfacing from underwater
it broke and I kept running, didn't even realize.

Gulping for air
In the gap between what we want
And where we are

That glass shoulder.

dawn splinters
rusty posts, black swan trail
to ravaged patches

noctilucent

points of contact *click* from his back
sprout like wings
he never sees the danger—

the foil sky, a cupola drawn
back

the gravel sea,

inkling
that braids and unbraids

sweet blue, to soil and worm

cloud scatters
children in the schoolyard

fence links between apples fallen
from the camera

I will, as I always do, regret not dating these entries, this slight arrangement of parts. Let me just say that the trees are far from jaundiced, let me say that our salted histories waft back with each breeze. Let me say that there is music on the radio, that I have just painted my nails and am considering the nail polish remover. Let me say that the world is awake and mundane, that it is alternately restless and in pursuit.

Let me say that I am out in the fields, trying to gather God in a dish, a golden god-tub, and under the bridge God is a fish who doesn't mind living in my bowl. He has everything he needs: The sky reflects, the moon and stars repose—and of course I feed him occasionally (when I remember). Shall we pause to bark? To whine, to moan, to bray? To yelp? Maybe God is a list of symptoms—with the right medication, he could be cured.

But I want no more of the nihilists, the existentialists, the absenteeism—it hurts here. This is how people are broken down, bracing day by day. You rise and sink back, rise and sink back. You splash out symptoms, let others trail off your surfaces, wonder whether *you* are a symptom for something—the age. Women of your age. You block off all the doors, all the windows, everything is so silent.

The sound of the fan, a helicopter, a dragonfly buzzing, a whining sound in the head. And crumpling, something taking even the body. Something resigned, like someone vaguely setting down a glass.

Under anamorphic screens, butterflies wing the patterns on the back of the black-and-white photo, the thought remembering, murmuring to itself. You saw me slide further and further down. Mathematically, magically, the only solution was to incorporate everything, to digest and shit it out and write mysterious letters on the walls addressed to no one, to catch glimpses in pocket mirrors without recognizing them, mouth words without hearing, and without anyone to hear them. And I realized I was looking not for a cure but for someone to hear me. And no one did, and no one could.

The sudden impact of the bit of open space that gapes, a park, a soccer field, a deserted vacant lot, I never see it first. An alien gravitational force field that operates a void. And recognizes me.

You wonder what the pit of your stomach looks like—whether it's lined with fire or lava or home to a dragon.

Chirpings, sounds you could hear, suddenly the birds your comrades, without words, and their songs, high-pitched, singular, jabbing through the other sounds, and the same sounds coming from you, from somewhere inside of you, not understanding the language you are speaking. Being covered, something submerged. A slow progression from woman and sentient being to pure sense and nonsense, to touch silence and hear. I could hear. How things are peeled back so that I hear the sounds of people and the world and the air, all the peripheries humming. All this that I could hear.

Do we forget to ask, “Who am I?” and “Where am I?”

I dream of two houses, in one there is food, a feast, a surprise, someone, light, hardwood floors, sitting, eating; the other is dark with shadows, fear, a lurking figure at a short table with a shelf underneath and a shelf full of knives and on one of the blades of the knives is written, “How it’s impossible to think in pieces.” This was the house where I was to stay.

Slow work: Shuffling the same images, a looped series, to and fro. A weighing from palm to palm, what is the progress here? All the while the finest particles slip through and scatter, some salvaged, others abandoned. What is this slow work? What is its measure, its trace, its shape? Is there some furrow it’s forming, of the imagination, of the heart?

Pieces fall off, break here and there, stranded bits to compile at a later date, compress into words. A race-car driver talks into the mic—the sound is down—but what you notice is how his face is squared to the interviewer, how his jaw is braced, a horizontal hold. What you notice is how his head moves, swivels from side to side, as if on a track. What you notice is how his eyes glitter, like birds’ eyes.

These disparate parts, discrete alchemy, a kind of faith, an investment, futures trading. Mornings are times when you are alone, when you can hear yourself and are aware of the body’s psychic scars, the ghosts chasing death.

KATIE and MOTHER
Gulping for air
In the gap between what we want
[the voice of mother falls off]

KATIE
And where we are

MOTHER (low)
That glass shoulder.

[beginning again]
KATIE
Under the ...
Under the trees in the yard

MOTHER
a room, pale yellow and laid with gold cracks
“the walls are cracked with gold cracks”
In the pale light, leaf-transparent
the window above me, light spider-frail.

KATIE
a conversation between two women at a window ...
the drapes billowing at the open window, night air

she wakes to find a shallow sticky red pool in her bed,
rose after rose blooming on the pale white sheets.

MOTHER
The tablecloth trick begins with a perfectly set,
elegant table, tall candles spill their perfect little circles
of light, the plates are perfect ripples in the long square lake
of the table, cup and saucer, cup and saucer, cups and saucer,
a perfect repeating pattern. A quick tug, the cloth disappears.

KATIE

A deep confusion begins inside of her
like a skin condition, murk spreads like chaos
pre-dawn light over water

I look up and see that the ceilings sag, the roof is leaking.
With my small cup, I run between the corners
where water gathers, I hold out my cup and water fills it, overrunning.

I didn't know how it could possibly fit into all of this, how
I could maintain any sort of proper distance in it all, how
I could make any sort of story from it without
being implicated, without giving everything away, without
betraying everything.

I wanted never to open my mouth again.

MOTHER

When I do open my mouth again ...

KATIE

I watch her, our eyes caught in the mirror.

MOTHER

When I do open my mouth again, it is a red pocket
lined with cross-hatched columns and rows.

KATIE

Two women converse at an open window.
"I am having difficulty making meaning here," she said slowly.

MOTHER

Sting of rigid chest
Pip, the hard-bit bulb of flower
That wants, stubbornly for
the blooming at the back of the throat

KATIE

a rose, a rose, a rose, in pencil.

MOTHER

A rose on the back of the black and white photo, perhaps.

KATIE

Nostrils trembling, the child
teetering there on the edge up there

MOTHER

Should, as you had taught yourself, armed with
books, armed with inward talk and talk and endless reading and
listening and reading all of them, how like a bunch,
How like a bunch they were, reading.

KATIE

Across the table read
garden stockings
Dark

in your gardening trance sensed
me drowning my roots
to the ends
erring heard

Give me some twilit
room, my hand waving, the drowning begin
you

Give me the cut-word blossoms there mounted
your mound, your mound, there moaned, under the
mattress, that would never let us
sleep, protect your language, this difficult
most difficult, dying, this

lavender lace purpled there there there
and there, coughing from the next room grew louder

MOTHER
that lullaby ...

KATIE
Just what I wanted
you would give that to me, you said
do you want it, do you
yes, I said. I want it, yes.
I do.

My feet planted themselves, stalk
still in the garden cemeteries murmuring
hush-a hush-a

BOTH
Hush, sh-sh-sh

MOTHER [very quiet]
You are shapes that go lightly by
Enormous flanks of background noise
Almost rubbed out on a line
An arc swimming against
a gold threaded sky

This

Flower of night
opening in me

Night begins
me in the glass

Night knits
me a room
A tiny room
I must stay in

I scratch at the face—

Night, with its cold centre
Blooms in me

A swathe of bitter green
invades my blood, my thoughts

Thin skin of night

I scratch at the veneer—
Looking for something elemental
In dreams of art galleries, colours undulating,
Van Gogh's lonely spectators,
I resemble the human race

(walking at the side of the road
alone, mad in the night
this one-way road one
must walk alone)

Bones at the side of the road, delicate
with wild ghosting and memory
through to the essential,
furtive and sweet
snout to rich earth—

Of course remember we
are invented of
those particles

Those who wait
through the night
are accompanied by night animals

Loose-jowled jackals
Secretive elephants
Antelopes wandering and shy
Red-eyed rabbits who see in the dark
and speak
in their animal tongues

Three cats appear
in strict silhouette
on the emerald lawn
the velvet, dew-mantled lawn—
less cats than omens
jewelled eyes spark
Prism of my night
window, tangled in my skin,
Flares against glass plate, cold

medicine
if I can be cured: I look for clues

Here in the window,
a night tray of gauze and bandages,
Here a cabinet of pills

I rifle through, I rattle

For the moment I understand
sickness, not cures

What use is such an understanding?

There were those nights, out of city
when I knew you better

You were away yet
I felt we were very close
(though I doubted you'd be found again)

Perhaps you'd been taken
the way you'd always feared

I searched, first in the city
wandering streets, staring (I'm afraid)
at girls unwitting and saucy on staircases

("I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets
and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth.")

Hid in doorways when intercoms
clattered their secrets,
interpreted flags in windows
as probable signs of your capture

Imagined freezers and furnaces
doing their worst, inside
floors gave every sign of being tampered with
Certain they would give way and collapse
The floor fell out from under her
then

Out of city where night
was always imminent and evenings
concluded for days, fading
from tenderest blue and violet
to indigo and silence

Some car in the distance threatening
to explode the moment it hit the house, distant
headlights and revving keeping time
with the blinking led clock

Was there a particular time
you'd call, I thought, some code
I should decipher
"I am not entirely myself,"
I said. "Remember
the blind spot and all that,"
you'd remarked on leaving

Everything participated in this logic

I felt a bit faint, wondering again
were you a friend, an enemy
perhaps it was you sitting
in the equipped car, waiting
for the right instant to detonate

I couldn't decide
The details that mattered
where to locate them
and what they might mean

A moment came to mind
in which I'd watched
smoke tendril through leafless branches
against the stark winter sky

Yes, I thought, just so:
God is a storyteller
God is a painter

Now in the dark you are
a shape-shifter and I was vaguely afraid
of what next you might become

In the dark I felt myself
dissolving, on the verge
of disappearance: "Once I was in love," I noted
weakly to keep alive, body unfastened
wind flapping through empty rooms
(warm, heart, in, my hands, pulsing)

I watched you become
a gull and a squirrel and finally a bear
the house caged around us, we fought
for understanding in the quiet

When night finally broke, the morning,
instead of glistening and buoyant, was ponderous—
as though we were still uneasily shaking our doubles

the air inert

Morning and I move carefully, worrying
back doors, fearing remote ways in, my trousers
keep slipping, the toilet is latent with evil possibilities

Gazing into the mirror, my mouth
hatches electric wire and cross-hatched lines
My hair has bred a metallic streak overnight

With face drawn
written over
There

With eyes invisible
I'd burrowed deep—
deep—
And in the mirror a flicker
I am carried away

Bones at the edges of road
delicate with wild ghosting
Remember through
to the essential, furtive
and sweet snout to rich earth

In dream etiquette, I picture you, exquisite in your delicately placed horizon. The sun is setting by degrees, yellow, orange, orange-red. With vanishing points that multiply the night is yet to fall. The sun's caught its hems on the fireflies, is shaking its skirts and stomping on embers, looking from the corner of its eye at the divots of the dark.

Reclined, turned into its own bright face, it's searching for a way out, to diversify investments. I couldn't get to sleep so I stay up to think instead. I go out, inhale the air, I peel an apple, bit by bit, until I get right to the core. Forget to taste it, I'd left my teeth somewhere. Throw the apple and the core away and back inside to bed. I didn't dream at all.

One hundred poems have been written on this spot, families, also, are weak at the knees; they pray and hope for the best. They see the signs and bury them in private lakeside ceremonies. Stay, they say, pulling out your childhood toys and the seven kittens that warmed you. The real estate agent in the minivan flashes us his gold ring, albino fingers swelling red. Five blind mice, teeth bared, and their ghosts guard the road. The rain gauge is chattering and clicking its approval. The forecast is rain for days, for acres.

Here I am, the years passed. A hungry, caged animal with a taste for expensive bonbons? Nervously tossed one by one through the bars while I pace?

Novelist James Salter, famous for his erotic, virtuoso novels about love, just the other year came out with another book co-written with his wife of 30 years, *Life is Meals*. It's a book of days written not for lovers but for food lovers.

The entry for "Brie" notes that, "At its peak of readiness, it is viscous though not runny, with a slightly bulging, uneven white top, mottled with pale brown. It is a cheese that ripens from the outside in and once cut, ceases to ripen."

Another entry outlines the life of Kellogg, creator of the much less glamorous breakfast cereal, who later gave his entire fortune to benefit the education and health of children.

Who am I, that I might also eat?

I run into you at the local Safeway behind me in the lineup a few years after. You must be in town to see your mother. We see one another simultaneously. I go weak at the knees, you go to another lineup. I redden, face hot, body numb, legs liquid, set my mouth into a half-smile, say a determined thank you to my checker through trembling, hold my head high, (half) smile intact, while pushing my cart of groceries out the door (very

dignified) into the rain to my car. Curse myself all the way home, sit in the car for ages, Want to cry, don't.

You look unsublime, mundane, irritated. "I get it," (I tell myself? the air? the director? all the way home). "You're mundane, you're ordinary and everyday. I get it."

Felt stupid. Said so aloud. Told myself how stupid I was. Who did I think I was, anyway. Snapped at Ezra when I got inside and felt plain.

I'd thought of saying, "We've got to stop meeting like this, haha." I thought to myself, Wait a minute, who is directing this anyhow? What do they want from this scene? I felt better after arranging my flowers—sweet white freesias and alstroemerias—(my packets of Safeway flowers and my *Vogue* "Age" special atop my \$179 cart of groceries into the rain shakily packed into my trunk while I muttered, Of course, of course, under my breath and half hoped to escape before you got through your purchase). Before bed I confess, tell Ezra I am having a hard time. You don't have to feel that way, he says. You're a good person and you deserve good, he tells me. Am I? I think to myself.

Go to Hell! I say to the ones that used to cow me when I humbly asked for a sandwich.

Lay aside the weapons, love, for all battles are lost.

Thanking him for a book he sent, Bonnard wrote his long-time friend and fellow artist Maurice Denis in 1911, “There is beginning to be, as you say, a certain melancholy in evoking this period when theories still had a certain importance for us. Now this period is becoming not only distant, but even detached from us. The likes of Denis, Sérusier, Bonnard and Vuillard, who were so busy at that time, seem to be individuals whom we knew a little. It’s very strange.”

I dream I am in a shallow boat on a lake. In the boat with me is my Grade 11 math teacher, Mr. McKnight. I wasn’t particularly good at math. In fact I dropped the course and had to retake it later. I felt no particular aversion or affinity towards this teacher, though he did always seem like a bit of a puzzle. He was Scottish, and had a quietly humourous way. My teacher, in my dream, is thinner and taller than he was in real life, though he was always frail looking—in my dream he is spindly, attenuated, spidery. Also in the boat with me are two other figures. One is my brother. The other is Vicki, the class bully who later became my friend. We are in the middle of the lake, which is oval-shaped and silvery green. I could see the lake’s perimeter; it looked like a large coin, small enough to be a large pond. The boat looks like a small speedboat but is actually a

rowboat. I had no oars and had to use my hands, which seem to worked fine. Near the end of the dream I step out into the water and find that it is quite shallow. Mr. McKnight's face has since become a bird mask, like Thoth, with a jewelled eye ... there've been fishes and birds and jewels added ... the lake has become a silvered pool ...

We depend on memory, I tell myself. We depend on memory, sometimes, to survive. During that time, it somehow felt like it was all I had, as though it made up the largest part of me, the most substantial part. There was nothing else to me, a house with missing limbs, a tree with no windows, fate, blooming and blooming.

Rilke, from *Sonnets*:

sing the gardens, my heart, those you never knew ...

...

... so many chances die

when the one choice is made: to be!

Silk thread, you were drawn into the fabric.

Whatever single image you made yourself part of

(be it even a moment from a life of torment),

feel how the whole carpet is meant, its glorious weave.

Don't be afraid to suffer—take your heaviness

and give it back to the earth's own weight;

the mountains are heavy, the oceans are heavy.

Even the trees you planted as children

Have long grown too heavy; you couldn't bear them.

But the breezes ... and the spaces ...

*And almost a girl it was and came forth
from this glad unity of song and lyre
and shone brightly through her springtime veils
and made herself a bed in my ear.*

And slept in me. And all things were her sleep.

...

She slept the world.

There's a photo of the three of us, taken one evening at the local fair. You are between us, arms around us, myself and John Henry, you are kissing my forehead and smiling right at the camera. John Henry is looking at the camera, too, laughing, holding the silly, google-eyed stuffed frog you'd won for him at the ring toss. Frogs, his favourite. My head is tilted down, I'm smiling and looking fond and amused and at ease, as though shaking my head at my luck, at an affectionately tolerated cheesy joke. In the background the huge Ferris wheels are lit up against the dusky sky. It's about to rain. The air is thick with humidity and is coloured periwinkle. It's electric with the coming storm,

and they've lit up all of the rides. The neon glows in the night. It smells of candied apples and fried donuts and cotton candy.

I look at the photo, my eyes welling with tears. Why is it that I can still feel your hands on my skin? Why can I still feel you beside me, why can I imagine your gaze? This internal system of catalogued looks, touches, tones, set up to last through time, so torturous and so sweet.

This photo. The memory stays true, this one version of you.

The other version is the one I find when I come to the end of myself. This is the other version of you, the you that is nothing at all, that does not exist. That is the blank square in my hands (holding my heart in my hands, warm, beating, heart). Turning the photo over in my hands, the smooth white square. The blank of the reverse of the photo.

The sudden emptiness, the vacuum, of nothing but myself. I feel despairing, unwise, unloved, unlovely. Hopeless.

And later, I dream that I am looking at the photo again. Rather than anger and fear and emptiness, I feel all of the love and warmth of those years, even in that second and last summer and fall and winter, with Billy and Jay and John Henry and Wolf.

I turn it over, and there are three painted roses on the reverse.

I think of the end of Schoenberg's "Verklarte Nacht," the finale lovely scene: "See how brightly the universe gleams! There is a radiance on everything."

Ella Freeman Sharpe, from her book *Dream Analysis*

A “Last” Dream

I wish to record as the final dream in this book one which was in reality a last dream, since it was related by a woman three days before her death. She did not regain full consciousness after reciting it. Physical distress had mainly been caused by persistent sickness and her dream ran: “*I saw all my sicknesses gathered together and as I looked they were no longer sicknesses but roses and I knew the roses would be planted and that they would grow.*”

I wish to make only a short comment on this “last” dream, since the psycho-analyst will have no difficulty in finding significances from the manifest content according to his general and particular insight.

Let me rather close this book not by interpretation but by a reference to the foundations of our belief in the practice of psycho-analysis.

The woman whose dream I have related was eighty-one years of age. She had suffered many vicissitudes in her long life, any one of which would have brought despair to a less stabilized character. Her mental faculties suffered no diminution. She shared in her old age the interests of youth and any movement that promised fairer and better conditions for mankind in the future appealed alike to her mind and heart, and among these was psycho-analysis. The dream reveals the source of the unfailing hope which sustained the dreamer in life and was her consolation in death.

It is Eros alone who *knows* that the roses will be planted and will grow.

Back in our shared bedroom before bed I am reading about hydrotherapy, thinking of Marthe and Bonnard and taking notes about how Bonnard goes from painting to painting adding a bit here, then a bit there.

That night I dream that I am swimming, going for a casual “quick dip” before I have to present my story. I have just arrived at this ... place, which seems to be some sort of retreat centre, institutional, possibly religious. The water is cool and the pool is shady.

In real life, I don't like to swim, though I can. Since childhood, I've always felt the slight edge of panic in water, especially at swimming lessons—diving! ack! So this is all a bit strange.

Here everything is calm and I am calm and enjoying being immersed, the water circulating around my limbs. I feel supported by the water.

And everything is beautiful, coloured aqua and mint and cool, dark, shady greens. After swimming, the ... bureaucrats? receptionists? nuns? who are housed in this tiny booth (their distant faces framed by a sliding window at the front of the booth) in the far, shady interior of the (very horizontal) building overlooking the pool tell me that they are waiting for me to present something. Oh! I emerge quickly, but my clothing has disappeared. I keep on the bathing suit and find a sort of light dress (also mint-coloured) to throw over.

I'm barefoot. I go into the building. It's mostly dark, the light is the quality of shade. I write a few last-minute notes, and on my knees, gather my papers.

The huge mass of papers is scattered all over the floor, written on everything from small scraps and bits of paper to large eight-by-fourteen-inch pages. These larger pages are all laminated in plastic, and in fact they look like large dinner menus. I'm juggling all this stuff, trying to contain it, trying to review it, trying not to drop the crooked obelisk of papers and plastic. I start towards the room where I'm to present my story, finding my way through the shady halls and up the cement stairs (floors cool under my bare feet) to the second floor room. Then I'm in the room, seated onstage at a large table. There's a

closed piano that I can see just out of the corner of my eye, to my far right. As I look out from the stage, the room is mostly dark and quiet, a small audience is scattered in the seats below; blurry faces are turned up at me expectantly. I'm about to present but first ... a young woman is going to sing a short song. From the aisle below. She sings in a warbly voice. She's not a very good singer. But it's all right. Everything feels natural and just fine. I wait for her to finish, listening. I wish I could recall the words of the song. Near the end of her tune, there is an overlay of voices, kind of contrapuntal. The final phrase in counterpoint includes my name and it's transporting.

“Thank you for that lovely song,” I smile. “I really liked the final phrase!”

And then I present my story, trying to pull out relevant points. I do. But of course the material I actually do get to present is miniscule in relation to the scrambled stack of notes and, er, menus, I have on the table before me.

Pure description, I wish I could live in that state.

COUNTERPOINT: It is hard to write a beautiful song. It is harder to write several individually beautiful songs that, when sung simultaneously, sound as a more beautiful polyphonic whole. The internal structures that create each of the voices separately must contribute to the emergent structure of the polyphony, which in turn must reinforce and comment on the structures of the individual voices. The way that is accomplished in detail is ... “counterpoint.” —John Rahn, author of *Music Inside Out: Going Too Far in Musical Essays*

Afterword, by Lily “Jay” Glydas Small

If you'd asked me years ago, I wouldn'ta thought that I'd be the one to tell this story, or even that I had much to say about her. I knew *about* Kate Wake, sure. She was a certain form of famous, for these parts. A bunch of forms of famous in the end, not all lucky. She was beautiful, there's that, and talented. But she didn't get to see her baby son grow up, she did have some rough times herself even young, and she never did see any of the joys of old age—and there are some! Better than the alternative, I always say. Old age is not the end, regardless of what people try to tell you otherwise!

But none of that was going to be hers anyhow, mind. Not once she was at the Hill. My aunt always said, “One can live without having survived.” But when you're dead, it's not like living or surviving is an option, either way. None of that was hers.

I really only knew of her, but I suppose that due to my aunt who did know her I have a special perspective on her. I had the painting of her, of course, so I knew what she looked like. The one painted by William, with her eyes open. Aunt Jay kept it in her room for years. She kept it hidden way back in her wardrobe, would bring it out sometimes. She told me once that it had been painted by someone who loved Kate.

One time, she said that. One time, after a few too many whiskys.

There was another one similar, she said, with her eyes closed. Personally I thought to myself that it might be the case that my Aunt Jay had some affectionate feelings for him, too. There were those little things she said, about cleaning his house,

planting a garden, made me think so. To myself only. She wouldn'ta hesitated to backhand me if I'd said it to her!

I was never always one hundred per cent sure that what she was telling was all truth. That's just the kind of person she was. Some bluster, some kind of stuff that you'd think, hmmm. Could it be the way she believed it was, really? But maybe that's better than knowing nothing about it at all.

She had her own way of seeing things, Aunt Jay did.

Everyone called me "Jay" at the hospital, and her being my aunt made things easier on me. I was in her shadow for most of my life. Never especially minded that much. I didn't feel that I had some charmed individual place anyhow that I needed to claim. Her father—my own papa's father too—she always told me, was a mean one, she wanted to get away from that house just soon as she could, would have sooner but for all the kiddies under her she was expected to act mother to. Still, she escaped. Drunken lout who liked to beat on those kids every once in a while. Heard maybe their mother died from one hit too many. Grandpapa was a tough man, not so unusual in those days, but he was just exceptional mean, I guess.

Aunt Jay said that she was haunted by her, by Kate Wake. That her own story was all tangled up in Kate's. Kate's story was the fine metallic thread that cut the cotton threads around it, she said.

Her death, her death was an unfortunate accident. So unfortunate.

It's these kinds of accidents that gave the Hill a bad name, too. Everyone wanting to hush things up after. It happened occasionally that patients went into shock after hydrotherapy, yes, but how were they to know? That she had just delivered a child? That she'd kept it a secret all that time, making excuses, putting on weight? It was my Aunt Jay who'd helped her in the end, helped her keep her secret, helped her deliver the baby. I suppose that's the one saving grace of it.

There were a lot of good people who worked here, who truly wanted to help. Aunt Jay smuggled the baby out to a couple who adopted him, it was the proudest thing she'd ever done, she said. She'd promised Kate she would. She sent a letter with it, to tell the child about his parents, Kate and William. William and Kate.

The story of how I eventually came to the end of Kate Wake is the story of how I came to the end of myself, even back to myself, perhaps. Or perhaps it was a new self entirely. It's sometimes difficult to know the difference. It's difficult to recognize oneself sometimes, isn't it? One sheds old selves like old skins, without even realizing. Old lives are replaced by new ones.

Even the most broken life can be restored to its moments.

KATE WAKE

A scripting, a certain kind of animation.

Female voice-over narrates, very quiet, very matter-of-fact: neutral, like an English dub. Neither the voice-overs nor stills are quick-paced; for much of the narrative, in spite of the sounds or any music, there is a sense of flow and calm—and quiet—to the visuals, of watching a silent movie in a dark room, alone with one's thoughts, almost as if listening to one's own thoughts, or of watching non-thoughts projected by the light and shadow flickering over the movie screen.

* * * * *

It is early spring, night. The black screen of night eventually becomes washed with violet, a slight pulsing. After a minute or so the screen melts into a blurred close-up of ground tinted by colours of the night sky that forms the backdrop to the scene. It is still winter, bits of snow highlight the sparse landscape. As the camera pulls back slightly we see poised over the ground the raw, chapped hands of a woman, paused, and then digging furiously at the earth. There is no sound. The camera holds the shot as a still in extreme close-up, for a minute or so. There are flickers and other visual interference on the surface of the screen, and flickers of light from the background, as though we are seeing a sort of X-ray or suppressed, layered history or psychic X-ray of the scene. Gradually we see the ground she scratches and jabs at as a grave, and as part of the scene. The camera pulls back further and she is silhouetted against a violet-orange sky, lit up with fire. In the background, a house is ablaze. We hear the sounds of a blaze overlaid with slight audio interference, like an ancient recording, but eventually becoming more persistent, less subtle, like loud static. The volume increases until the sounds are loud and fill the screen with their own sort of presence.

Black.

A woman walks down a deserted street under flickering street lights, pre-dawn. The sky is lightly overcast; it is drizzling or about to rain, early spring, with distant, muffled sirens, the just-recognizable chatter of morning birds, the sounds of her wet footsteps on pavement. Her head is bent, eyes downcast; she walks with a slight spring in her step, energetically and in a directed way, so that we see she keeps to herself by choice and by habit, walking in an urban environment. She wears a light-coloured raincoat and hat.

The woman crosses the street. The street glints with rain. We follow her, focus on the side of her face as she looks in both directions before she crosses. Upon crossing the street, she pauses and turns to look back, in apparent recognition of someone or something.

VOICE-OVER

She'd been trying to capture in paint the loose, sunlit greens of the runners of beans and grapevines at the house across the lane, the way the dark frames of the windows (blank gaping eyes) set off the pallid stucco of the plain house, the waxy cerulean sky and cut lace foreground of twiggy black boughs. A tracery of deeper greens has sprouted from them, stretched and inclining toward the picture accumulating there inside the frame, atomizing into constituent parts at the shivers and caresses of wind, at the sudden prisms and scatter of light as the glass door opens and shuts again, a motion that seems somehow to echo the curly, tremulous plants and simultaneously fuses and splinters the entire scene like someone shaking a messy blond head of hair in sunshine. Moving to and fro behind the strings set in strict parallel columns, members of the family traverse the brief length of the deck crammed full of terra cotta pots of geraniums, moving in and out of the house, a couple with a boy and a girl and grandparents, six of them in all.

The deck was like a crude makeshift stage in a small-town theatre production, she thought, the bean and grapevine runners framing and obscuring the backstage action like ragged curtains before the show starts. The movements were random, of course, gestures completely meaningless from her vantage point (and besides, she thought to herself, the show hasn't started yet). Similarly the grandparents often sat, a moribund audience that mirrored her own furtively active one. They were placid for hours at a time, facing the back lane without moving, without speaking. They sat, heavy and rooted, as she drew, outlined, daubed with paint, study after study.

She perceived them some days comically, as two huge iron pears, moulded and cast into their wooden chairs. They wore shades of beige and grey that blended them at their rounded edges and creamy shadows almost into their backdrop; she imagined the foreground of perpetual motion, of their children and grandchildren, their eyes strained at the wider world beyond the runner strings, waiting for glimpses, for the world to pass like a shimmering, enervating parade.

She wanted to capture the colours of the movement itself, the *impression* of movements, of the overall scene—as though she could pack all of the gestures into the one impression, all of the afternoons of watching, directly and out of the corner of her eye, of the scene leaking in at all her other senses, which caught like a cup held under overflowing eaves, all of the purling, flowing motions, accumulated, repartitioned—these came to her less as discrete or even actual human movements than as sort of broad blurs of time, segments of musical work, each with its own rhythms, melodic contours and counterpoints, designs, motifs. But she wanted to show them all accumulated that way, to build them up overtop of each other, the way she imagined the scene to be accumulating inside of her, layering, leaving burrows, weighted in certain areas, nearly transparent in others.

She begins by outlining the strings with her paintbrush, slim gold lines. They show up suddenly, transfigured, as the lines of a cage, as though the neighbours were caught in their own menagerie, and she, standing outside the cage, looking in, looking for signs and finding, finally, that what she's been drawn to, has been drawing from, drawing and redrawing, is there, right there *on* the surface, rather than behind it.

And soon, she whispers to herself as she retraces the strings in gold, soon the leaves will have grown in completely. The strings will disappear into the scene ... the figures will be submerged in greenery, their own skins fairly shining green with it, abandoned to it.

The shot dissolves into her leaning up against the window, still from behind, the side of her face barely reflected in the glass, her mouth. We hear her murmur, barely above a whisper, but neutral, without emotion; we see her mouth move more than hearing the words; we follow the tracings of her mouth in the glass.

The camera follows Kate's POV to the house. We stay on the house.

VOICE-OVER

Abandoned to it (was there a way she could paint, another way, a way to paint the impending submersion into their shadowed faces, their age-spotted arms? as a sort of *prefiguration*, an enunciation of the greater green to come, of the submersion, the eventual disappearance into the greenness of green).

She sketches the scene again, paints the scene in black and white, then begins painstakingly to fill in the leaves with green. She can't decide whether to paint the strings in gold, and eventually decides to leave the strings as their usual dull white and then changes her mind again and mixes a bit of ochre into the white to pull out the strings, to make them seem to catch the light.

[While the camera is still on the exterior of the house, we hear]

MOTHER [a whisper]

This is the room in which it all takes place, this is the room where everything happens.

[A cross-fade into a series of stills and stationary shots of rooms, flickering and shadowy, which seem to contradict the voice, since we see not one room but a series of rooms, all clearly different from one another but sharing a pre-dawn light that ranges from a dusky indigo to murky violet grey with pinky-gold-lit undertones and thick velvety green-black backlit trees profiled against sky, the tones of imminent sunrise. There is a sense that these images of rooms are archives of a sort, whether remembered, or old photos. One room fades into the next. The stills are intercut with several of wall details that display the quality of light in each space. The walls are covered in crisp or murky shadows, some of leaves swaying gently, shadows left by low sun streaming through a window, perhaps sheer drapes; some of winter light, with only indistinct shifting forms of shadow and light.]

Series of stills.

1. 1930s hospital room with four single beds, a black and white still. The room is white and crisp, with bright white light streaming in through two windows opposite the door. The door opens onto the room and onto the beds, two on either side of the room perpendicular to the door and the two windows. On the wall next to the bed, on the far wall, is a tiny pencil drawing of roses.
2. Grainy photo from the 1970s, a still or slide with a pink tint, of a child's bedroom with rose wallpaper and matching bedspread and curtains, a red rug (which translates as a deep rich claret-black on film). [my childhood bedroom]
3. A small apartment, with bright white walls, a futon on the left wall with a deep garnet blanket beside a narrow rectangular window. Outside the window we see snow, buildings: a silent scene. On the window frame around the window, which frames the scene, Emily Dickinson's words have been lettered in gold: "I'm Nobody! Who are you? Are you—Nobody—too?"
4. A spare room with tall windows, an easel, paints, a half-finished painting, dark marks on canvas, pre-dawn light. Outside the window it's raining lightly.

KATIE

I'd imagined a photo of a boy in a t-shirt
sitting in sunshine, facing away
from the camera, his back a play of shadow and light.
and shoulder blades that sprout like wings from his back

I'd rendered that photo of the mind
in paint, in creams and yellows and greys,
so that the shoulder blades sit
in the foreground, the figure
almost completely abstracted. Mere incline, angles,
slope and slant, a certain tilt of the head,
the grey and cream light soothing
the shoulder ...

So vulnerable, I shuddered to think of it.
So vulnerable.

MOTHER

(there was an earlier scene,
his mother standing beside him,
arm around his shoulder,
firm and holding him in place, she
roots his desire, her arm ready to send him out,
had told him, with her confident voice,
If you want to play, go ask them—
he approaches uncertainly, full of hope, the feel
of his mother's hand still warm on his neck.)

Last night I awoke from a fierce, lengthy dream. I dreamed I'd found a small cub that had the black silky fur of a panther. I took it in and cared for it and it grew and grew until it was a large, beautiful animal, a big, beautiful cat. In the dream I lived in a house, where the animal was now living with me. Now, however, it was becoming too large to manage. In addition it began to wrestle with me, more and more roughly until we were wrestling nearly all of the time. Laboured wrestling, the creature's teeth around my wrists, our limbs entangled. I began to try to put it out of the house and it would bully its way back in the door. I couldn't get rid of it, couldn't defeat it. But it was a lovely creature, and wrestling with it was physical and sensual and intense and very tiring. The dream went on and on and on.

And through it all, she'd kept repeating these words: the loose bloom of his face, the loose bloom of his face, the loose bloom of his face ... the shining white pavement, the pale white of houses, the low moon of summer. The loose bloom of his face.

Rose (EPILOGUE)

For all that time (I can only just spit
it out), I could see the ones who peopled
my indictments. Does everyone have such a
window, a clenched, wet fist?—

I refused at first, you
must know. My demurrals not neat but
billowed and broad and wide, toppled
one after another (though *folded*
might be better), no more
correlative than that—

I went back: that's what—

I did.

ah Rose, I was the only misnomer
Your eyes wide, you always watched
Can I describe you?

(It's not the right question, I know
There are those who read me and still
see themselves)

But why do you sit there, clear
out-of-doors feet clinging to lawn
lifting your fingers to my skin? Why in that picture
am I crying again? You're silent, I can't bear it
Or anything (could it be so?
I look later, the inside of my
cheek has bruised)

That you won't recall though you played
my winter piano brought home through snow
from miles away with blankets, strong rope
The creaking wood and snow blossomed
sound, remember? Yes! you said
with just us there, sound
it, repeating your son's words. Fight,
I rejoined, Can you do that? Yes,
I said, I think so Yes? Yes, I said,
I will.

Notes on the text.

On page 118 (and again on 188 and 207), “the walls are cracked with gold cracks” is a line from *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf.

On page 120, “Anything can be turned to beauty” is a quote from Bonnard in John Russell’s introduction to *Bonnard* (1984) edited by Sasha Newman.

On page 118, John Russell’s quote, “The art of Bonnard is not an art of anecdote. It is an art of situation . . .” is from his introduction to *Bonnard* (1984) edited by Sasha Newman.

On page 130, the Rilke quote is from “The Tenth Elegy” of *Duino Elegies*.

On page 131 and 135, there are references to Bonnard’s statement that he wanted, in his painting, to “show what one sees on first entering a room, what the eye takes in at one glance; one sees everything, and at the same time nothing” (Hyman 136) and to Bonnard’s statement that he “does not hesitate ‘to take’, as he put it, ‘all possible liberties of line, form, proportions, colour, to make feeling intelligible and clearly visible.’ In his own repeated declaration, ‘il faut mentir’—one has to lie” (Hyman 137).

On page 132, there is a reference to Bonnard’s statement that “Drawing is sensation, colour is reasoning” (Hyman 100).

On page 145, the line “foil sky persists its sweet blue” is a reference a passage in Roo Borson’s essay “Poetry as Knowing” in her book *Personal History*. The passage is: “My friend the painter painting the light of the sky in a transient blue—a ‘sweet’ blue, as he calls it—on a wall in Winnipeg” (19).

On page 146, the quote by Schoenberg is from the book *Schoenberg* (155 Armitage).

On page 166, the line “What’s at the back of the back” is from Stephanie Bolster’s long poem “Girl” in her book *Pavilion*.

On page 178, the information about the Moirae is from the online Theoi Project, a site on Greek mythology and the gods in classical literature and art, at www.theoi.com/Daimon/Moirai.html; the reference to ‘abhorred shears’ comes from Milton’s *Lycidas*.

On page 181, the line “What one of us lives through, each must, so that this, of which we are part, will know itself” is from “Blue Hour” by Carolyn Forché in her book of the same name.

On page 183, the lines “When he was four,/ my brother bit me because I was not him./ No one was.” are from Stephanie Bolster’s long poem “Girl” in her book *Pavilion*.

On page 211, the line “I resemble the human race” is a reference to Antonin Artaud’s line in his essay, “On Suicide”: “I can neither live nor die, nor am I capable of not wishing to die or live. and all mankind resembles me.”

The long poem that appears on pages 211-216 was published in an earlier version in *PhaenEx, the journal of existential and phenomenological theory and culture* 2:2 (2007).

On page 217, the quotes on Brie and Kellogg are from James Salter’s book *Life is Meals*.

On pages 218 and 219, there are two quotes from *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* by Elizabeth Smart: “Go to Hell! I say to the ones that used to cow me when I humbly asked for a sandwich” and “Lay aside the weapons, love, for all battles are lost” (111).

On page 220, the “fate blooming and blooming” is a reference to Rilke’s Sonnet 7 in the Second Part of *Sonnets to Orpheus*, that begins, “You flowers, akin, finally to those arranging hands/ (girls’ hands from times before and now),” continues with the line, “... and now/ raised up again between the vivifying poles/ of feeling fingers, which minister/ more potently than you had dreamt...” and ends, “... relating you/ again to those whose fate, like yours, is blooming.” (Snow 73)

On page 224, the dream quoted is from Ella Sharpe’s book *Dream Analysis: A Practical Handbook for Psycho-Analysts*, originally published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press in 1937.

On page 226, there is a note on “counterpoint” from John Rahn’s book *Music Inside Out: Going Too Far in Musical Essays*.

On page 227, the line “One can live without having survived,” attributed to Jay Small is actually a line from Carolyn Forché’s poem “Blue Hour.”

On page 229, “Even the most broken life can be restored to its moments” is a line from Carolyn Forché’s poem “Blue Hour.”

On page 236, the line “the loose bloom of his face” is a reworking of a line in the thoughts of the fictional character “Sylvia Plath,” about her infant son Nick, near the start of Kate Moses’s novel *Wintering: A*

Novel of Sylvia Plath. The sentence in full reads: “A grave look as he yells for his mother, and then he sees her coming across the threshold: his sleepy face blooms like a loose pink rose.”

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