

YELLOW PAGES

A Catalogue of Intentions

BY

Nicole Markotić

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Language and Literature	0279
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Music	0522
Philosophy of	0998
Physical	0523

Psychology	0525
Reading	0535
Religious	0527
Sciences	0714
Secondary	0533
Social Sciences	0534
Sociology of	0340
Special	0529
Teacher Training	0530
Technology	0710
Tests and Measurements	0288
Vocational	0747

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS

Language	
General	0679
Ancient	0289
Linguistics	0290
Modern	0291
Literature	
General	0401
Classical	0294
Comparative	0295
Medieval	0297
Modern	0298
African	0316
American	0591
Asian	0305
Canadian (English)	0352
Canadian (French)	0355
English	0593
Germanic	0311
Latin American	0312
Middle Eastern	0315
Romance	0313
Slavic and East European	0314

PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION AND THEOLOGY

Philosophy	0422
Religion	
General	0318
Biblical Studies	0321
Clergy	0319
History of	0320
Philosophy of	0322
Theology	0469

SOCIAL SCIENCES

American Studies	0323
Anthropology	
Archaeology	0324
Cultural	0326
Physical	0327
Business Administration	
General	0310
Accounting	0272
Banking	0770
Management	0454
Marketing	0338
Canadian Studies	0385
Economics	
General	0501
Agricultural	0503
Commerce-Business	0505
Finance	0508
History	0509
Labor	0510
Theory	0511
Folklore	0358
Geography	0366
Gerontology	0351
History	
General	0578

Ancient	0579
Medieval	0581
Modern	0582
Black	0328
African	0331
Asia, Australia and Oceania	0332
Canadian	0334
European	0335
Latin American	0336
Middle Eastern	0333
United States	0337
History of Science	0585
Law	0398
Political Science	
General	0615
International Law and	
Relations	0616
Public Administration	0617
Recreation	0814
Social Work	0452
Sociology	
General	0626
Criminology and Penology	0627
Demography	0938
Ethnic and Racial Studies	0631
Individual and Family	
Studies	0628
Industrial and Labor	
Relations	0629
Public and Social Welfare	0630
Social Structure and	
Development	0700
Theory and Methods	0344
Transportation	0709
Urban and Regional Planning	0999
Women's Studies	0453

THE SCIENCES AND ENGINEERING

BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Agriculture	
General	0473
Agronomy	0285
Animal Culture and	
Nutrition	0475
Animal Pathology	0476
Food Science and	
Technology	0359
Forestry and Wildlife	0478
Plant Culture	0479
Plant Pathology	0480
Plant Physiology	0817
Range Management	0777
Wood Technology	0746
Biology	
General	0306
Anatomy	0287
Biostatistics	0308
Botany	0309
Cell	0379
Ecology	0329
Entomology	0353
Genetics	0369
Limnology	0793
Microbiology	0410
Molecular	0307
Neuroscience	0317
Oceanography	0416
Physiology	0433
Radiation	0821
Veterinary Science	0778
Zoology	0472
Biophysics	
General	0786
Medical	0760

EARTH SCIENCES

Biogeochemistry	0425
Geochemistry	0996

Geodesy	0370
Geology	0372
Geophysics	0373
Hydrology	0388
Mineralogy	0411
Paleobotany	0345
Paleoecology	0426
Paleontology	0418
Paleozoology	0985
Palynology	0427
Physical Geography	0368
Physical Oceanography	0415

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Environmental Sciences	0768
Health Sciences	
General	0566
Audiology	0300
Chemotherapy	0992
Dentistry	0567
Education	0350
Hospital Management	0769
Human Development	0758
Immunology	0982
Medicine and Surgery	0564
Mental Health	0347
Nursing	0569
Nutrition	0570
Obstetrics and Gynecology	0380
Occupational Health and	
Therapy	0354
Ophthalmology	0381
Pathology	0571
Pharmacology	0419
Pharmacy	0572
Physical Therapy	0382
Public Health	0573
Radiology	0574
Recreation	0575

Speech Pathology	0460
Toxicology	0383
Home Economics	0386

PHYSICAL SCIENCES

Pure Sciences	
Chemistry	
General	0485
Agricultural	0749
Analytical	0486
Biochemistry	0487
Inorganic	0488
Nuclear	0738
Organic	0490
Pharmaceutical	0491
Physical	0494
Polymer	0495
Radiation	0754
Mathematics	0405
Physics	
General	0605
Acoustics	0986
Astronomy and	
Astrophysics	0606
Atmospheric Science	0608
Atomic	0748
Electronics and Electricity	0607
Elementary Particles and	
High Energy	0798
Fluid and Plasma	0759
Molecular	0609
Nuclear	0610
Optics	0752
Radiation	0756
Solid State	0611
Statistics	0463
Applied Sciences	
Applied Mechanics	0346
Computer Science	0984

Engineering	
General	0537
Aerospace	0538
Agricultural	0539
Automotive	0540
Biomedical	0541
Chemical	0542
Civil	0543
Electronics and Electrical	0544
Heat and Thermodynamics	0348
Hydraulic	0545
Industrial	0546
Marine	0547
Materials Science	0794
Mechanical	0548
Metallurgy	0743
Mining	0551
Nuclear	0552
Packaging	0549
Petroleum	0765
Sanitary and Municipal	0554
System Science	0790
Geotechnology	0428
Operations Research	0796
Plastics Technology	0795
Textile Technology	0994

PSYCHOLOGY

General	0621
Behavioral	0384
Clinical	0622
Developmental	0620
Experimental	0623
Industrial	0624
Personality	0625
Physiological	0989
Psychobiology	0349
Psychometrics	0632
Social	0451



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Cinéma	0900
Communication verbale	0459
Communications	0708
Danse	0378
Histoire de l'art	0377
Journalisme	0391
Musique	0413
Sciences de l'information	0723
Théâtre	0465

ÉDUCATION

Généralités	515
Administration	0514
Art	0273
Collèges communautaires	0275
Commerce	0688
Economie domestique	0278
Éducation permanente	0516
Éducation préscolaire	0518
Éducation sanitaire	0680
Enseignement agricole	0517
Enseignement bilingue et multiculturel	0282
Enseignement industriel	0521
Enseignement primaire	0524
Enseignement professionnel	0747
Enseignement religieux	0527
Enseignement secondaire	0533
Enseignement spécial	0529
Enseignement supérieur	0745
Évaluation	0288
Finances	0277
Formation des enseignants	0530
Histoire de l'éducation	0520
Langues et littérature	0279

Lecture	0535
Mathématiques	0280
Musique	0522
Orientation et consultation	0519
Philosophie de l'éducation	0998
Physique	0523
Programmes d'études et enseignement	0727
Psychologie	0525
Sciences	0714
Sciences sociales	0534
Sociologie de l'éducation	0340
Technologie	0710

LANGUE, LITTÉRATURE ET LINGUISTIQUE

Langues	
Généralités	0679
Anciennes	0289
Linguistique	0290
Modernes	0291
Littérature	
Généralités	0401
Anciennes	0294
Comparée	0295
Médiévale	0297
Moderne	0298
Africaine	0316
Américaine	0591
Anglaise	0593
Asiatique	0305
Canadienne (Anglaise)	0352
Canadienne (Française)	0355
Germanique	0311
Latino-américaine	0312
Moyen-orientale	0315
Romane	0313
Slave et est-européenne	0314

PHILOSOPHIE, RELIGION ET THÉOLOGIE

Philosophie	0422
Religion	
Généralités	0318
Clergé	0319
Études bibliques	0321
Histoire des religions	0320
Philosophie de la religion	0322
Théologie	0469

SCIENCES SOCIALES

Anthropologie	
Archéologie	0324
Culturelle	0326
Physique	0327
Droit	0398
Economie	
Généralités	0501
Commerce-Affaires	0505
Economie agricole	0503
Economie du travail	0510
Finances	0508
Histoire	0509
Théorie	0511
Études américaines	0323
Études canadiennes	0385
Études féministes	0453
Folklore	0358
Géographie	0366
Gérontologie	0351
Gestion des affaires	
Généralités	0310
Administration	0454
Banques	0770
Comptabilité	0272
Marketing	0338
Histoire	
Histoire générale	0578

Ancienne	0579
Médiévale	0581
Moderne	0582
Histoire des noirs	0328
Africaine	0331
Canadienne	0334
États-Unis	0337
Européenne	0335
Moyen-orientale	0333
Latino-américaine	0336
Asie, Australie et Océanie	0332
Histoire des sciences	0585
Loisirs	0814
Planification urbaine et régionale	0999
Science politique	
Généralités	0615
Administration publique	0617
Droit et relations internationales	0616
Sociologie	
Généralités	0626
Aide et bien-être social	0630
Criminologie et établissements pénitentiaires	0627
Démographie	0938
Études de l'individu et de la famille	0628
Études des relations interethniques et des relations raciales	0631
Structure et développement social	0700
Théorie et méthodes	0344
Travail et relations industrielles	0629
Transports	0709
Travail social	0452

SCIENCES ET INGÉNIERIE

SCIENCES BIOLOGIQUES

Agriculture	
Généralités	0473
Agronomie	0285
Alimentation et technologie alimentaire	0359
Culture	0479
Élevage et alimentation	0475
Exploitation des pâturages	0777
Pathologie animale	0476
Pathologie végétale	0480
Physiologie végétale	0817
Sylviculture et faune	0478
Technologie du bois	0746
Biologie	
Généralités	0306
Anatomie	0287
Biologie (Statistiques)	0308
Biologie moléculaire	0307
Botanique	0309
Cellule	0379
Écologie	0329
Entomologie	0353
Génétique	0369
Limnologie	0793
Microbiologie	0410
Neurologie	0317
Océanographie	0416
Physiologie	0433
Radiation	0821
Science vétérinaire	0778
Zoologie	0472
Biophysique	
Généralités	0786
Médicale	0760

Géologie	0372
Géophysique	0373
Hydrologie	0388
Minéralogie	0411
Océanographie physique	0415
Paléobotanique	0345
Paléocologie	0426
Paléontologie	0418
Paléozoologie	0985
Palynologie	0427

SCIENCES DE LA SANTÉ ET DE L'ENVIRONNEMENT

Économie domestique	0386
Sciences de l'environnement	0768
Sciences de la santé	
Généralités	0566
Administration des hôpitaux	0769
Alimentation et nutrition	0570
Audiologie	0300
Chimiothérapie	0992
Dentisterie	0567
Développement humain	0758
Enseignement	0350
Immunologie	0982
Loisirs	0575
Médecine du travail et thérapie	0354
Médecine et chirurgie	0564
Obstétrique et gynécologie	0380
Ophtalmologie	0381
Orthophonie	0460
Pathologie	0571
Pharmacie	0572
Pharmacologie	0419
Physiothérapie	0382
Radiologie	0574
Santé mentale	0347
Santé publique	0573
Soins infirmiers	0569
Toxicologie	0383

SCIENCES PHYSIQUES

Sciences Pures

Chimie	
Généralités	0485
Biochimie	0487
Chimie agricole	0749
Chimie analytique	0486
Chimie minérale	0488
Chimie nucléaire	0738
Chimie organique	0490
Chimie pharmaceutique	0491
Physique	0494
Polymères	0495
Radiation	0754
Mathématiques	0405
Physique	
Généralités	0605
Acoustique	0986
Astronomie et astrophysique	0606
Électronique et électricité	0607
Fluides et plasma	0759
Météorologie	0608
Optique	0752
Particules (Physique nucléaire)	0798
Physique atomique	0748
Physique de l'état solide	0611
Physique moléculaire	0609
Physique nucléaire	0610
Radiation	0756
Statistiques	0463

Sciences Appliquées Et Technologie

Informatique	0984
Ingénierie	
Généralités	0537
Agriculture	0539
Automobile	0540

Biomédicale	0541
Chaleur et thermodynamique	0348
Conditionnement (Emballage)	0549
Génie aérospatial	0538
Génie chimique	0542
Génie civil	0543
Génie électronique et électrique	0544
Génie industriel	0546
Génie mécanique	0548
Génie nucléaire	0552
Ingénierie des systèmes	0790
Mécanique navale	0547
Métallurgie	0743
Science des matériaux	0794
Technique du pétrole	0765
Technique minière	0551
Techniques sanitaires et municipales	0554
Technologie hydraulique	0545
Mécanique appliquée	0346
Géotechnologie	0428
Matériaux plastiques (Technologie)	0795
Recherche opérationnelle	0796
Textiles et tissus (Technologie)	0794

PSYCHOLOGIE

Généralités	0621
Personnalité	0625
Psychobiologie	0349
Psychologie clinique	0622
Psychologie du comportement	0384
Psychologie du développement	0620
Psychologie expérimentale	0623
Psychologie industrielle	0624
Psychologie physiologique	0989
Psychologie sociale	0451
Psychométrie	0632



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NICOLE MARKOTIĆ

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Nicole Markotić

ABSTRACT

My Master's thesis, a creative writing project, takes the form of a novella. It narrates, by various strategies, the story of the Canadian "hero," Alexander Graham Bell. That the famous inventor was much involved with the deaf world has largely been ignored. After marrying a deaf woman, Alexander Graham Bell became immersed in the deaf "problem." His powerful stance and his interference in the deaf community often led to disastrous results. My novella tells that story.

That the man who considered himself a champion of deaf people in North America was the same man who invented a machine deaf people would be excluded from using is an irony not usually pursued in history books. I contrast the official history of Bell as entrepreneur with the lesser-known "facts" of his dabbling in politics, in eugenics, and his attempt to obliterate deaf culture.

Alexander Graham Bell discredited Sign Language and prioritized the spoken word, thus invalidating deaf culture through the erasure of its language. By inventing the telephone, Bell established a verbal hierarchy that rendered deaf people invisible. My novella narrates this complete "deafness" to the language of the "other" by the man deemed most sympathetic.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the city of Winnipeg and its impossible inhabitants who caused my stay here to be so delightful and untroubled, especially when it seemed so complicated, and who understand the magical properties of Confusion Corner and gelati in winter.

And to my parents, who are with me always.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was once asked if this novel would have evolved differently had it not been written as a thesis. Not only would it have become something else without the university's academic expectations, but it could not have developed the same life had I not been so deliriously happy to be in grad school and to be in grad school *here*. I want to recognize the following collection, in alphabetical order, of Winnipeg's best and brightest and – yes – most bizarre. Although the list may appear extensive and crowded, each entry deserves individual acknowledgement and my lasting gratitude. Calgary friends and family are mentioned only tangentially, cuz this thesis belongs so much to Winnipeg and excess.

My (orgasmic) thanks to:

all grad students around the department – who were always into going for a coffee, no matter what the deadline or when.

David Arnason – for giving me permission to mix up chronology and still believe in a straight line.

Neil Besner – for brown leather jackets and being *The Bez*.

the Blue Note – for its slippage of nomenclature, and its stable clientele of writers and musicians.

di brandt – for her defense of anger.

Rob Budde – for emerging out of the tentative and into read-aloud kisses, and for poems that lick their own pages.

Méira Cook – for six-hour lunches, for needing to know what flavour soup, and for her theory of mashed potatoes.

Dennis Cooley – for being in love with bad puns and for making Wednesday nights at Merks the coolest of times; and to Dana, Diane, & Dennis – for open doors, hospitality, and art earrings.

Wanda Coop – for continuing to gift me with her art.

deaf people – anywhere – who refuse to subscribe to the notion that they're handicapped, except by the hearing world.

Brian DeFehr – for basketball games in the afternoon and dinners to die for.

Wayne DeFehr – for introducing me to music he creates out of wood and his own body.

Shawna Dempsey – for outrageous outfits that trick words onto the open fields of text.

Charlene Diehl-Jones (Doctor-Professor-Short-Hair) – for neverending phone calls, and a *ching!ching!* friendship we have predicted into old age.

Billiam Diehl-Jones – for bad movies and piles and piles of popcorn.

DebRRRRRa Dudek – who misspells coca-cola and simmers pepsi in her belly button, and who offered bodied collages and a welcome overdose of chocolate every Monday evening.

Larry Dueck – for green M&Ms and voice-prints on campus.

e-mail pals across the country – for spicing my life with electronically dazzling conversations.

Lucia Flynn & Erica Walker – for being the best two people that ever happened to Fletcher Argue's 6th floor.

B. Hariharan – for slipping on the ice and snow angels in Winkler.

Dr. E. Hinz – for never settling for less than excellence.

Susan Holloway – who sings to dolphins and splits open every word looking for its original grandmother, and who transforms the ordinary into tales of enchantment.

Liz & Terry Janzen – for folding words inside films and hands.

Debbie Keahey – for recognizing missing dang lies.

R.K.'s Grad Class – for (in)famous Desir(ing).

Prof. Lou Layman – for making friends first, and for actually liking my poetry.

local bookstores, chapbooks, & magazines – for investing in Manitoba writing.

Shelley Mahoney – for teaching us about forearm sex.

the Manitoba Writers' Guild, board, employees, membership, and volunteers – for always expecting (and giving) more.

Lisa Mark – for female agency and lipstick discourse.

Dawne McCance – for listening.

Roy Miki – for being the only writer at the table actually *from* Winnipeg.

Markus Müller – for our one-day-of-the-week German sessions and other roomie service.

out-of-province friends – who wrote desperate letters and obscene postcards, and participated in irrepressible late-night phone calls that saved my life, every time, & who flew, drove, or just plain imagined themselves here and stayed long enough to hold my hand and fall in love with the city.

Judy Park – for risking an overnight with the class, afterall.

Andrea Philp – for organizational skills above and beyond the call of her intelligence and beauty.

the Red River – for curving past all my windows and reflecting its own history.

Heidi Rees – for phone calls from work and dinners at 11:00 pm.

Doug, Marty, & Matthew Reimer – for incredible friendships, and for the party-of-the-century in Winkler (of-all-places) Manitoba.

Dr. Rempel – for candies on his desk and Swift discussions.

Barb Schott – for tea stains in the carpet and brothers in common.

Carol Shields – for formal invitations to her classrooms and informal lunches afterwards.

Lori Skirten – for arriving in Winnipeg first, yet maintaining the trace of Calgary.

Margie Sweatman – for being breathtaking (and brilliant and foxy) without really knowing it, and for paving my fear with parallel laughter.

Jack Tulner – for inventing triangles that live on the page.

the University of Manitoba English Department, for generous support and help and solace, and solutions, even.

Veralyn Warkentin – for being able to be shocked.

John Weir – for comforting hugs and van trips across the border.

Julien Winfield – for his carpenter's hands and for reminding me, once in a while, that I still existed.

the Winnipeg Transit System – for the Pembina bus driver and for every six minutes in the morning.

the world that is my immediate family – who reside with me no matter which present terrain or challenging landscape I inhabit.

Soaring past the mythological, I wish to express extreme critical passionate ardent thanks to Robert Kroetsch – for his famous unanswerable questions and his endless complaints that I had too many characters, not enough characters, that I didn't know what a character was, sometimes, yet who still managed to expect brilliant words from me in the most generously demanding way; for his own writing, which is always more than an example, is an invitation to a fabulous country; for getting impatient and for being unbelievably patient; for prescribing narrative rather than biography, fiction rather than history; and for insisting this was (still) a great idea and of course I could write it.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: He swallows the sound of sky too hesitant for looking / 3

TWO: Automaton that travel London / 11

THREE: Thought Book of A. Graham Bell / 17

FOUR: Edinburgh grows small for Aleck / 21

FIVE: Aleck and Melly play *Who am I?* / 37

SIX: Letters from Marie / 49

SEVEN: The Thought Books of A. Graham Bell / 64

INTERLOGUE: Who invented the telephone / 74

NINE: Naked in your body / 82

TEN: Speak loudly to the Deaf / 87

ELEVEN: Because wood, so too metal / 99

TWELVE: The Thought Books of A. Graham Bell / 111

THIRTEEN: Hush-hush / 120

FOURTEEN: Platypus love / 128

EPILOGUE: Sympathetic vibrations / 151

To love someone is to love that person's body and language.

– Abdelkebir Khatibi

Love in Two Languages

All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparatively recent past, but in the strict sense: the consciousness of one's own activity as one actually performs it.

– R.G. Collingwood

The Idea of History

[on Alexander Graham Bell]: ...the most to be feared enemy of the American Deaf, past and present.

– G. W. Verdictz

First president, National Association of the Deaf

PROLOGUE

He swallows the sound of sky too hesitant for looking

* * * * *

Graham Bell urinates, pissing into the wide ocean, releasing himself into the element.

Inner tube and water carry him away from his dock, through the bay, towards a gap in shoreline that is ocean. Baddeck Bay, coarse and irritable, allows him to float, just float. He dips one toe into the pebbly water and listens to the grit of minuscule waves against rubber. A sound of scratching. Of air defying gravity. And the sound of his body half-immersed in this lake, an inner tube surrounding his legs, cradling his massive neck.

Graham Bell listens.

He leans his head back, back into the water, till the waves stroke his face, then opens his eyes to what lies above him. He discovers sky, matches the straggly clouds above to the fussy waves at his side. If he leans his head to the left or to the right, one ear dips below the surface. One ear reaches down toward the sound of underwater. If he lies still for long enough, perhaps a microscopic fish will swim into his eardrum.

A person could go deaf that way.

The ripples spin his inner tube round and round, Graham Bell paddles his toes, until he faces Beinn Bhreagh. Until he sees, from this distance, his 27-room castle nestled on his hill. His inner tube has drifted to the middle of the Bay. He is too far to see his deaf wife inside, sweeping the carpet he brought

with him from Scotland. A carpet that belonged to his grandfather. A carpet of coloured swirls and implied whooshes out of which he can't help making stories.

A carpet that began with the idea of a single thread.

Graham Bell pulls at his chin and detaches a single strand of coarse white beard.

The thick hair loops around his pinkie finger and he dips it into the ocean. The current catches, loses it again, and gradually unwinds his single idea of thread.

A carpet is more about threads woven together than about a singular beginning. A carpet is about the appearance of completion.

Even the air against his damp ears blows a whine into his head. Graham Bell has tried not to yell or sing into the vastness. If he were to open his throat and let out sound, the inner tube holding him would toss and twirl and spill the concept of direction all over the bottom of the ocean. And Graham Bell likes to keep his secrets to himself.

His body. What used to be useful has now been forgotten. Graham Bell rubs his hands over his immense belly and finds satisfaction in the dry skin, in his bulk that defies the regular landscape of sea. His hands find his chest and again he plucks a curly hair. This one glows pink in his palm. He licks it into

the space behind his yellow teeth. There it rests beneath his pink and searching tongue.

He has trapped the sound of it.

He bites off dead tissue from his body and brings it to life inside the cavern of his mouth. Graham Bell smiles and pushes his body deeper inside the inner tube.

Graham Bell's body is more than the sum of its parts, it is his personality denied. His fingers don't curve around meaning when they touch water, his arms don't translate sound into vision. Only his eyes see, only his ears hear.

The meaning of a word will occasionally worry you, he used to lecture his deaf students, but its sound is constant. And possible. Always remember: speech is a gift we've been offered. An easy gift. Just open your mouth, reach with your tongue, take what is already there.

The mind counts even when it sleeps. How many times did he turn over in his sleep? how many times did he snore? or burp? or fart? The mind keeps track of the body, but the body has a mind of its own.

His voice is low and dusty, Mabel feels it against her hands. He grumbles at the children at the dog at the telephone when it interrupts him for the fifth time this morning. Better to be deaf, Mabel tells him, better to avoid the weary responsibility of hearing. Graham Bell couldn't stop hearing if his life depended on it. Mabel has. He talks and his wife loses the shape of his

mouth when he turns to catch a car honk behind him. Or he runs past her in the middle of a word with no clue from him that the word hasn't been completed. Mabel follows his back, trying to see past his incomplete sentence to what notion has driven him into his latest frenzy. But it is only the telephone again, he has run to catch it. What a bother, Mabel says when she sees his hand lunge out to capture a final ring. Why not just let it ring?

The noise in Graham Bell's ears is not the drone of a fishing trawler beyond the Bay. The noise is not the sky falling into his eyes his ears his mouth where he can almost taste the blue. The noise is not the ocean promising him mermaids and eternal lullabies. The noise is a voice generated inside him. Graham Bell listens. Words and sentences, the babble of speaking curl beneath his tongue. The voice rises up out of his ears his nostrils his eye ducts, travels away from his useless body, disperses out of his still-thick beard and the washed-out blue covering his earlobes, evaporates from his lungs into the fishing boat, the seagulls, the lap of ocean against his skin.

The sky is too timid, but he is unable to close his eyes against its feeble protest. He cannot speak the words beneath his tongue. The words he hears out of his besieged inner ear. Words leak into the air so confused he cannot identify one by one by one. One individual hair catches on his tongue, he swallows it towards his throat. Graham Bell chokes. Spits the hair back into the ocean.

The inner tube twirls and Graham Bell sinks his large white head against the reassuring rubber. His body sunk low into the water, his arms and feet hang over the inner tube which has drifted too far out into the Bay for Graham Bell to manoeuvre his way back again. He has drifted for days, for days, even

nights perhaps. The sun gives no clue. Only the palest promise of daytime. When the time comes to return, Graham Bell's toes will have to invent a way back to his castle.

The deaf woman inside will have gone to sleep. He will return in time to kiss her sky-pale skin, her eyelids the colour of clouds, her locked lips.

A bug lands on his knee, and then is washed away. He scrubs, with stubby fingers, the near-transparent skin.

Above the clouds, Graham Bell tries to make out a tiny persistent shape of kite. Not box kite, not cloth, but an enormous wooden crate. A kite made from the idea of beehive triangles. A kite that can hold three men. The clouds, like cataracts, fog up his eyes, he lets both hands drop from where they caress his belly into the water and uses them to steer.

A kite is more than an invention, a kite is something to believe in. A kite is about tricking the gods into revealing sky beyond the sky.

If this inner tube exchanges the air inside for the heavier substance of the surrounding water, Graham Bell will sink. Not even his large body will float him above the water-line. The trick, Graham Bell tells himself, is to believe in buoyancy. He uses his arms as rudders and paddles his toes. The sound of air changing into water is only an illusion. The magician knows how to imitate body language.

The tiny speck in the middle of the Bay that is Graham Bell can no longer be seen from the concealed windows of his castle. A person peering out any one of those 27 windows would not notice the glimmer of bare belly.

The inner tube makes its own way, Graham Bell's toes wiggle uselessly. The irritating waves lap louder now against the protective rubber which encloses his shoulders. The chalky reflection in the water chases his every nod and tremor. Graham Bell is lost in the ocean. His toes squirm there at the end of his legs where he can no longer feel. He is lost in his own body. The beat-beat of the ocean slaps his bare soles.

The curl of chest hair has left a tickle in his throat. Graham Bell is thirsty. He toys with the idea of water distillation, imagines rows and rows of shallow boxes, moisture gathering on their sloping glass tops. Except that would require sunshine, and the sun today has woven itself into a carpet of cirrus cloud. Next, he will notice hunger, and after that the pressing urge to defecate. He shakes his hands free of the salt water and lifts a finger to his mouth. Intends to suck what little moisture may be trapped inside his folds of skin. But there are only more folds, only dry skin. Graham Bell sucks his finger and feels a nail loosen and detach. He does not spit, cannot afford the moisture loss.

Water sloshes inside the inner tube. The persistent lap of waves echoes from the rubber. For a while Graham Bell plays with the rhythmic notes, the swamp of trapped liquid.

His thirst has become a raging companion.

His hands, the consistency of rubber, rest against the ring of tube still above the water line. One remaining jut of land visible from where he sits. He blocks it out with his big toe.

Graham Bell licks his moustache dry, then regrets the taste of grey on his tongue. His wife sleeps, her lips barely parted, her eyes travelling their inner lids. The roar of ocean enters his body. The broom, transformed from utensil to ornament, hangs upside-down on the mantle. The deafening roar of water and water. Afternoon dust settles on the furniture. He reaches a finger towards the drip of moisture escaping one eye. A castle constructed in the 20th Century.

Graham Bell's voice, bellowing, catches inside the inner tube. He cannot hear it. His wife turns over, her eyes blink rapidly underneath their thin envelope of skin. She dreams a tiny speck in the ocean, an almost perceptible roar.

Graham Bell closes his grey moustache over his lower lip. Stops noise.

When she wakes from the heat of the stifling summer day, feeling trapped under a colourful quilt criss-crossed with embroidery threads, Graham Bell's wife Mabel, will remember only the sound of ringing.

TWO

Automatons that travel London

* * * * *

Aleck's namesake, Alexander the Great, invented a telephone. He was the first in a series of inventors that stretched to the 19th Century. Through a gigantic double-ringed horn, a loudspeaker of sorts, he shouted military orders about formation and attention and yelled battle manoeuvres at his generals. He stood on the summit of a hill and threw his voice at men standing up to twelve miles away. This mechanical device amplified vibrations released from his throat. He threw his voice around like he was passing out loaves and fishes. The trick he never managed was to hear his own magnification.

Aleck, growing into his namesake's name, decides he will hear his own magnificence. Decides he must stop the cycle of invention. Must become the final installment in a long line of telephone inventors. A process of invention that began with one Alexander and completes itself with another. Aleck will be remembered, if he is the last. His own voice will reverberate into the future, if he is the last. The chain of invention will stop. If Aleck will be last.

* * * * *

Aleck enters the world a birthday present for his grandfather. They share a name and a birth date. They share the sound of each other's voice. Grandfather Alexander had been a shoemaker who longed for the notoriety and wickedness of the stage. He spent years as a prompter, staring at actors's feet, hissing up at them to recite forgotten lines he could see clearly written on his prompter's page. No theatre fan knew his face. When he quit, he opened a school for elocution, taught sons of noble Scots how to pronounce the King's English. Shakespeare and Dickens. Grandfather Alexander could recite Dickens better than Dickens, but he attracted smaller audiences.

* * * * *

Summers, Aleck visits Grandfather Alexander at his retirement home in London. His grandfather hustles him off to a tailor and buys Aleck a proper suit and coat and top hat. Mortified, Aleck wears his costume everywhere in the hopes it will wear out by the time he returns to Edinburgh. The tweeds scratch his legs and sound like a cat licking fur. Grandfather expects Aleck to learn how to walk so that his clothes wear out evenly, not just in patches. So that his clothes settle into a proper fitting. Aleck feels like a dandy. His small chest sweats beneath the sweaters and vest and jacket. The suit hums and rubs into one continuous rustle. His grandfather's voice reverberates inside the top hat so that Aleck balances layers of conversations above his head. He tilts his neck in a new way to see if the words leak out. Aleck learns to walk in a new manner. His clothes fit. Ears at attention, he walks into a new way of looking.

* * * * *

Back in Edinburgh, Aleck decides to grow out of his family nickname. Melly taunts him with "lick" and "lock" and "lack." Aleck want a name to fit his new walk, stylish and adult. He can't demand they use his birth name while his grandfather's still alive. Families who name their children after themselves find shortcuts to avoid confusion, and Aleck doesn't want just another nickname. He hauls out the dictionary and looks up famous men: Chopin, Liszt, Mendelssohn. He needs to consider rhythm. His name begins – Alexander – with four syllables, and ends – Bell – with one. The middle name Aleck will adopt must contain two, or three. Lucky. Sailor. Governor.

Aleck's father believes in Canada. Canada is a mythical country where you get better if you're sick, where you learn to breathe again after your lungs have collapsed. Aleck's father exchanges Christmas cards with a Canadian friend, Graham. Every year Graham postpones a visit to Edinburgh, promising the next year.

Aleck meets the name years before he meets the person.

Then, without any letter of warning, Graham-from-Canada knocks casually on the Bell front door, no one expecting the visit. Once I write a plan down, I'm too bored already to follow through, Graham explains. He took a boat from Newfoundland to sip tea with his friends in their kitchen. I've got to get back tomorrow, he apologizes, travelling takes so long.

Aleck trails after this invisible friend made flesh, trying out his name on his own tongue. He likes that it starts with a growl. He likes that the Canadian spelling alters the Scottish *Graeme*. Because Canada is my destiny, he tells Melly, who spit on the grass in response. Melly wants them to stay Melly and Aleck, but that's not possible. Graham Bell, Graham Bell, Graham Bell, Aleck yells at Melly. Their father's guest turns back just as he reaches the street, then turns away again, leaving his name behind in Aleck's mouth.

THREE

Thought Book of A. Graham Bell

September 1861

Today, Melly and I made a machine speak words. We worked all this past month. Melly hauled spare wood from the lumber mill. Armload by armload of discarded planks the owner let us drag away. Melly's arms are scraped red from the loose nails, from splinters. I sneaked into Mother's piano room and removed a long thin tube, perfect for magnifying sound, from her hearing apparatus.

I shaped replicas of the jaws, teeth, and nasal cavities. Melly did the throat. I stretched *gutta-percha* rubber over the leftover planks Melly cut. Then padded the rubber with cotton to soften the air passages.

I thought of that after sticking my finger down my own throat. I want the thing's insides to feel real.

A machine that talks like the Baron's. It doesn't look like much, but we made it cry and call out and speak the word *Mama*.

Mama, mama, it cried all morning long. The neighbours thought it was a real baby and asked why we didn't do something about the poor child! Ha. I knew it would work. Melly wanted to spend more time on the lips and belly, but I knew it would work.

Melly has soft hands like Mother's, sometimes I wonder how he's oldest. Melly's whole personality is in his hands. The rhythm of him scraping rough brick against wood sang to me: *Melly can fix it, Melly can fix it*.

The Baron's book wasn't enough. The diagrams are charcoal shadings of the human skull. We needed to know how the *inside* worked. That's what I kept explaining to Melly, that we needed to know, that we couldn't construct a proper larynx without dissecting one for real.

Our cat for the sake of science, I told him. We have to make the sacrifice, I told him, our pet in exchange for knowledge. Science beats out the cat every time, I told him. She lay so quiet in my hands. She trusted my hands. I poured the nitric acid down her throat. I shut my eyes so I wouldn't hear the scream, but Melly said the acid burnt away her vocal cords too fast for there to be a scream. I hadn't thought the acid would destroy her vocal cords completely, now she's useless. Melly kept his eyes open the whole time?

Her head disintegrated so slowly.

We had to use a lamb after that. And kill it without wrecking anything. Melly slit its throat in one stroke. Except for the gash, the insides were intact.

When we finished we blew our breath into its lungs, and that's how the thing breathes. Breathes and talks, which means it's almost human. "Ah," it said when we first opened up the diaphragm. A word, first thing! and all by itself.

Last year I made our dog bark out labial syllables: mmmmm's and bbbbb's, and this year a mechanical thing that pronounces an actual word. I can make anything speak. A coat-rack maybe. Pebbles. The clock in the hall. Balloons, deaf-mutes, Melly's favourite top hat. Melly pulls ridiculous objects out of it

and all the uncles and cousins adore him. But I'll make magic tricks look tame beside speech. What would my shoes say, if I asked them to report on the quality of the cobblestone today? Or my elbows about how thin my sweater has become? I know, I'll talk to Father's pipe and ask it to repeat entire after-dinner conversations.

Melly doesn't even care about the prize Father promised, but I'm going to ask for a real human skull.

FOUR

Edinburgh grows small for Aleck

* * * * *

Aleck inherits music from his mother. Eliza hears less and less every day, and Aleck more and more. He sweats nights from an incessant beat-beat in his ears, and wakes up delirious from the rhythms inside his head. The only relief is while he makes music. Aleck takes lessons from Signor Auguste Benoit Bertini. Hammers at the keys till Bach, Beethoven, Mozart crowd his veins. Hours and hours of staring at black & white notation, making it mean music. Eliza sits by her son's side, sets the mouthpiece of her hearing apparatus on the piano's sounding board. So she can see the sound, so she can feel notes her own fingers no longer inspire. Aleck pounds and pounds, his blood pure, the pulse living in his fingers, his nights broken by a passion of musical fits and seizures.

Aleck releases notes from his body. Until Signor Bertini claps his hands together and the piano stops singing. Sound departs Aleck's body and he sits alone in his own silence.

When Aleck walks down to supper he can't hear the grandfather clock in the hall, his mother's hands slapping against dough, his bare feet slapping wood. This temporary ear-popping the vengeful defiance of his body. Testing. Deaf like his mother, but defiant. Aleck's ears shut out even the memory of sound, he can't imagine what her lip formations expect. Aleck can't hear her speak. She raises her ear-horn so Aleck will pour words into its mouth.

"Good evening mother, *bon appetit*." His lips form the words. His tongue complies. Sound slithers out of his mouth.

Against the will of his body that commands silence. Demands silence.

Aleck's body refuses to let him hear, yet here he is, faking speech. His mother adjusts her ear-horn, curls her fingers from the direction of his mouth towards the inside of her hearing contraption, this motion pushes air between their faces. She indicates he should repeat his words. "Good evening mother," his lips perform perfectly, she doesn't guess at the lack inside his ears. Neither son nor mother hear the words, but their struggle reverberates against both pairs of ears.

All week Aleck swims in the absence of noise. All week he refuses to approach his piano. For a week he sleeps without moaning. The silence seduction. When his father's lips flap at him he turns away. Signor Bertini despairs. Aleck's father despairs. But his mother waits. This deafness the opposite of his frenzied seizures. Eliza knows Aleck is composed of extremes. She waits for him to swing again towards sound.

* * * * *

Summers with Grandfather mean lunches that begin in the morning and afternoon walks to increase the appetite. Aleck and Grandfather speak the same language; both belong in another city, both require the company of machines. Together they visit every ridiculous exhibit, every circus. They dare each other to catch out frauds. What they love best are machines they can hear. Bits of metal and string coaxed into speech by some inventor with more time than brains:

A duck that quacks and flaps its wings: Quaint. The wings don't bend but fold together like praying hands.

Flying and singing birds: Commonplace. Probably constructed by clock makers in Switzerland. The notes are too sweet, too high to radiate.

A tambourine player: The figure sways in time to its music. Both Alexanders think him splendid.

Vaucanson's flute player: Barely looks human, but Aleck and his grandfather admit that the notes are accurate enough.

An automaton named Psycho: Reputed to be a ferocious whist player. Ho hum.

Chess players: *These* a real mystery. The figures wear iron gloves, yet manage to move the delicate wooden pieces flawlessly. The crowds yell out

for one or the other to move his King's Bishop's Pawn or a Queen's Rook. Occasionally the figures halt, mid-move, and place the carved figure where the crowd advises. Aleck watches a challenger from the crowd lose his cash and his dignity. They must be hearing machines. They must be listening. There's no room in these metal men for human beings. Yet they can hear. And play chess like experts. They can hear, but they can't manage the simulation of speech.

The chess automatons never tire, they never laugh.

* * * * *

Grandfather takes Aleck to view the Baron von Kempelen's automaton. They've never heard one talk before. The Baron had been dead for years and years so chronologically his automaton predates the others. There it sits, just like the others, beeping and gurgling and even burping, once. How is this possible? Aleck asks. Grandfather reads the book and verifies the mathematics. He explains certain passages to Aleck. Here, Grandfather says, pointing out a figure of two men sitting facing each other across a wall of wires and electronic connections. And here, he points to the laborious writing. The tones childish, but almost natural. In Grandfather's library Aleck sits for hours deciphering Kempelen's *Mechanism de parole des Hommes*. Why would a German baron write everything in French? The book full of diagrams and drawings of a device that knows how to animate itself. A book full of typed words and marks on a page that mean an invention. Aleck sits on display in Grandfather's library. How clever he is, Grandfather's friends remark when they observe him there, how dedicated. A book full of ordinary math that, all put together, makes a metal contraption recite the King's English. How is this possible? Aleck asks himself. And if one such machine can be constructed, why not another? Why not another?

* * * * *

Aleck opens a museum. He collects the leg bones of squirrels and mice, the tail bone of a cat, labels each in Latin. He finds an entire sparrow skeleton, dusty and disintegrating, and figures out that birds fly because their bones are hollow. He thought flight was about feathers and wings. He has discovered a trick, then, one of Melly's gimmicks. He feels cheated of his admiration for flying creatures.

Aleck studies plants and insects, learns how to preserve both in his mother's leftover jars, with cheese cloth tied around the tops. Aleck's ambition: to be a scientist, a collector of facts. Melly stares at the dragonflies praying-mantes bluebottles Aleck has collected, but loses interest when Aleck gives meticulous readings of species and genus lists. Aleck plods on. He knows more than Melly. He has discovered from the inside how a ladybird works. Next, he will tackle the touch of a finger against a cat's tongue, the basin of the ocean inside an ear.

* * * * *

Aleck's father invents speech.

Mr. Bell listens to Aleck recite his *Hamlet* soliloquy and transcribes the whole thing into pages and pages of loops and twirls. He hears Aleck and Melly argue – My turn now, my turn – and writes that down, too. He listens to a woodpecker outside the window and tries to make the same noises out of pen and ink. Aleck is so bored he wants to scream at his father. When he does his father writes that down, too.

Aleck stands up and rushes to his father's writing table. He can't believe his father has been so busy listening that he has lost the knack of hearing. There it is on paper: Aleck's scream.

Can you read it back to me? Aleck demands, and rests his hand on his father's shoulder so Mr. Bell will answer the question, not just transcribe it.

Aleck's father whirls, stares at his son, wondering at the touch. Aleck has ignored his father's work for so long; has ignored his father for so long.

Mr. Bell picks up the paper and blows on the ink till it dries. Softly, he clears his throat, and gently coughs.

Then lets an ear-rupturing scream tear out of his mouth.

Father and son stare at one another in disbelief. Then both break down laughing, more and more till Aleck hurts, till he tries to stop but can't. In the midst of this laughing, his father writes down their laughter, too, writes down laughing at writing down laughing.

And not just their laughter, but the strange animal noises of Aleck trying to stop.

* * * * *

Aleck's father invents speech.

Words don't look on the page the way they should. He divides the alphabet into vowels and consonants. He divides the mouth into regions and makes a map of it. His system is a phonetics for linguists to decipher. Look at that squiggle and make this noise, he instructs Aleck. Aleck can make any noise he sees. Aleck, the ideal pupil for his father's paper-thin invention.

Aleck sits in his father's study and watches his father invent a way of writing that looks like horseshoes and whips.

Mr. Bell requests his sons perform for public audiences.

Aleck's father draws ^ on a blackboard and it means a sound. I can make my son say this sound, he tells his gathered audience. Say ^ Aleck, say ^ . Aleck does. ^ says Aleck, ^ ^ ^ .

Then his father draws more lines and dots on the blackboard. His first public demonstration on word pronunciation. He turns to the men: A test, he says to the bearded faces.

Out of the room goes Aleck. Melly sits quiet. Aleck's face shines as he walks, slowly walks, past the grunting, mumbling academics.

Offer me words, Mr. Bell demands from his audience. Difficult words. Nonsense. Words from a language you don't even believe in.

Sszeckeeeh SHAY AY, shouts one voice. Outside the double-wooded door, Aleck doesn't hear, can't even imagine the sounds these men will invent for him.

Yes. Again, says Mr. Bell. More.

Pfu ZUM blah, goes the audience, *w?xim^blu*.

Mr. Bell makes the blackboard into art. Draws alphabets with strokes and gashes through the characters. Dots and wavy lines above that. The blackboard, propped on a podium, faces the audience. Aleck outside. Not hearing.

Watch says Mr. Bell. You'll see. He brings Aleck in, who studies the board, studies the silent anticipating audience. No muttering now. Melly lost beside their father. Melly, the oldest, but Aleck holds the audience inside his voice, carries the scribbles on the blackboard from his throat out over the tops of men's heads.

Sszeckeeeh SHAY AY, repeats Aleck. Looks at his father. *Pfu ZUM blah*, he quotes, *w?xim^blu*.

* * * * *

Aleck never tells Grandfather he inserted another name between the two they both owned. At fourteen, he memorizes the soliloquies of *Hamlet* in Grandfather's study. At fifteen, Grandfather divides the summer between Latin and Greek. But Aleck seeks an escape from Edinburgh that is more than his grandfather. He applies to boys's schools for the position of piano instructor. Instead – because of his father's name and reputation – the school at Elgin offers him the position of elocution tutor. He'll be a teacher then.

Grandfather taught the British how to speak English. Aleck's father invents on paper a vision of how to hear. Aleck will do both. There are no automatons at Elgin, but his days will be filled with an imagination that begins in the lungs.

Sixteen, Aleck departs his father's house and steps into a possibility of future he can only taste.

* * * * *

Aleck looks out of his bedroom window and sees people marching in the direction of somewhere else. Aleck slips down the back stairs and out into the garden. His mother needs him to interpret her world through his fingers. There she is: Eliza, half-blinded by the sun's halo, painting easel propped against the landscape. How delicate her fingers, Aleck thinks. Eliza famous all over Edinburgh for her miniatures, her replicas of local bankers and mayors. Aleck observes her interpretation of their garden pulpit, blades of grass. She will never be a great landscape artist.

Aleck matches his own profile with his mother's and approaches her in a straight line. She cannot hear his footsteps. She will not notice his shadow reaching her painting easel. Her chin lifts towards the blue above her head and she strokes yellowed sky lines onto her canvas. Blue, yellow. Blue, yellow. Eliza's fingers dip into the canvas, stroke old paint. Her fingers avoid the fresh oil she has added today. The sun is too bright, Aleck closes his eyes then realizes that his mother has done the same. Deaf by nature, blind by choice, his mother confronts a canvas of sound. She strokes her fingers into the branches she has carved, as Aleck's fingers stroke piano keys. She hears the scritch of birch. Aleck has no talent for painting. Eliza tilts her left ear to catch a ripple of leaves rearranging themselves. Aleck will never translate the words her skin hears.

On Sunday Aleck accompanies his mother to church. He fingerspells the preacher's darting words. Sixteen and bored, Aleck cradles both hands in his mother's lap and twists his knuckles around a lesson from the Bible his father

has taught him not to read. Mr. Bell refuses Anglicanism; Melly has recently been seduced and converted by Spiritualism. Melly can't spell as fast as Aleck. Melly's fingers are thick, like their mother's, too set in their ways. Aleck's crawl the air before his mind knows what his hands say. His mother divides her face between Aleck's hands in her lap and the preacher's face. The two combined make a sermon.

Aleck no longer displays interest in the game of translation, but finds himself still seated in the half dark, listening to an old man promise platonic love to old women. If he could think that fast, Aleck would command his fingers to convey a different message, superimpose his own interpretation on the preacher's words. But his fingers are too quick for him, and they spell out several sentences before his mind registers hearing a sound. Aleck is defeated by his own abilities. Amen, he spells to his mother. Amen, she says out loud.

Since trading in God for the lesser-known qualities of the supernatural, Melly's skills and talent for magic have doubled. He used to pass ribbons through his mother's wedding band and the ribbons changed colours. Parlour tricks in the evening. But Melly starts to believe in his own talent for astonishing. An ordinary kitchen chair folds into kindling, then shapes itself back into a chair. Melly smashes their grandfather's favourite timepiece and Aleck fears the beating that will follow. Grandfather explodes into laughter. He, too, has come to believe in the watch's reincarnation. Believes Melly can revive anything.

Melly reads minds. Aleck cowers behind chairs, but Melly has lost interest in his younger sibling, and chooses a woman Aleck hadn't even noticed enough to ignore. Green beans, Melly reads from his list. Striped trousers, antlers, ants-in-your-pants. Caroline blushes at Aleck's brother's precision. Your sister's yellow hair pin, an envelope full of stamps from another country, green eyes. Melly discovers sugar candies in Caroline's hair. She accepts his hand when he offers to make her disappear.

* * * * *

Sixteen, Aleck stops fingerspelling to his mother. The exercise reminds him of Melly's oh-so-clever parlour tricks. It galls him that his mother cannot hear his voice except through the machinery of her hearing tube. He wants his voice inside her ears. Look at me, listen to me, Aleck pleads. But he only says this out loud, only speaks into the air. His words never reach his mother.

The hearing tube becomes the enemy. Aleck refuses speech into a machine. You can hear me if you try, he says to his mother, says to her eyes. She remembers the sounds lips make, but not the sight of them. Her son's lips cripple her. Aleck expects her eyes to do the work of now useless ears. Except they're not useless, not when she can insert her magnifying tube into an eardrum. But Aleck won't be satisfied with props.

Aleck touches his mouth against her ear and shouts himself hoarse. The noise is too big, she tells him, and blurry. Aleck doesn't give up. He shouts his voice at her from different points in a room. Can you hear me now? can you hear me now? he shouts. His mother shakes her head at his lips. He tries closer, he tries tilting his head backwards. He makes her angle her neck till the ground sways. He walks a straight line towards her mouth. He cups both hands against her ears. He tries talking into the skin wrapped around her throat. He keeps shouting into her ears, can you hear me now? Eliza hears less and less every day she can't tell Aleck she stares at his lips furiously she can't tell Aleck. Can you hear me now? his question always the same. Of course she can hear him, just not his words. Yes, she tells him when his lips crush against her left temple. I can hear you Aleck. I can hear.

FIVE

Aleck and Melly play *Who am I?*

* * * * *

Aleck and Melly sit on the floor in the parlor. Melly goes first because he is the oldest. The two brothers sit cross-legged, solemn. Melly the oldest, the one carrying his father's name, the innovator, scholar. Aleck, two years behind, dreamer, artist, child.

They hold hands. Melly pulls Aleck forward, his hands bigger, stronger. Melly's hands pull Aleck inside the circle that is their arms. Their cat rubs Aleck's leg; their arms keep her out.

Guess my secret, Melly says. Their arms wrapped around each other's arms, their heads together. Aleck, his foot asleep, thinks: the blood can't get in. Thinks: I can't move. Says: Give me a hint. Melly watches his younger brother rock forward onto his knees. Thinks: Aleck has no patience. Thinks: Aleck is too eager. Aleck rocks ankle-to-knee, his fingers grip Melly's. Melly, patient and strong. Aleck, weaker.

I am, Melly chants, a thing so vast, no mortal being has ever seen me. Aleck pulls away; Melly holds fast. No fair being God, says Aleck. Melly smiles. You're so dumb, he says. You're so dumb. Aleck closes his eyes. Who is Melly if he can't see him? The sky? No, *dummy*. Heaven? No.

Aleck squeezes his eyes tighter, thinks about Melly's hands, his fingers squeezing, his fingers squeezed. Aleck opens his eyes, stares at his brother's hands.

Not strong at all, he thinks. I could beat those hands, he thinks. They're Mother's hands. On the sofa the cat stretches, her paws reach above her head. The bottom of the ocean, Aleck says. Smiles Melly's smile. Melly lets go shakes his hands free gets up breaks the circle. But it's my turn now, Aleck says. It's my turn.

* * * * *

After Grandfather's death, the family moves to London. Aleck wants nothing more than to stay behind in Edinburgh. Melly, the oldest son, remains there to represent them all. Aleck can't stand the house in Harrington Square without his grandfather in it. His father doesn't know how to carry off opulence the way Grandfather Bell did. Mr. Bell had, after all, tried too hard and too often to convince the old man to repay money he'd borrowed from his sons and daughter and, just recently, from his eldest grandson. Aleck would not have behaved so stingily. He would have provided lace and refinery to the old man. Instead, he prowls the streets of London alone, no grandfather, no Melly.

Summers in London begin sticky and slow, and Aleck is not used to slow. At Elgin, he taught every day and pursued his own academic studies, as well as his experiments and electrical tests. But in London without his grandfather, Aleck drifts. He reads early into the morning and sleeps late. He offers to run errands for his mother then forgets where he's headed.

* * * * *

Melly mails a thick packet to the family from Edinburgh filled with fabulous Melly tricks.

Bits and pieces of house Melly has scraped from where they used to live.

The front page of a newspaper.

A transparent scarf that still manages to be a different colour on each side.

A rolled-up canvas their mother painted before she married, which Melly discovered in an antique store.

A child's glove.

A *papier maché* map of Scotland with only the rivers painted in and the name *Caroline, Caroline, Caroline* written in black ink all over the surface of the land.

A hand-written page in Visible Speech, for his father, of Zulu clicks he'd learned from a sea-faring native of Natal.

A ten-page letter for his mother.

And half a sheet of instructions for Aleck:

Don't lie down on heated ground

Don't crawl into caves

Don't psalmsing in a choir

Don't mix pickles with beer

Don't neglect the English language or geometry

Don't fail to rank music in your lists

Don't hate London – for home's sake

Don't doubt the constant affection of father

Don't doubt

* * * * *

Melly's letters from Edinburgh grow more numerous by month. Everything Aleck knows about Melly now, he learns from the inside of an envelope. Melly's engagement, the stammering students he has so much success with. Even Melly's stunts and tricks continue on paper. Melly sends Aleck a notice from the paper announcing that "The Great Loblinski" would appear at the Edinburgh Music Hall, and Aleck understands from this that the audiences were seduced and beguiled by his brother the bearded Russian Prestidigitator.

And then Melly gets sick. The letters turn into scrawled half-notes and jagged thoughts until Aleck receives only one sentence at a time, or no words at all, just an envelope filled with scraps of paper that used to be Melly's notes.

I'm coughing my life away, Melly writes, every thought I've ever consumed expels violently from my body. I am afraid to inhale sometimes, for who knows what I will breathe back out?

Melly sends Aleck another long list of instructions, this time about how to communicate with the dead. Melly's handwriting is so bad by now that Aleck thinks he wrote, communication with the deaf, and puzzles over the chants and candles that Melly insists are important to the process.

cures for tuberculosis:

cod liver oil

raw eggs in wine

breathe a pure atmosphere

wear flannel against your skin

walk

mixture of: hops, spikenard root, inner & outer
portions of tamarack bark boiled together,
drained, drink quick with honey & brandy

* * * * *

If anyone can get out of this, Melly can. Wave your magician's wand, Melly, bend the coffin backwards till it forms the letter C.

Aleck stares at Melly in a box. Stares at the face that isn't a face anymore, at the hands that aren't hands. Aleck expects Melly to rise up out of the coffin, declare the whole thing a joke, a trick, laugh and exclaim *Who am I?* and then cough and cough and cough till blood pours out his nostrils.

Don't lie there Melly, open your mouth, pull pincushions out of your fingertips, suck on lollipops and rocks from our garden. Sit up, Melly, wave at me. C'mon, Melly, wave your magician's wand.

Melly lying there. One finger crooked over his chest, accidentally pointing at his chin. Everything about Melly is accidental now, thinks Aleck, or deliberate by somebody else's hand. Aleck stands quietly in his pew, watches everyone gathering to kiss his dead brother's dead cheek. Aleck whispers words at his dead brother. I know you, he says to the inert body. I know you. You're thinking you're no longer alive and you don't have to say anything anymore. Well, you're wrong.

Aleck understands that Melly is dead, but he wants to caress Melly's cheek, to lean down for a last kiss.

I've only got one chance, Melly, Aleck speaks into the coffin. Who am I? Aleck asks. But Melly is stone cold silent and all Aleck can do is repeat the question.

* * * * *

Last one home's a rotten egg, Melly yells over his shoulder, daring Aleck to push past, daring Aleck to be first.

And Aleck runs hardest fastest, scissors his legs to chase Melly round and round the marble pulpit in their garden in Edinburgh, not once did he ever succeed in getting close. Melly knows which way to turn to cut the corner closest so his heels dig into the dirt, and how to torque his body to the left, to the right, so Aleck skids to the ground in poor imitation.

Melly runs fast and never looks back.

But Melly is in a box in the ground. Aleck is closer to being ahead than ever before in his life. Aleck 23 and advancing; Melly stopped at 25. In two years Aleck will pass his older brother.

The trick to being first, he has discovered recently, is just allowing yourself to be last.

* * * * *

They bury Melly beside Grandfather Bell. What's awful, is that Melly is in a hole in the ground and Aleck's father already plans a future for the one surviving son. Mr. Bell believes Aleck next in line. Mr. Bell decides, on account of Aleck's too-predictable coughing that imitates Melly's first lung tickles, to transport his family to a safe place. To a new country free from dust and grime. Aleck discovers his father expects him to leave Britain and Marie simply because he is still alive. He refuses. He isn't sensible, he isn't reasonable. He wants to remain behind. To take his father's phonetic alphabet, his father's Visible Speech charts, his father's reputation, and do more with them than his father ever could. Not just imitate sounds, but make students create them.

But in order to be from a place, you must first leave. Aleck was going to be from Edinburgh, from London, from Canada. All homes he learns to leave behind; countries he no longer belongs to.

* * * * *

Last one home gets to close the door after entering. Or leave it open for others to follow. Aleck, recovering from illness, is dying in Brantford. It is no longer enough to translate unwritten Indian languages into Visible Speech. Aleck is no longer interested in the process of visualizing articulation. He wants to create sound out of sound.

There are two possibilities: Aleck will invent the telephone or he won't. Aleck doesn't know which way he'll go. The telephone, he knows, has already been invented, but not for the last time.

Aleck isn't going to leave any doors open, not even a crack. He has to make sure, though, that he is entirely inside before the door slams shut for good.

SIX

Letters from Marie

* * * * *

At Elgin, Aleck teaches boys proper speech. They can tell him anything as long as they use the correct grammar, the precise word, an exact pronunciation. He expects the boys to ask him for his opinion on politics, for advice on how to contain natural desires. The first boy complains, the soup wasn't hot enough today, I like it piping. Yeah, says another, usually my mom sends biscuits, but she's broken her leg and I have to survive on what little they serve us here. Aleck points to each one in turn. Tell me your name, he demands, and follow that with a complete sentence. Eric, announces a third boy. My sister will visit this weekend. Eric doesn't stop there: I warn you all, he says, Marie once took the train all the way up the coast just to deliver a pair of socks. I warn you, Eric says, girls don't know how to talk sense like we do, but she'll have goodies. Hang around and I promise, we'll get some eats out of this visit, at least we'll get that.

Marie carries a large basket of fruit. No, she says to Eric's reaching hand, your new tutor shall have first pick. Marie is tall, yet awkward somehow. Aleck stares at her. Marie's limbs don't quite fit her body. He reaches into her offering, gathers a handful of grapes into his palm. Ripe grapes. In the middle of dreary November. Aleck shakes off the excess water. His hands don't want to let go of the cool reminders of spring. His tongue makes the shape of a grape inside his mouth. In Spain they peel them, the sister tells Aleck. A peeled grape is about sun and eating meals outside. But I'm much too impatient. And you need the right clothes for that sort of thing. Clothing? Aleck lost the meaning of her sentence, what did clothes have to do with a meal in Spain? Peeled grapes are the ultimate in patience and

decadence, depending on which side of the peeling you're on, Marie continues. Peeled grapes disintegrate in your mouth without you having to chew. But you'll have to settle for the grapes whole, she told Eric and the others, because I'm not one for peeling. Besides, I like the way grape skins feel slippery against your teeth, don't you? My teeth? Aleck wonders, chewing carefully on his first grape.

Show me your room Marie insists to Eric, take me on a tour of the school grounds. Eric doesn't want to walk her anywhere. Stay in the room, he says to his big sister, sit a while. Marie laughs and delivers her hug. She strolls out the door. The others follow. She carries an umbrella even though not one of them expects rain. Marie swings the umbrella round and round her woman's shoulders without once letting the tip of it scratch the ground. Still, Aleck was right about the flaw, her umbrella is just a cover for a bum leg.

Marie's brother Eric is fifteen. Aleck himself is still only sixteen, but none of the boys know this. Marie visits again before the end of term, each time letting Aleck choose first from her fruit basket. He pulls out a pomegranate the second visit, and Marie tells him the story of Persephone in hell. Persephone was so young, you see, she explains to Eric, explains to Aleck, she didn't know she'd be dragged underground forever. She didn't even know what forever meant that's how young she was. In Marie's version, her mother doesn't just mourn for Persephone, she transforms the soil, makes dust out of fertilized land. Persephone's mother invented winter, you see, Marie tells them. Nobody had ever heard of seasons before so they didn't know how to go about growing then not growing. Seasons are about waiting

and Persephone's mother waited for Hades to realize that. Men don't understand that seasons change everything.

One visit, Marie exchanges the fruit for chocolate. My sweet tooth, she tells Aleck, who has assigned written exercises for the first time this term. They still have classes, he tells her. We can save the chocolate for later. Oh, no, Marie sucks the tip of one finger, I'll never last that long with chocolate dangling under my nose. Some day I'll have to escape to Germany because I hear they make the sexiest chocolate there. Aleck blushes. He doesn't understand what she's talking about.

The boys swarm the classroom as soon as they hear Marie's umbrella swish through air. She pushes them back. To let Aleck reach in first. Marie's dresses hide an imbalance Aleck has already guessed. He observes the way she carries one leg higher than the other. Marie carries stories in her head, and laughs when she speaks them. I know you, she once said to Aleck, no, that must have been somebody else. Aleck draws her picture and hangs her face above his bed. Marie offers Aleck the heaping basket. Aleck declines, preferring to discover whatever is left for him. Go ahead boys, he gives them permission to precede him, take whatever you want. Marie delivers her basket and one story and takes the next train home. Aleck wants to recite lists of exotic fruit into her ear: kumquat, coconut, starfruit, he wants to make her laugh before he reaches the end of a joke. He wants her to listen while he says her name, wants her to hear his voice and know him. By the time each boy has grabbed his wealth of succulent treasure, the basket is empty. But Aleck doesn't mind, Marie's empty basket still holds a promise.

At night he writes in his diary, *I have become a victim of the excesses of love.*

* * * * *

Reclining in the school visiting garden, Aleck recites to Marie the names of men who precede him. Marie stares at a cucumber plant that shouldn't be grown beside the flowers. Cucumbers need more light, she says, and mounds and mounds more earth. Marie urges the blooms to burst into seed. Come on, she says to the cucumber stalk, come on.

Aleck's voice increases its monotonous rhythm:

Nasmyth invented the steam hammer.

Fairbairn the iron steamship.

MacMillan, the mechanical simplicity of pedal bicycles.

Edinburgh men, Marie, that's where I come from.

During Aleck's monologue, Marie examines the pistils and stems of the daisies decorating the path. These daisies have no art of conversation, yet Marie pays more attention to them than to her brother's tutor. She day-dreams some magic trick, some hocus-pocus like Melly might perform. Aleck speaks louder, longer. He sits under the weak sun and recites heroes. He ignores Marie's ignoring. And desire.

This is the way of pointing a wandering gaze back to the self: look at me, look at me, solitude begs.

Melly, too, flutters his ears past Aleck's words, or invents a new trick while Aleck's voice demands a portion of his brother's time. Or Melly holds

Caroline's hand, the two of them pretending to listen, the two of them shutting him out. This is the way of older and younger brothers. Of cousins, friends. Of lovers, even.

In a combination of three, one is always left out.

The difference in this equation, is that there is no third person, only Marie and Aleck, and Aleck's conviction that he must regain her ears. But Marie doesn't pay any attention to Aleck's hero narrative. Her gaze shifts onto her lap, through the grass, across Aleck's ankles.

Stop staring, Aleck protests, after Marie has spent a full five minutes peering at the soles of his feet. What are you looking for?

I can find letters between your toes. I see V and T and M and W and even an X etched into the bottom of your feet. Neat, huh? she smiles at the belly of his toes.

Aleck never allows his boys to speak slang. You're not listening to me, he grumbles at her, listen to me Marie. Don't stare at what doesn't matter. Aleck rolls over until his face is upside-down beneath Marie's eyes. There, he says, speaking into her forehead. Stare at that.

OK. Marie complies, stares hard at the tip of Aleck's nose. Kind of cute, she says. Oh Aleck, I can see stories no matter where I look.

* * * * *

Aleck dives into school and teaching. This year, he is assistant master at Elgin. He studies for the degree examinations at London University. He will teach by day, study by night, weekends he will see Marie.

Except Marie's brother has disappeared, none of Aleck's students know why he has not returned this year, or where he could have gone. Some seem not to remember Eric, not even when Aleck mentions the baskets of fruit. The white and pink parasol. Aleck enrolled again at Elgin because of Marie. And he can't find her.

Aleck invades the records office, searching files for some trace of Eric, a titled name he didn't know about or an address he can hold onto. At night he throws the blanket off his sweating body and composes letters to her face above his bed. Mornings, he crumples the pages and hurls them into the river beneath his window. By noon, he is in the records office, prowling.

When the letter arrives from Marie, Aleck feels ridiculous that he hadn't predicted Marie would find him. Of course she writes him letters, silly. Of course she is planning a visit next weekend. Of course she will be at the train station at 10:00 am.

Aleck arrives at 8:57. In his arms a picnic basket heaped full of cucumber sandwiches and biscuits and water from the spring. Everything he could think of besides fruit. He will take her for a short walk along the river and just before they come to the cliffs they can stop. Aleck plans the whole day in

his head and checks the station clock again. Only ten minutes have passed. He plans the day again, this time putting in more of the details: the ridge overlooking a bend in the river where there's a broken tree trunk Marie can rest on. He'll ask her about Eric, then where she goes to school. He'll sneak looks at her face and she won't notice. He'll point to clouds that form giraffes or elephants, then look at her looking.

The station clock is maddeningly slow, but Aleck fills in more and more details about a freckle just below Marie's left nostril, about how her left skirt drags the ground though she pretends not to care, about how strong her arms are, she swings them high over her head when she talks, she waves her arms in any direction except down. Perhaps she thinks she can propel herself forward with her arms, Aleck thinks, perhaps her arms help her walk.

When Marie steps off the train onto the platform, Aleck's legs are already tired from walking round and round the same path, his throat sore from rehearsing his planned dialogue.

* * * * *

Marie, limping and huffing, refuses to stop even once till they reach Aleck's first lookout. The morning's only half used up, Marie prefers to keep on going.

But we have to stop, Aleck argues, the cliffs make the path too steep after this.

Maybe for you, Marie throws over her shoulder, but I want to see more. Aleck, lagging behind in an effort to slow Marie down, hasn't yet had the chance to study Marie's face. He can't stand the way she throws words over her shoulder. Throws words away.

OK, he says, OK. We'll walk to the cliffs. He stops himself just before the words: I'll take you, escape out of his mouth. Marie wouldn't have liked that at all. Already Aleck knows this about her.

Let's go in, Marie says when they reach a cave that only reveals itself after they have climbed folds of hill that crunch dirt into dry tough layers of more climbing. The walk was a bad idea, Aleck admits that to himself. Marie's bad leg isn't strong enough even if she digs her umbrella deep into the brown soil. But Marie doesn't think so. She turns and points her chin at him, her lips just beginning to part: A cave! a cave! Perhaps he should argue, perhaps he should insist they return.

Aleck acquiesces. Marie carries her dainty umbrella in one hand and pine cones in the other. She leans slightly to the right to balance the lack of

support from her left leg. Aleck struggles behind her, his head filled with what her face might look like. His eyes focus on the rhythm and motion and curve of her shoulders. Marie limps competently along, yelling back words in his direction.

Colander; she says, my mother always throws a bit into the soup. Edelweiss; tastes best with cheese and crackers. Boxed bruises; Father once won a prize for growing them. Happenstance; I've never seen any this close to a river. Corkbread; Eric used to braid that into my hair.

Aleck grunts in reply to each use she claims for the thing. And when she does, finally, turn her head towards him, Aleck can see her lips are full of laughter and her eyes can't believe how much he doesn't know.

Inside the cave, Aleck and Marie sit with their backs towards the opening and stare at the sloping ceiling that disappears into night. They have retreated so far that the cave opening is only a mouth, a tiny puff of whistle neither can hear because of scrapes and shuffles and echoes. Marie opens the basket and pulls out Aleck's soggy lunch. What, no fruit? she asks, but he doesn't need to see her face to recognize the smile there. I'll bet these caves are full of bats, Marie declares. I'll bet all the shuffling we hear is them screaming at the walls trying to detect where we are. Aleck has no reply to this. He can't exactly offer her comfort when she so obviously is stating a fact and not hinting at all for support, or for his arm around her shoulder. But he can't figure why Marie yanks him out of his regular life, drags him halfway up a bloody mountain, then yammers on about bats. This is what he must

decipher: how to crack Marie's code of speaking, translate it into a language he can recognize.

Are you always so morose? Marie asks. And her voice comes to him from way down near the entranceway. He hasn't even heard her move. Gradually, his eyes fighting the dark, he makes out her silhouette and one hand rubbing the muscles in her left leg.

* * * * *

They get back to Elgin around dusk and Marie's dress, white and yellow when she stepped off the train, streaks with brown and reddish mud. Aleck dreads letting her back on the train looking like a cave person, but there is nowhere for girls to wash or change. Marie's wrinkledness appears less temporary than Aleck's dusty trousers. And her expression refuses to acknowledge shame.

Marie swings her parasol into the air and catches it with one hand. The parasol bent and torn. Marie opens it anyway and shows Aleck the sky through the holes. Like we're back in the cave again, she says, except with so many more entrances. So many more possibilities.

Aleck rushes her along to the train station so she can at least wash the bottom of her dress which is weighed down with caked mud. Silly, she laughs at him. It's much easier to get off once it's dry. Not at all like blood, you know. Once a month I have to rush straight from my bed to the bathroom and scrub and scrub and scrub with water cold enough to freeze pimples off your back.

Aleck stops walking and faces the train. Marie kisses him on the tip of his nose and proceeds the rest of the way humming a tune Aleck can't quite catch. Marie doesn't realize Aleck has no sisters. He's never heard a woman speak about her body, except his mother about her useless ears and disintegrating hearing. Even a mention of a bathroom seems so unladylike he can hardly stand there long enough to wave good-bye. What an unpleasant talkative girl, Aleck thinks, whatever was I thinking? Marie jumps onto the first step and swings the damaged parasol around in a circle. Look, she calls out to Aleck, I'm a giant clock. I'm a propeller.

There is so much Aleck doesn't yet know.

* * * * *

Marie is still in Germany, but she could get back in time, before Aleck's father's plan takes effect. If Aleck marries Marie, there'll be no more talk of leaving. Marie: his solution. Aleck spends days collecting the most appropriate expressions of proposal. He reads Keats's love poems. Before she left for her holiday, Marie crammed herself full of German words; none of them for Aleck.

After the funeral, Aleck wants to hear Marie's words pour into his ear, expects a written incarnation of that love. He writes her an appeal. Marie doesn't return to England, she announces her plans to study German physics in Taunus. Marie's letter back promises futures he can't yet recognize:

Make a name for yourself there, Aleck. Make a name for yourself in a country where Bell isn't a church announcement but whatever story you invent for yourself. Go forward, Aleck, don't hang onto this place. Don't hang onto what no longer lives here.

Aleck had explained, using his grandfather's exacting grammar, that he missed her. In the margins of his careful and lukewarm expressions, he copied Latin quotes from Virgil and Catullus. Marie ignores his margins:

How I shall miss you all! Funny, I don't expect you will return, England having become too *slow* for you.

Aleck will go to America and become someone else.

* * * * *

Before they leave England, Aleck sells his brother's house and his brother's piano. The house was easy, but how can anyone live without a piano? Aleck sits at the keyboard and tries to play a hymn. No, a hymn's wrong for Melly. Aleck wonders if there's such a thing as a seance song. Maybe he can conjure Melly with one of those.

The notes won't follow his fingers. Aleck presses his foot against the pedal that lifts the felt dampers from the piano wires. Hums to himself. He plays Melly's piano, bangs out Christmas Carols and Dickens's Follies. Melly lies dead but his piano remains tuned. Melly would have disapproved of these songs, yet his piano voices no objection.

The notes reverberate insincerely around Melly's vacant house, so Aleck stops playing but his foot remains depressed. The piano sighs and Aleck hums along with its fading notes. Aleck hums along with the piano humming.

Melly's piano humming.

Aleck stops and the piano stops. He hums and the piano hums. Then he lifts the dampers carefully, so the wires can't possibly be vibrating merely in response to the friction of Aleck letting his foot go. Aleck sings into Melly's piano, pours his voice into the heart of Melly's instrument. The piano wires sing back. In perfect pitch. Sympathetic vibrations. Melly's piano has learnt how to sing by itself, and without Melly.

Melly's piano sings sympathy vibrations, in response to Aleck's voice. A parlour trick of sorts. The kind Melly might have performed for friends had he discovered it himself. Only the notes Aleck sings echo out of the piano. Aleck alone with his own voice and Melly's piano. Aleck closes the piano carefully and wipes it clean for the new owners. Aleck won't tell them about the singing.

SEVEN

The Thought Books of A. Graham Bell

June 4th, 1870. London

Father took us to visit Grandfather's grave today. Five years he's been underground. Five years since I saw his face move beneath its skin. Melly smiled at the fresh flowers Father pays a custodian to plant every spring. Grandfather's not really down there, Melly said, he's walking around beside us during the day.

Last time I stayed with Grandfather, six years ago, I never told him, but saw the Reis exhibit that toured London. Grandfather was busy with one of his old cronies, so I deked out for a walk around Harrington Square. Except I never. I walked and walked until I found that poster we'd passed the day before. Reis – Somebody – had invented a device that conveyed sound.

He called it his telephone.

The thing was ugly. He'd hollowed out a bung from a beer barrel, covered it with sausage skin, and stuck on strips of platinum with bits of sealing wax. What a laugh, I thought, wait'll Grandfather hears this one.

And then the crude thing *worked*. No strings attached. I heard the tinny notes of a harpsichord, transmitted from another room. I heard the notes rise out of the *metal*, not through the wires. Not through the walls either. I couldn't very well relate that story to Grandfather. He once deduced that the chess automatons we saw had dwarfs stashed inside, what would he do with *this* contraption?

That was 10 years ago I can still hear that harpsichord echoing its notes. Why didn't Reis consider the human voice? Or did he, and I just don't know it? These are my next projects. What I'm going to do when I get to America: invent the telephone all over again.

June 11th, 1870. London

Melly's funeral was awful. I stood by Father and Mother and held Carrie's hand and the congregation, the whole lot of them, sang righteous hymns about returning to the bosom. Crap. Throughout the entire sermon I could feel Carrie's wedding ring pressing into my palm and I thought what a useless bit of jewellery that was now. And then I cried. Because that was all I could think about holding my brother's widow's hand: that her ring was biting into my skin. It was ghastly, all those tears that should have been for Melly, wasted.

July 3rd, 1870. London

Carrie, the raving mad widow and I, the absurd left-over brother. For yelling at Melly to appear, jump out of the box, wave your magic hands in the air, Melly, and show us a trick. I didn't even let go of Carrie's hand while I waved mine about. I'm sure to the rest of the congregation we looked a right pair of idiots. I felt bad for her, after. Carrie said it made for a scene, but scenes prove we're alive. She said she thinks more about the baby than about Melly. Not because she doesn't miss them both, only she doesn't feel Melly's dying was her fault. They gave the baby four names, and Carrie thinks that was too much for an infant. Maybe it wasn't the *number* but the *kind* of names. Who would want to grow up into an Ottoway? Naturally, I didn't voice this out loud.

July 22nd, 1870. *The S.S. Nestorian*

Captain has promised me first view of shore. Besides the crew, that is. So I won't really be first at all. But Father has told him I'm ill, half-way to the grave no doubt, so this must be how sailors humour the dying. But I've decided instead to retire to my cabin when the time comes. You can't really urge a dying man to leave his bunk, can you? I'll be the last of this lot to step into Canada, but I bet my brother's life I'll be the first to leave. When the ship pulled away from England, I thought we'd seen the last of Europe, but we stopped in Spain and Portugal before lunging out for open sea. I think I spotted Africa a few days after that, we were far south enough. When we get to Canada, I'll be able to say I've seen three continents. Whereas Melly will always be locked in one. I miss him.

September 24th, 1870. Tutelo Heights

Mother and Carrie don't know, but in the stillness of night I have seances all by myself in the half-hope, half-fear I will hear Melly's voice again. What must it be like to be dead and no longer thinking thoughts? They say hair continues growing after a person's dead. Does someone *measure* these things? I try my best, I honestly try my best, Melly, without success. No response. Not a tipped glass or banged window or creaking furniture. No dream visitations.

How is it possible that his voice has just stopped? We agreed that whoever died first would find a way to speak that silence. Melly, I can't hear you. Oh god, what if it's me? Maybe he *is* talking. Maybe he's singing the *Scottish National Anthem* or *Skinamarink* or *Homeward Bound*, and I just can't hear.

October 16th, 1870. Tutelo Heights

Melly has been dead half a year. The silence is deafening.

October 19th, 1870. Tutelo Heights

I lie in my bed or I lie on the edge of the bluff overlooking Brantford's river and I wrap myself with rugs and buffalo skins and pillows. Why does my mother give the sick so many pillows? Father's teaching his Visible Speech System at McGill University, Harvard, Washington Square. Sundays I go with Mother to Service and press my lips against her forehead and repeat the preacher's words into her skin. But I tire of these infernal soothsayers who would perpetuate the world, rather than evolve it. At least Mother will never hear this preacher's voice which is nasal and lacklustre. Tomorrow, I plan to make an excursion to the Six Nations Reserve nearby. Reverend Henderson says that although the Indians have been living side by side with the Europeans for centuries, there is still no written version of their language. How exciting!

February 27th, 1871. Tutelo Heights

Melly has deserted me, here in this fresh land. The voice I hear inside my head is mine. Where are you Melly? has become an ironic comment on my own reasoning powers, not a question at all.

The only book I brought with me from England, *On the Sensations of Tone*, I have yet to crack open. I've turned lazy and ineffectual. I wait every day for a letter from Father. He has promised me a teaching job in Boston. But that was months ago and I've heard nothing since. Typical! So wrapped up in his own forays he forgets me dying in this place I must call home.

And the company! Mother and Carrie have lost all art of conversation. Mother expects me to practice piano, which I can no longer stomach. She sits down herself, but cannot discern a single note. Why bother? I ask, but never out loud. Carrie is worse. She sits by the front window and counts carts, schoolchildren, delivery boys that pass. Every evening she remarks on the number as if a sane person would be interested.

I must get some mathematical books – something scientific – or I will go mad from boredom.

February 29th, 1871. Tutelo Heights

Leap year. Carrie announced today she is getting married. How is that possible? I go about town, do the shopping for us all, greet the towns people on my way to the Six Nations Reserve, stop sometimes for a short beer at the tavern. All Carrie does all day is count horses, yet she has managed to get herself engaged! Perhaps this is some Canadian courting ritual I don't yet understand?

Her fiancé insists on an April wedding. I swear by the date of the nuptials I will be gone from here.

Today, I visited Isabella Ellis at Dominion Telegraph. She ignored me for several minutes, but eventually became enthusiastic about my idea. Why must I always *prove* myself when I enter into conversation? No matter, tomorrow we will perform an experiment, she and I, and then I begin the slow process of making a name for myself.

INTERLOGUE

Who invented the telephone

* * * * *

In 1673, Athanius Kircher constructs a model of Alexander the Great's speaking trumpet. He succeeds in throwing his voice up to four miles away. He builds the loudspeaker out of hammered metal and bits of willow wood. The two components work together to bend and amplify sound.

Robert Hooke, reporting on Boyle's famous speech transmission experiments, writes: It is possible to hear a whisper at a furlong's distance ... and this not only in a straight line, but in one bended in many angles.

Mr. Millar of Glasgow is the first to use wire to conduct sound from one locality to another. Later inventors insulate strips of these wires inside glass and support them with a thin iron diaphragm.

Sir Charles Wheatstone transmits music through wooden rods and solid wires and believes his contraptions able to project sound to distant places.

In 1837, W.B. Page replicates musical tones using the action of galvanic currents.

Charles Bourseul announces to the French world in 1854 his intention to produce a speaking telephone. I don't see why what is spoken in Vienna might not be heard in Paris, he speculates. The thing is practical in this way...

By 1855, the two essential organs of the telephone have been engineered by independent inventors: the vibrating plate, which acts as the transmitter, and the vibrating rod, which acts as receiver.

The missing ingredient – electricity – is soon added. Electromagnetism, M. du Moncel declares, will aid certain instruments, such as pianos, will render them capable of being played at a distance. In order to telegraph speech, we must have the electrical ear. The power it possesses to set metallic plates into motion and cause their vibration, can produce distinct sounds which may be combined, which may be harmonized.

One inventor of the telephone, from Italy, has a monument established by the city of Aosta in his honour. The inscription reads: Innocenzo Manzetti, inventor and maker, in the year 1864, of the first telephonic apparatus.

There have been many mechanical versions of the reproduced succession of irregular vibrations, especially those inventions requiring bits of wood, knitting needles, or skin. This is now a dead art.

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Edward Farrar, in 1851, erects two thin boards, one carrying a horse-shoe magnet and the other a soft iron disc. This simple receiver is superior to what Bell submits the date of his first patent. Discouraged by a professor at Yale College, Farrar declines a test to vary the resistance of his transmitter's circuit in order that it might produce voice-wave currents.

Antonio Meucci begins experiments with the telephone in 1849 in Havana. He's too poor to take out a full patent, borrows the twenty dollars to file a U.S. caveat. He submits drawings and a model to the president of the New York District Telegraph Company who never tries the apparatus and loses the drawings. In 1885, thirteen years later, Meucci is successfully sued by the United States Bell Company. Meucci often used his telephone to converse from his basement study to his invalid wife on the third floor.

M. Petrina, of Prague, builds a telephone with various keys. Sound currents are set into motion from one instrument to another across the room. Music played from one telephone to the other when the hand lifts from the keys.

When S.D. Cushman hears distant frogs from a nearby swamp while working on lightning arrestors for a telegraph line, he begins experimenting on electrical methods for transmitting such sounds deliberately. From 1851 to 1854 his telephones are in constant use in public areas while he attempts ways of magnifying the sound transmission so conversation can be carried on in noisy places. In 1888, Cushman is successfully sued by the United States Bell Company. Cushman's transmission is faint but, at the time of his patent, Bell's telephone had not yet talked at all.

* * * * *

The inventor sits alone in his study, surrounded by wires and mechanical hook-ups and a microphone placed in front of his lips. In another room, out of hearing range, sits the assistant. The assistant is waiting to hear whatever comes out of the inventor's lips.

The inventor, anticipating failure, delays the moment of speech, fiddles with his materials with his apparati. He touches his tongue to a thin strip of metal; the taste bitter. The assistant sits patient. His role is that of helper, recorder. His lips will form no shapes, his lips do not press against wire against contraptions.

The assistant waits for the inventor to gather together courage to attempt the impossible: to pass the spoken word through walls and doors and several flights of stairs. The assistant believes that he will soon hear the voice of the inventor in his ear. The assistant does not know how this will happen, though the inventor has explained the process several times. All the assistant needs to know is that his ears will hear what they cannot possibly predict.

The inventor clears the area around the microphone, leans down to speak. Earlier, he spilled acid on his arm and cried out in anguish. But that moment was fleeting and unimportant and the assistant, set up so far away, heard nothing. The inventor feels only the dull ache at his elbow, he measures his lips exactly 2 cm from the thin and vibrating metal and opens his lips:

"Pferde fressen gern Gurken Salat," a sentence so absurd, it could only be recorded accurately. "Help, I need you" is what he cried when he spilled the acid, what the assistant ignored because the cry did not reach his ears through the wire receiver. *"Horses prefer cucumber salad."* These fabulous words bring the two men into the same room. Their voices convince them they are together. One spoke, and the other heard. One listened while the other fabricated an entire sentence. The two men separated their physical bodies, and their words found them again.

Words that could only travel in one direction. The two men were not having a conversation, they did not exchange pleasantries. Philipp Reis spoke and Herr Schultz wrote down his words. The assistant, the listener, walks up the three flights of stairs to Philipp Reis's laboratory and hands him a slip of paper: *"Pferde fressen gern Gurken Salat."* An exact replica, a written account, a translation of what reached the destination of his ear.

The United States Patent Office has no physical evidence that the Reis telephone ever transmitted speech. It also has no physical evidence that the telephone Bell patented ever transmitted speech.

Philipp Reis publishes several papers on *telephony*, and his telephones spread across Europe in wide general use.

Philipp Reis dies in 1874, exactly 40 years after being born, and almost three years before Bell submitted his patent for approval. No less than four distinct varieties of the telephone are attributed to him. After her husband's death,

Emperor William of Germany bequeaths a pension of a thousand Marks per year on Philipp Reis's widow.

Both men undertaking this experiment understand that they rely on the ear. On the ear and on the mouth. Philipp Reis, who gives the telephone its name, looks forward and sees ahead to the day when such a transmitter will also involve the eye.

Philipp Reis is a school teacher. His desire is to influence his students with the spoken word. He absents himself from the classroom and iterates one sentence of his day's lecture. Now, his voice says to the bowed heads taking notes, do you *see*?

* * * * *

When I turn twelve, my mother takes me to her – and Philipp Reis's – home town. Although born in northern Germany, she grew up in Friedrichsdorf where Reis lived and taught. There is a small museum there, and the townspeople have never heard the name Bell in connection with the modern telephone.

NINE

Naked in your body

* * * * *

Don't think Bell wasn't a hero. He was a hero, all right, just not in his own country.

After the family settles in Tutelo Heights, Aleck goes out to the Six Nations Reserve to excavate new sounds for his father's system of recording Visible Speech. He is intrigued by the vision of himself inventing writing. He wants to be seduced by a virgin language.

The first man Aleck meets reaches a hand up, not out, for a handshake. Aleck misunderstands meaning, doesn't read the gesture as greeting. The man takes a step closer to Aleck, offers him a name, and tells him this smoky day is swollen with appetite. Aleck misunderstands meaning. When this man speaks English, he sings the words, and Aleck registers his lilts.

Aleck explains his project, I want to transcribe your words he says, shows off his notebook and the strange squiggles that mean sound. The singer doesn't glance at Aleck's notebook, but points him in the direction of other voices. Aleck joins a circle of cross-legged men and waits for them to speak. The men in this group greet each other with the stroke of thumb against moccasin. The singer joins the circle and passes both his palms underneath the chins of his neighbours. Aleck waits patiently. He witnesses layers of unspoken ritual. He writes nothing down in his book. He waits. A pipe passes his chest, but he is not offered a puff.

Years later Aleck will remember a wrinkled set of fingers stroking the long tube of this pipe, or young fingers braiding hair. But he will have no written words preserving these pictures. Years later, isolated details will leap at him unexpectedly. Disembodied images. The tight swirl of smoke released from lips. The breaded thongs of a leather shirt. An elbowed jawline.

At this moment, Aleck only notices the expectant blankness of the pages in his Thought Book. "Visible Speech. Iroquois," he writes down at the top left-hand corner. And the date.

Aleck the boy taught his dog to growl a sentence in English. He witnessed automatons who could cheat at chess. Aleck the adult wants to make something of himself. How would it be, he thinks while waiting for this circle of people to form their tongues around trapped breath, how would it be to invent myself?

The singer rests the tip of the pipe against an indent in his chin and closes his eyes. Aleck holds his pencil at the ready. The singer refuses to exhale the smoke still contained in his lungs. All the other people hold their breath with him. Aleck's own lungs constrict in sympathetic vibration. Like Melly's piano when I sing to it, Aleck thinks, but he still can't convince his body to relax into release rhythm. He's forgotten the melody of breathing, can only pitch himself to the exact note of the controlled and unyielding example of this man.

The singer, still refusing to exchange smoke for air, raises his body from a squat to a full-standing position, legs still crossed at the knees, as if holding a

secret. Aleck feels prickles in his own legs and bum. The singer pivots on his heels, his legs uncross themselves, and he removes himself from the circle. In one simultaneous rush of breath the seated people relax their diaphragms, the noise of this so close to the sound of laughter that Aleck scribbles for several seconds before he remembers to breathe.

He writes the laughter, a page of belly-rumbles. But he wants more. He wants to follow the singer, but Aleck isn't confident his knees can perform that trick. The men in the circle have begun passing the pipe again, reaching past Aleck. The thing is, Aleck isn't an adult, he's mostly child, pretending adult games. So it isn't entirely his fault he misunderstands what comes next. Misunderstands what he later names his victory dance.

The only gesture Aleck can bring himself to substitute for the spoken word is to point with one index finger to his ear and to point with the other index finger to another speaker's mouth. The Mohawks, too, misinterpret Aleck. Although rudimentary, the men still observing the circle think they perceive signs imbedded in Aleck's crude beckonings. They believe his fingers invite them to dance the dance of arms and mouths, and of seeing what another person sees with closed eyes. They understand Aleck's fingers to point in the direction of desire and that he wants, with them, to become telephones.

One by one people pair off. With others who have come to join in but don't sit in the circle, with some of the children, younger than Aleck himself. Aleck stands in front of a much older woman, already hunched and squatted into position. The couples around him begin inserting their index fingers into each other's ears. One finger. Then another. They squat or kneel, stare

penetratingly into another pair of eyes. Aleck misunderstands, he believes he is witnessing another layer of ritual, but really these people are dancing. Dancing joy. Dancing communication. Aleck tries to ignore his partner. Right in front of him, the old woman sways. One shoulder higher than the other, but her swaying still balanced, even. She doesn't hum. No, her body transforms into an instrument to convey sound. Or music. She is waiting for Aleck to tune in to the flow of her blood, for him to want to listen to what her skin has to say. Aleck, brushing her fingers out of his ears, refuses this game. Refuses this old woman penetrating the inside of how his body sounds. She doesn't try to insert her fingers into his ear holes again, she is not persistent, only hopeful. Why would a young man refuse the advances of experience and delicate manual intercourse? Aleck, not looking down, not looking ahead, walks the road home to Tutelo Heights. The very last person he sees on the reserve is the first man he met.

I've written a breath song about this, the man says to Aleck, but you wouldn't understand a word of it, not one word.

TEN

Speak loudly to the Deaf

* * * * *

A debate arises in the Massachusetts Legislature.

For her fifth birthday, Mabel Hubbard's mother takes her on a train to New York. A city that should be a song because its name rhymes with itself. May's mother's mother lives in New York, New York. A twin city of mirrored doubles. May likes twins that don't look alike at all but really are. May has another name and lives in Cambridge which is in Boston. And inside that lives a bridge which goes over water or other bridges, depending where you put it. Once they reach New York, she turns into a girl from Boston: a city inside a city inside something else altogether.

The backers of this debate, the rigorous supporters of teaching speech to mutes, include Samuel Gridley Howe: a politician addicted to the struggle of reform, and Gardiner Greene Hubbard: a rich Bostonian businessman who had managed, in spite of his prominent social status, to beget a deaf child.

In New York, May suffers Scarlet Fever. Her forehead fluctuates from hot to hot to hot. Not just her eardrums, but her eyes and nostrils burst from energy disturbing the openings. May screams and screams until her throat clogs together, refusing to be passageway, until her ears no longer process her scream as voice. Her mother sits by the bed, strokes ice chips over skin that devours solid water.

Howe walks into the Legislature with Hubbard on his shoulder. The two men beg for deaf students to be given the opportunity to become like every

other person. How can we deny Mutes the right to appear normal, Howe pleads. If we do not teach Mutes to read English on the lips of Americans how can they fit into our world? The two men flood the House, drowning the rows of seated men with examples of deaf adults who can speak. They don't bother to explain these deaf adults have only relatively recently lost the ability to hear. Not one of their shining examples were born deaf. Howe doesn't mention this. Slips his tongue.

Mabel Hubbard is totally deaf. May-the-deaf-girl. Until age seven May sings songs to herself: Peter-Pumpkin, Ring-around-the, Away in a Manger. May plays toy soldier and Tea Party and School-in-a-real-classroom. She recites her sisters's names: Sister-the-oldest, Berta, Grace, Marian-the-baby, and Carrie-Dwyer-who-lives-next-door. May is second-oldest daughter. She holds and cuddles the sisters till they squirm away from her arms, till she loses the knack of words.

BUT, stands up one dissenter from the rear of the Legislature seats, BUT, he speaks out from far away his seat at the back too far for any eye to catch the lipswirl of protest, BUT, everyone hears his voice travels far and above the other deciding heads, BUT, an interruption of the Howe/Hubbard presentation on how well deaf children will soon speak as if they're not deaf at all. But. What about math-science-history-literature-geography-classics-music? But. Shouldn't articulation skills be an adornment, rather than the basis of instruction? But. Funny how the spoken voice can be ignored even when the ears function. Funny how the hearing will sometimes turn a deaf ear.

May's tongue already knows how to twist itself around "th"s and "ch"s. There is no biological reason not to continue speaking. But her lips form themselves less confidently around vowels, and her consonants slur and distort. And May's vocabulary stubbornly refuses to expand. To hear her speak, one might guess she'd been born deaf. Gardiner Greene Hubbard refuses his daughter this handicap.

* * * * *

Before taking on the cause of Oralism, Samuel Gridley Howe:

 fights for state reform schools, prison reform

 fights against the immediate abolishment of slavery

 fights for the abolishment of slavery

 supports the Cretin revolt in Greece against the Turks

 carries funds for Polish revolutionaries in Prussia

 returns to Boston, abolished from Prussia, to direct the newly-opened

Perkins Institute for the Blind

* * * * *

If you want your daughter to be normal, Howe tells Hubbard, you must speak to her and she must speak to you.

But May's speech continues to deteriorate. Her parents only allow her to play with her sisters. Her parents only allow her to meet other hearing children. Her parents hire a governess. Her parents slap May's hands when she signs or attempts hand gestures of any kind. May lives in a world she creates out of her childhood.

May's father needs to hear his daughter perform the spoken. Needs, even more, for others to hear this ordinary miracle. A young lady who doesn't talk might be deemed mysterious, desirable, clever even. But a young lady who can't talk might be thought Dumb.

By the time the Perkins Institute is financially established, Howe has already stumbled onto his latest cause: Deaf people are sorely left out of society, he reasons, having never talked to a deaf person. Having never met a deaf person. And children who sign invite the danger of neglecting precious oral skills because of their unnatural dependency on pantomime. Howe, with financial and moral backing from Hubbard, approaches the Legislature with an appeal to bring all deaf children to his school for the blind. The school, he promises the House, will establish classes in speech and lip-reading only.

Miss-True-the-governess practices lip-reading with May all day. In the morning May writes down what Miss True's lips tell her, and in the

afternoon May forces her own lips to pulse out sound. Any sound. All the sound she can remember. May even likes this game, though she doesn't understand it. She remembers that lip-flapping has something to do with the way you can point to a speckled stone in the river, or see your sister's face when she's not in the same room. But May no longer makes any connection between that time of hearing and her governess's face pressed so closely into her own.

The Perkins Institute for the Blind begins advertising for deaf students. But they need to prove this will not be an added expense for the Massachusetts Legislature. Howe sets up a policy to employ "untrained females" to teach articulation. They teach out of love, he tells his board, not because of the salary. Deaf children, he tells his board, only require enough mouths to stare at. One-on-one, every day, every day. One teacher, one student, cheap at the price, he tells his board, cheap at the price.

Although May manages to read certain words, she cannot decipher their meaning. Miss-True-the-governess was a missionary's daughter before the Hubbards hire her to instruct May full-time. She taught bible studies and religious worship to the children of the wealthy. Over and over Miss True points to a word in the bible so May will mouth each letter. May can say the alphabet every time because it's also a song. Miss True ignores how to explain "silent" letters, she lets the child pronounce them anyway, correcting only when May forgets that the gap between words indicates closure and swallows her endings.

The point of learning, for May, has become making the correct mouth shapes in order to please Miss True to please her father. But these tongue exercises have no meaning for her. May's sisters read the same words, nobody stares at their lips, nobody grabs their chins tilts their heads up at a grownup set of flapping lips. Her sisters open their mouths and run at the same time out of the playroom. Her sisters hide from each other, yet always know when to come-out come-out wherever they are. May plays Miss True's lip game very seriously. Somehow through this lip-flapping she will be able to meet her sisters's friends and play games that have more than one verse in them. Somehow, May understands, she should be learning how to hear.

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Two deaf pupils face each other in a classroom in the Perkins Institute for the Blind. They rehearse lip-reading. A girl describes the landscape outside, and her fingers stretch toward the window. A teacher raps her knuckles, and the wounded hand slides back into her lap.

The second pupil, a boy two years older, avoids looking where her finger points. If he lets his eyes slip from her lips he will never catch up, never repeat this description back to the teacher.

Tree, the girl says at him. Tease? Deal? Tea? Rocks? her lips aim for perfection. Walk? Rude? The boy cannot unearth the world inside her mouth. He longs to reach out, grab her words and stuff them into his ears.

The boy has the sick feeling that he will begin to cry. And if he cries, the tears will drown his vision.

The girl promises to her smarting fingers that she will not gesture again. The sign for sun as obvious as releasing the fist in her lap. But she knows the boy will not lower his eyes. Not for even an instant of borrowed sunshine.

The girl watches the boy's lips flap a reply. She smiles. She caught one word. Play. She says it back at him and he repeats it again to her. They go on like this, passing solitary words back and forth till the other has caught it squarely between the lips. One by one, word by word. The teachers can't lip-read, so she doesn't follow this fractured discourse. Not many of the teachers understand the gnarled sounds that pass as speech. When the teacher quizzes this girl this boy after their exercise, both will speak the same words.

* * * * *

May's father believes that association makes the Deaf deafer, the Dumb dumber. May has never met another deaf child. She doesn't know that adults can be deaf, too. Her father tries so hard, and she still hasn't learned how to hear. Sometimes, her sisters run off together without warning and then May is alone. She wanders the huge garden and talks to the daisies. The daisies bow their heads in greeting. May has long involved conversations about how much they've grown today, how much of their skin the bees have stolen, if he loves her. The daisies don't expect May to read their lips. She stares down at them and hears their petals caress air. The pinks so much louder than the yellows. Or purples. May remembers how a certain colour can sing a note or vibrate the scales of a piano. She remembers the sound a bird's wing makes when it hugs sky. Her eyes remind her the noise a snail makes losing its shell. A scream that tears her insides in two.

* * * * *

Grooming, for a young lady in Boston: the basis for education. May's father hires another governess, this time to teach his daughter how to walk up steps or carry an umbrella in sunshine or laugh with her mouth closed. May has never had a dainty laugh. She is forced, these days, to spend every afternoon inside rehearsing strategies of poise. Her steady companion is a matron whose seven daughters have all married prominent businessmen. But all seven daughters have mastered speech and hearing, and May is beginning to understand she never will. Marriage, according to her father, is the only destination possible. And for her, the only goal impossible. Her father struggles against every obstacle for May. For months and months she is trapped in the parlour folding handkerchiefs and removing her gloves one finger at a time. Her eyes go grey with boredom and for the first time in her life, May considers mutiny. There was a time, after her illness, when she could still hear the dependable and deadly sound of her father's voice. By that reverberation of sound is now only memory.

Sixteen, and May stops believing in voice. Hers. Ugly and unpleasant. I'm not going to talk anymore, she announces to her father. Gardiner Hubbard takes out his pipe and makes her repeat the sentence. Say it clearly, May, he says. Inflection, that's the key. If I need to, May persists, I will use a pencil and paper. Impress young men with my exquisite handwriting. The word exquisite pleases her father. Say it again, May, put more muscle into the X. My voice, father, will only make my chance at marriage worse.

Getting married – now that she has figured out she will never hear again, now that she listens to the story of her voice as fiction – is the only gift May has to offer her father.

When Hubbard suggests a new speech therapist, an articulation specialist willing to take on private pupils, May refuses. No. I'm done with this talking business, she writes, I want the world back. She hands him the paper, keeps her lips firmly together. No more tiny rooms and staring at bad teeth and lip sores. No more hours spent on the letter Q. Her father hands back the paper and pencil. I can hear perfectly well without sound, May writes. Mr. Hubbard refuses to read the sentence.

May, unable to bear her father's silence, her father's refusal to accept her refusal, agrees to this teacher, agrees to Alexander Graham Bell. He's the last one, she says, the last one I'll ape speech for.

ELEVEN

Because wood, so too metal

* * * * *

Musicians rely on an instrument's memory.

A cello played only by one master, so well and for so long, will bend into a groove of expectation. The wood itself is moulded by the perfect concerto. Again and again, the same notes, the same lyrical pattern, so that even an amateur will discover sweet half-notes inside such impressionable instruments. The wood remembers, inspires perfection.

Aleck has listened to piano wires that hum sympathetic accompaniment to perfectly pitched voice. For months he has pursued the prospect of the multiple telegraph. He has set up contradicting experiments a hundred times, and inside each individual failure has discovered easily one hundred more to follow. The path to the telegraph, though it forks away from the idea of the straight line, is clearly there. Aleck needs to discover the method of discovery.

But the telegraph no longer interests him. The telegraph has become a proposition old men believe. Gardiner Greene Hubbard, who sponsors Aleck, invested in this likely invention. He believes in the multiple telegraph because Aleck has insisted on its workings. Unaware that Aleck has been seduced by voice; by the possibility that these wires might remember what has been spoken into them.

Metal may be pliable as wood. A mechanical instrument is still an instrument.

Aleck leans down over his dismantled telegraph contraption, sings into its wires. He will perform this miracle every day, imprinting the metal with the rhythm of his song. Aleck hopes the wires will listen to his voice. He wants them to memorize sound.

* * * * *

Aleck breaks away from his singing when he can no longer hear the exact pitch of his voice. When the sound that issues from his mouth is so distorted to his ears that he fears he may warp the wires. He thrusts his hat on his head and grabs his walking stick. The walking stick is for the appearance of greater years and a studious air. On his way down the stairs he bumps into and past Watson, a man deaf to the intricacies of musical notes and timbres, a man who has arrived because he desires to work in the visionary field of electronics. Aleck brushes past this stranger, a watcher whose weekly pay packet should guarantee an interest in multiple message clicks across telegraph wire. Aleck brushes by though this stranger's path could only be a direct line towards the apartment Aleck just quit. Aleck needs simple air against his ears and the regular sounds of horses clomping through the streets. The odd banging, the swish of clothing against the boardwalk. He needs to remember what the world sounds like before he traps it inside a piece of machinery.

Watson, though, recognizes this young man who ignores him. Watson proceeds to the top step to await Aleck's return. Hubbard instructed Watson that Aleck specifically requested services. Watson doesn't yet understand the layers of betrayal these two will ask him to perform. The multiple versions of truth he will learn to speak at the same time.

By the time Aleck returns to his apartment, Watson will have picked the lock and swung the door wide open. Inside its frame, Aleck discovers Watson asleep. He wants Aleck to recognize him as the perfect assistant: capable of the mechanical skill to further his own entrance into the inventor's world.

Aleck stands there. Weary from his experiments, vocal chords aching, he does not know what to do with this new person insinuated into his life. There is his mother, and there is Mabel. Outside that circle there is his father, and there is Gardiner Greene Hubbard. This stranger, who trusts himself to fall asleep inside another man's home, doesn't fit Aleck's concentric pattern.

At least he's silent, Aleck thinks.

Watson is up and dusting the sleep out of his eyes and Aleck sits silently in the kitchen waiting for water to boil so he can make tea. He has closed the door to his work room, there is no need for him to hold back words, but he hasn't yet decided what to say to Watson, whether to accept Hubbard's deviation from their signed agreement. He cannot afford to become more grateful to the man. But he cannot afford to turn away eager assistants either.

Watson leans against the door frame. He prefers to position himself between rooms rather than inside them, a form of spatial fence-sitting. He abstains from talking. He has offered himself to this young inventor once, then has the patience to swallow extra words. Aleck needs him, Watson assumed this from the first moment he opened his eyes to witness a man who didn't know whether to step over or on him. A man caught in his own hesitant desire.

What Aleck wants or how he expects to achieve this want is beyond Watson. Still, Watson believes he can help. He suspends himself in the doorway, wordless and solemn, until Aleck begins to believe too.

* * * * *

Aleck doesn't trust Watson. They work separately, Watson in one room with the now defunct telegraph apparatus and Aleck enclosed in his bedroom, serenading his metal strips. Every day Watson materializes whenever Aleck chooses to open the door. He never knocks. Aleck cannot catch him in the act of arrival. Watson is either there or not-there.

Aleck grabs the door, hurtles it open. Nobody. Or else his new assistant, propped there against the door frame in a pose of quiet resignation. Even if Aleck props the door open to trap Watson's footsteps, he is defeated in capturing even an echo. His ears strain against his own even breathing, and then there will be Watson, looming above Aleck's worktable, waiting for the gesture that will invite him inside.

Aleck doesn't yet know Watson's first name.

The two begin a work schedule compromise. Watson appears later in the afternoon, sets up equipment while Aleck completes his last day's lesson. Watson unrolls hand diagrams to the tune of "ah" "ah" "ah" or checks his module frequency to the "ph" "ph" "ph" of expired air. When the last deaf student is gone, the two attack the work bench in a synchronized progress of chaos. They understand the principal of multiple clicks on the telegraph wire. They believe the system can be collapsed into one continuous strand of clicks. But their methods divorce each other. Aleck stares down the metal, clicking his tongue in disapproval at every mathematical deviation. Watson wanders the room. His feet cover the wooden cracks and knots Aleck's rug is

too poor to conceal. He clamps his lips together and his eyes blink when he stares at the pictures Aleck has saved from Scotland. His eyes trace the route of the telegraph wires along the cracks in the wall.

Vision, Watson says to Aleck, can also sustain sound.

* * * * *

Aleck's rooms are decorated sparsely. Watson introduces bits of himself to the apartment. Unobtrusively. Aleck cannot say when the first hint of green intruded into the dusty attic. Watson must have washed the windows, Aleck never saw the spiderwebs before. Bits of coloured ribbons hang from the window sills.

The attic's corners are littered with what Aleck assumes is rubble, but Watson explains the rocks are specimens he has collected: Malachite. Jasper. Cat's eye. Dull earth tones that litter the floors. Iceland spar. Willemite calcite, from Québec. Tinstone. Aleck swears he will break his neck stepping over these overgrown pebbles.

Watson's planted herbs and spices sprout wherever the sun can reach. Each has a tiny white stick inserted into the earth with a name printed up one side. Basil and cloves and mace and caraway. Each still a minuscule growth on Aleck's window ledge. One ginger stalk, red and bewitching. The gathering foreign scents, carried inside on the Boston air, assault Aleck's logic. He tastes dried peppermint leaf crumpled onto his tongue.

* * * * *

The three of them in the same room. Aleck, Watson, Mabel. Today, Watson appeared before Aleck's last session with his newest student had reached its completion. Or Mabel arrived early for a lesson while Aleck and Watson were still bent over the latest gadget. Aleck has taken to changing his work hours wildly because his regular teaching lectures and the idiosyncrasies of his various students and their wealthy parents do not invite a healthy work day. Aleck expects this to entangle or annoy Watson. He expects Watson to lobby for the right for more respectable hours. Instead of this constant rotation: 7:00 am. 11:30 pm. 2:00 pm. 3:30 am. But Watson fits into Aleck's time slots the way he fits herbs and spices onto the attic's crowded floors. Now: Watson and Mabel, two unknown integers.

There. Watson has made Mabel laugh. Her laugh shrill, she loses a lot of air. Aleck hears that her nasal passages are too open, she must learn to breathe less when she finds some prank funny. Watson points to his thumb and pinkie finger, then to his nose. Mabel laughs again and Aleck hears her vocal cords straining to close. Next lesson they will work only on her laugh. He will draw a diagram in Visible Speech for her, of what that sound looks like, help her remember how to imitate her own laughter. Imitation. Adaptation.

Learn to hear what you sound like, he tells his pupils, then learn to change that sound. He teaches them the Hearing World's camouflage.

* * * * *

Mabel bends over Watson's shoulders and traces his lips. Her finger travels across his cheek, his neck, down his shoulder and arm. He has rolled his shirt sleeves past his elbows. Mabel stops where shirt meets skin. His arm remains perfectly still, expressing an invitation. She stares down at his forearms, reaches to stroke the hairs, finds a thick vein, follows it. Then traces another back to his elbow again. She looks up at his face, expecting to see lips flapping at her, instruction she will not be able to follow. But Watson has closed his eyes, and his lips signal nothing. She stares at his closed lids a long time before she removes her hand from his. Then she steps away from the work bench and goes to sit beside her teacher.

What would you like me to say? she asks Aleck, and her lips ache each vowel. But Aleck is too aware of Watson's arm on the table, Watson's eyes closed against this scene. Aleck senses Watson not looking. He offers the crook of his arm and leads Mabel Hubbard to a chair directly opposite his own. Aleck has interrupted a conversation.

* * * * *

Watson is not around the next time Mabel shows up for her lesson.

Aleck runs through the drills of Visible Speech, teaches her three new variables and draws small ticks beside each letter to indicate the exceptions. Mabel doesn't understand the exceptions. They squirm out from underneath her tongue, she can't sense the word anymore. She has no patience for the ridiculous. And the precision of these exercises displays no beauty. But she has promised her father, and so she works diligently, making words out of air and the shape of her jaw. The other one isn't here this time. She has never been so bold as to stroke a man's skin before. To stroke anyone's skin before. And now that she's touched him, he's disappeared. If she asked Professor Bell, would he tell her if the man will return? No, her new instructor will only tolerate articulation questions. What would be the point in Mabel proposing a question merely for the sake of its answer? She sighs. Aleck hears the boredom.

Aleck stashes the Visible Speech charts under his chair, invents a game for Mabel. He feels like a magician, waves a ruler over his head and Mabel has to say whatever he points to. She is sluggish to begin with, then picks up when she realizes that he isn't stopping for mispronunciations. Aleck's interest is in the momentum Mabel achieves when she forgets that she can't hear.

la-amp, Mabel says. kRa-kR. Her words slur around his apartment, stop wherever his wooden pointer does. stul. ke-tl. pi-chur, fra-am. ti-im.

No. Aleck says, clock. Two "Kh" sounds. The second one half-swallowed.
Say it, Mabel. clock.

Time.

No. Clock, he says. Again.

Time.

Thyme: beside the clock, Watson's tiny plant. Not even an inch high. But
Mabel knows its name.

TWELVE

The Thought Books of A. Graham Bell

November 2nd, 1872. Boston

Watson has proven himself a godsend, yet I don't trust the man. He is a good worker, but eternally tired. I have caught him napping several times this past week, asleep with his arms wrapped around his head. Oblivious. There's work to be done, I say loudly enough into his ear, but sometimes even that won't rouse him. He sleeps in his chair, and on my work table, and once he fell asleep in the middle of fixing a leaky pipe. I strode into the kitchen in search of black tea and there his legs were sticking out of my cupboard. I believed, for a moment, that he was a dead body. He has yet to offer me an explanation or apology, and I suspect I will continue waiting till my breath evacuates from my body. The man has no sense of decorum.

November 13th, 1872. Boston

Rather than taking the train back to Salem every night, Watson has been sleeping on my floors. He is young and his head brims with ideas that help my own, but I cannot bear living with a man so mannerless. He shovels food down his throat without stopping his conversation. He rolls his sleeves up and turns his chairs wrong side around in order to dine. He holds his knife in a fist and stabs at his food then pokes it in his mouth. He eats as if he has never seen a fork. I am disgusted every meal. What can I do?

Yesterday I burst out: Were you born in a barn? and without pause or hesitation he replied: Yes, my father ran the stables.

What can I make of that? I, too, increased the speed of my food intake and soon enough we were back in the attic speaking to each other through metal and wires.

November 28th, 1872. Boston

I can't fathom Hubbard's motives. He sponsors my scientific endeavors financially, sends his daughter to me assuming I can perform a miracle of speech with her, yet directs and manipulates my experiments of which he understands nothing. Money, of course, but there is much more money to be had in creating a machine that can talk, than in merely encouraging simultaneous telegraphs. Hubbard pushes so hard for the telegraph invention, and it is after all his funding that pays for the equipment and for the attic suite and for Watson, but I cannot bear to be the first person to develop a contraption, only to watch it disappear within days.

Invention is about voice and where I can send it. Hubbard, a businessman, doesn't understand this seduction's about changing the future. Being original doesn't count for much, Hubbard should know that. What counts is the forward leap. The hesitation between connections.

The multiple telegraph is obsolete already, yet Hubbard insists I spend hours a day searching for ways to invent the thing. Fool.

I want to trap the human throat inside a box.

I want to speak to Watson without tolerating his body in my room.

I want Mabel Hubbard to implant my device inside her ear.

The future, I have discovered, is no longer what it used to be.

December 23rd, 1872. Boston

The best kiss I ever had I can't remember.

Marie and I walking – no hiking – I felt so sorry for her limp, for her inability to climb rocks or scale mountains.

Marie always preferred to scale mountains.

I followed her footsteps on the steep path then increased my gait so I could accompany her bad leg. An injury, or birth defect, she never said. And I wanted so wickedly to help, to offer a bent elbow, to wrap an arm around her waist. To lift.

Really, I wanted to touch her, her lameness the excuse I invented. But Marie refuses to understand that she's lame. She hobbled and scrambled over that difficult path more eager than I. She turned, and I froze my arm against my chest in order not to reach for hers. I wanted to touch her. My fingers consumed with desire to stretch out against skin. My body, caught between its own longing and her resistance, unable to follow either path.

She kissed me then. While my hand hesitated solo above her unafraid arm, she kissed me open-mouthed and full against greedy surprise.

I kissed her back, of course, her tongue sensational and confident beneath my own. I pulled her inside my lips and tried to trap her breath there beneath my

tongue. I can't remember, but the dynamite persuasion of her mouth gasping against mine resonates inside my body.

An explosion.

My body reminds me it was too convenient, Marie's kiss, and too much hoped for. A kiss I will memorize all my life though I own no details. The best kiss I ever. The best I ever.

January 3rd, 1873. Boston

Mabel's mouth smells of apples and birch trees. A New England mouth twists around -K-s and -T-s and breathes out even and confident. Mabel claims she can read my lips but I don't believe her. I mouth: I-love-you-I-love-you-I-love-. She can't hear. She turns away from my flapping lips and cradles the caraway seeds on the windowsill. Look, she says into the glass, the shells are invisible.

I used to breathe words against my mother's forehead. My mother couldn't decipher a single sound except me pressing my lips against her receptive temple. My mother, who has never heard my father speak her name, has heard her one remaining son sing churchly hymns, expound on the Great Beyond. Although no lover of religion, I plucked sermons and diatribes from the air above my mother, pushed them into her head. Her skull remembers what she can no longer hear. My mother stares at the minister every Sunday – every Sunday for forty-one years with only one change of country in between – but can't fathom where his lips go. She misses the singing, my mother says, she misses the long hollow words retreating into exile.

Mabel claims she has no need of hearing. She turns from the clear glass, lowers her eyes from mine, stares at the motion of my lips.

I lean my shoulders forward. -love-you-I-love-you-I-love-you-I- my lips rehearse, silently, so Watson in the next room can't hear. Mabel can't hear, my own ears can't hear. The final -I- catches in my throat and I choke on the game Mabel and I play.

She claims she can read lips, but I know better.

January 31st, 1875. Boston

I can't stand this infernal heat. How is it possible to be suffering from sweat and damp humidity in the middle of winter? Even Ontario makes more sense than this country.

Watson and I enter the attic, strip down to our trousers and bare skin, and immediately begin to overheat. We keep the windows closed so the air doesn't disturb the passage of sound through wires. It gets so bad, we go down to the kitchen just to breathe to the bottom of our lungs. Watson finds it impossible to stay awake for large spaces of time when working in the attic. I usually send him down to make the tea, otherwise when I return with a boiling pot of chamomile or Earl Grey I'll find him slumped over the connectors, drowsing into an amplifier. It's too hot to drink the stuff, but I send Watson anyway. He slumbers against the counter until the kettle's whine wakes him, then comes back up refreshed.

The logistics of this thing wind round and round my head. I can't grab hold of the angles. Hubbard wants his telegraph. Father wants me to continue with his Visible Speech system. I've yet to hear of Father using his method to teach his own wife.

Mabel claims lip-reading to be possible. To Mabel, anything is possible, why doesn't Mother think that way? Mabel stares at my lips, which frees me to stare at her. Mabel is tough, for someone so young. Her parents never let her grow up a deaf girl so she isn't. She is a hearing person gone deaf. She is the

shining example I show off to my other deaf pupil's parents. Look, I tell them, if this girl can learn to speak, so can your daughters, so will your sons.

And they believe me.

Those with money entrust their children to me, but I don't have the time anymore. I feel like a circus entertainer whose juggling balls rest on the ground. What happened to my delicate balance?

Mabel arrives early for her lesson and flirts with Watson until I send him away. They are both children, still.

THIRTEEN**Husha-husha**

* * * * *

Recite one of your old nursery rhymes, Aleck lips at Mabel. Perhaps her memory of fairy tales will trigger in this girl the urge to speak normally again. She is his most promising student, and his most difficult. The years and years her parents have invested in her articulation have turned her against the beauty of sound.

Children, Aleck knows, need encouragement.

Sing to me, he says to her again, and opens his own mouth wide as if in accompaniment. She believes he is singing with her. Astounded, Aleck hears Mabel repeat flawlessly the lilt and cadence of a forgotten song. Her voice, harsh and untrained and forgotten, startles him in its accuracy. She can no longer pronounce the rhymes, but the idea of the melody still resides in her memory.

Mabel, had she not gone deaf with scarlet fever, would have a perfect ear for music. The beat of childhood tunes perpetuate beneath her skull. Another, he says to her when the song ends. One more, one more, each time she closes her lips.

Mabel has never met anyone who likes the noise her throat makes when.

Aleck's fingers twitch against the sides of his legs as if he must restrain himself from reaching out and plucking her voice out of air. Mabel opens her lips and sings another. And another. She stares at Aleck's hands and makes stories out of the thick workman fingers and the chipped and gritty

nails. From his hands, she knows he is more than a teacher or statesman. She hasn't figured out what yet.

Mabel's voice wavers along the walls and ceilings, her eyes on Aleck's undulating fingers. This is their first lesson together where he hasn't worn gloves.

Mabel tells Aleck that except for her immediate family she talks to no one. She writes this down so that he will understand her exactly. Aleck wonders if she writes notes to the grocer's and the delivery boys. How old are delivery boys, he wonders.

Perhaps Mabel has met Watson before. Perhaps in hiring Watson, her father employed an acquaintance of the family, a man Mabel must surely have previously conversed with? Mabel's index finger traces Watson's forearm. She removes her white gloves one finger at a time and reaches her hand to the sleeping Watson. A man consumed by the urge to close his eyes in front of strangers.

Child's play, Aleck thinks, observing the two of them. Watson and Mabel only beginning adulthood. Both remember games and toys too well. Both are on the other side of twenty from Aleck. Watson thinks the task of invention jolly good fun, Mabel deigns to receive the benefits of speech for the sake of her father. Two children, Aleck thinks.

Mabel has invented the art of reading lips. And Watson, layers upon layers of improved defunct telephones.

* * * * *

For the duration of the invention of the telephone, Watson fits his life into Aleck's. Watson is his, and his alone. Watson works with Aleck before he goes to the shop, after he goes to the shop, in the middle of the night he arrives from Salem and works till morning. Watson sleeps on the train, he sleeps on the trams to and from Aleck's home, he sleeps on the desk when a space of five minutes opens up and Aleck is late with a deaf student. His day is divided into snatches of naps, sections of dreams which never reach their end. He wakes from a twenty-minute snooze, his hands already wrapped around the base of a telegraph wire. His body, pushed and strained, prepares to steal seconds of night.

Asleep or awake, Watson is the same person.

Aleck walks into the apartment, stares at his young assistant's lanky legs, sprawled between two rooms, oblivious to the approaching day.

On his one day off a month, Watson doesn't ride home to Salem, doesn't retreat to his bunk to sleep the sleep of 29 days of never enough. No. On his only free day, on this one day in 30 that he can designate his own, Watson takes the train out of Boston. He stands in a meadow of daisies, the white heads, the yellow hearts up to his knees. He breathes in their smoky pollen and coughs. Then he walks to the farmer's pond, there is always a farmer's pond, rounds the marshy land until he discovers some old rotting boards jutting out into the middle of this murky water. Watson strides down the

length of this dilapidated dock. When he reaches the end, he steps over. Breathes.

Watson breathes thick water into his body, and his lungs protest. They sputter and contract, begin to sink inside his chest cavity. He feels his arms go numb. Watson flings his shoulders out of the water, and heaves his body onto the barely floating wooden dock. Gasps and gasps and gasps.

Sometimes, a man needs to half-drown in order to find out he's alive at all. Watson is very much alive.

When they first met, Aleck told Watson his name was Graham Bell, and that's what Watson called him for weeks. Watson now wishes he'd offered his own middle name – Augustus – as fair exchange. Watson hadn't understood Aleck's obsession with titles. Aleck has a sickening nickname for Mabel that Watson can't bear to repeat. Luckily, he thinks, Mabel can't hear the sugar tones reverberate inside the cracks of the inventor's lips. She reads Joan of Arc there, or she shuts her eyes to again hide the label.

On his way back to Boston, when the train passes over Lynn marshes, Watson focuses his attention outside the car window. He should shut his eyes. He should lean back and rest his head against the window and invest what few moments he has left of his free day in healing his exhausted body. But Watson is a young man, practically still a boy. The risk of the day still tastes fresh in his lungs.

The sun rides low on the horizon, and Watson stares at the liquid shimmer of the field. The train's shadow bends and darts about the creases in the landscape and Watson attempts to pinpoint his specific location inside its trace. He focuses on a faint elongated glow, a little brighter than the sunlight on the grass, that marks the place where he's seated. He changes seats and the wavering halo follows him. He walks the length of the car till he stands at the train's end platform. The glow is there, too. Watson is astounded. Is this a flag of today's foolhardiness, or some divine communication? The halo surely streams from his head! He returns to his seat to see whether any of the other passengers have a glow attached to their shadows. There is only one halo, and it remains attached to Watson.

* * * * *

The attic has become the world. A country, at the very least. Aleck and Watson set up the cities of North America in the loops and crannies of their low-ceilinged existence. They spend their days transmitting messages to hypothetical cities. Watson phones Aleck from Boston to New York, Aleck replies from San Francisco to Los Angeles. They dash from one location to another making as many calls as they can. The trick is to display the machine's worst problems now. Both shout or yell or sing into the mikes. The cities at the other end of the songs receive only half a voice. When Aleck sends a message to Portland, a portion of his sentence gets relayed to Detroit. Watson's out-of-tune songs scatter themselves from Miami to Houston to Winnipeg to Seattle. These divisions are a faulty telegraph apparatus which cannot accommodate the new idea of sound beyond clicks. Their voices splay across this constructed country, they drip their mouths into funnelled tubes, they dive their ears towards the opposite ends. These frenzied scrambles are their best mistakes.

The two of them perform the victory dance: Aleck's traditional throb of celebration. Hooting and hollering, they crash about the attic, their arms waving above their heads, the chairs around them plummeting. They don't hear their landlady pound on her ceiling, they think the *bang bang bang* is the other's feet on the wooden floor. They don't hear Mabel arrive for her lesson. Aleck thumps Watson across his shoulders. Watson coughs the names of cities into the air: Grand Forks, St. Louis, New Orleans, Miami. They point at each other in glee. They hop over wire runners that criss-cross the attic floor. They toss quartz and gypsum stones back and forth between them. They stuff

their mouths full of fingers and make a popping noise. Mabel can't hear a thing, she sees two crazy men.

Aleck and Watson exhausted, pleased, dripping with perspiration. We reached L.A. today they tell her. They point at the map which is the room, that obscenely expands the cities, dwindles the rest of the country. Mabel walks from city to city in two steps or less, laughs every time she crosses a state border.

Tag, she shouts when she touches the table that represents New York. Tag, she says to Washington. The final "g" slurs into the back of her throat, her toes nudge wires to mask as perimetres. Not it, she declares to the two men and Watson slides his hand down Aleck's sweaty throat. You're it. Aleck joins in, lunges for Mabel.

They play all the rest of the afternoon. Two inventors: chasing Mabel.

FOURTEEN**Platypus love**

yesterday:

They began it in the attic. the two men stroking words as if they were parts of a body.

Not my body.

Which had flung itself into a chair at the opposite end of Alec's work table. I was waiting for my lesson. For my speech therapy. I couldn't touch their fingers or their words. I couldn't decipher a single sentence. The table sliced the room. The attic brimmed with electronic gadgets, wood shavings, and other masculine games. They began it with a verbal agreement that left me out, but also entangled me. The two men held up a model of love across the room and I reached out for it. I missed. They promised love from more than one side, more than one angle. They promised each other.

Two men: voicing a religion of the triangle.

The story they told used a phonetics of contact I couldn't refuse. I can't refuse. But they left me out. Told stories as if I were already a character living inside their foregone conclusion.

I turned away. Blanked out the expectations, the geometric possibilities, of three. I walked downstairs, announcing my decision to wait in Alec's kitchen. Surely a disciplined and eager student was as important as the toys

they tinkered with up there in that bachelor's attic? I turned away an offer they voiced against my mute ears.

I met a boy in Boston Public Gardens. The day after those two men in the attic offered up their triangular affections. Mother didn't see me slip down to the musky stagnant pond. I sat on wet grass and threw crumbs to the grubby swans our city imports every spring. She assumes I don't speak to anybody new.

I don't speak to anybody new.

But this boy sat next to me and began a couple dialogue. Investing in the power of two. Oh, arithmetic so much simpler than geometry! He had unusual hands, that boy in the park, twisted and gnarled like an old woman's. He let me stroke them alive. I rubbed the creases between his fingers, charmed his still-emerging calluses. Tingle, he said, you make them tingle, and he opened his hands slowly, stretching each finger away from the others. His word brushed against my lips. My eyes inhaled it. And when he smiled, my whole body lifted, and I saw the fresh impression in the grass of where I was sitting.

He was an equation I believed in.

But a circle is so easy to disrupt. Triangles don't collapse from pressure. And the pull of the unspoken is strong temptation. Those two men, whose words I couldn't grab, spoke to me. I can't hear promises or lies. But I read lips across even darkened attic rooms. Those two men, boys really, inserted their

hands inside my own, closed their fingers against my palms. Tight. Their lips, loose and flapping, articulated possible versions of a trinity.

Whereas the hand I massaged belonged to only one person.

Mother called and called for me, of course I heard nothing. My sisters sat far away on another hill and couldn't report her words. She headed home exasperated, knowing I'd soon grow tired of having no one to talk to. I have no one to talk to. But I anticipate a dusty cluttered attic, filled with the doubled image of two bodies, longing. I clasped my palms together, trapped the boy's one between my own two. And there it was: an ending that set the tone for this beginning.

That first day, as soon as he noticed I'd deserted his precious attic, Alec came downstairs, asked me to speak for him. Whatever I wanted. Say whatever words you feel most comfortable pronouncing, he instructed. I knew a boy, once, I told him, and stopped there. I left the gate swinging on my way out. The slam of its metal against wood finishing my sentence.

I met a boy whose name was Odysseus. He lived inside the pages of a book but wanted more. I wanted no less. We sat on the lip of his boat for days. Dragged our toes in the slippery green of ocean. We planned feasts of goat's cheese and papayas and fried octopus that we'd consume when we hit shore. Elixirs we'd drink through crazy straws that bent and twisted from the fluid into our mouths. I sang to the dolphins and heard them sing back.

Odysseus, though, had a tendency to bind his arms to solid bits of boat whenever he suspected a singing voice of seditious motives. He taught me about the Sirens and how they drown men in their liquid throats. How they use his name as bait to tempt him out of his skin: Odysseus-Odysseus-Odysseus.

This boy was on a quest to hear his own name sung yet not die in its execution. He lashed his body to wood rather than stuff his ears with silence. The other sailors drowned their bodies willingly inside a language they could only see. Odysseus clawed his own flesh in an effort to consume the treacherous reverberations of female seduction. Then blamed his bleeding wounds on mythical beings who were all voice and no body.

Creatures of desire.

Fault-lines of pure sensation.

The other sailors ignored his desperation. Bored by his antics, they stuffed cotton inside their heads, read each other's signs and signals so efficiently they forgot him. Odysseus screamed on but none heard. He'd wanted to be converted bit by bit, not devoured whole. He'd been trained by the gods to expect devotion. If not from the ship's sailors then from fish he'd schemed into women. I left him strapped to the ship's mast, fingernails gouging his ribcage, praying the voices would freeze.

There are two ways to build a triangle: the mathematical or the mythological. Math requires too much faith for me to follow; numbers are such difficult

magic for me. Mother says too much reading rots your brain, but that's because she was fed on poetry that's always a trick or puzzle. Miss-True-the-governess buys me thick books, the heavier the better, and I sink inside their weight till my brain is mush. Perhaps Mother does know best, but if I can't hear there's no other way to rehearse this language, and she does so want me to learn the King's English.

Most numbers I know are imaginary, and the friends I've met live under rocks or beneath lakes or inside someone else's body. Myth is so much more reliable than science. Though both come packaged inside the covers of books. I hold hands with Thomas and Alec at the same time, though they will expect me to choose eventually.

Eventually is a country I've never been to.

The country I live in is called the bedroom of Boston proper. A city of devoted priests, devoted congregations, but no devoted citizens. Boston is made up of parks and slums, Mother says. Boston is made up of rebels and reformers, Father says. Of lovers and the overly cautious, I say.

My lips belong to Alec who stares at them more than my breasts or ankles or wrists. Thomas can have the rest. He demands nothing short of excess. Thomas rubs the tiny triangle of skin just above my earlobe till my kneecaps quiver. He grazes my neck with the tip of his tongue. He strokes my skin so lightly I feel a ripple all the way up my scalp.

Thomas is all cartilage and raised muscle and hair follicles. I creep up behind him while he sleeps and his body wakes to mine. Before he hears a step. He closes his eyes again, an invitation to stroke his eyelids, to catch his lashes inside the grooves of my index finger.

Alec leaves the room when Thomas and I play games with our bodies. This isn't dignified, he tells me, but I reject dignified the way Thomas rejects the supremacy of fork tines and gaps over the simple basin of a spoon.

I stand at one point of the triangle, watch the other two. A version of the double. Alec says I live in the centre. But this projects a linearity none of us believes in. There is only the bent and sweaty contortion of our original line, flexed equally between three points. I think Alec distrusts equality. With me in the middle he can write the story of Thomas as beginning and himself as ending. He doesn't see there is no middle. Only a huge space, made precious by our joint enclosure.

Thomas says when we die we slip into another body. Those who feel awkward or uncomfortable inside their own skin haven't learned to live with the others. I am becoming a specialist of the other. Alec declares this preposterous. He attends lectures by men preaching the medicine of knives inserted below ribs. The science that ties a deaf girl's hands together with her mother's scarf. Alec's father spent a lifetime transcribing sounds that grow out of our lungs, out of our mouths, but Alec believes words commence at the tip of the nose. He thinks thoughts reside in the brain. The body functions only as a useful column for the head. And nobody lives in Alec's body but Alec.

Thomas believes we're either saints or angels.

Only those arriving by water approach Boston with any decency. The city is too trapped in its operations of renewal to recognize the debris collecting in North End Square, in South End, to the west of the Neck. Our city fathers drained the marshes, then left the oyster shells, gravel, and common street garbage to rot in the sun. Beacon Hill used to be a true hill until they took off its top to stuff full Mill Pond. Levelled its two sisters to fill the waters northside of Causeway Street. Demolished Father's house in the process. At 28 cents a shovelful, men demolished the land's curves, inverted the earth's valleys.

The geologist's sense of time is more spatial than the historian's.

Turn down Cow Lane and get lost in a maze of alleys and burnt-down shacks from before the great fire. Cross Mystic River Bridge and the city recedes in fog. Wander past the awkward Bunker Hill obelisk until Winter Street turns into Summer. The distance between Boston and the rest of America is filled with cultural mistrust. Boston is an island located under water. We rarely swim to the surface to breathe. Instead, we trap air bubbles escaping from doomed explorers's nostrils. We have a passion for righteousness. I grew into that passion, though I never heard a preached sermon.

I love the word femur. On my tongue. This is why I lick your leg, and why I lick your leg. I want to taste the murmur within bone. In love with your

body wrapped around the hum of this word. Flesh I embody with my tongue.
And with my tongue.

One of you privileges the mind. One privileges the body. Why name you? I am the eager lover of both, that much I know. You worship the body, already a saint. And you, a secular angel, beatific with longing, with your prescribed soul.

You leave me out. Already. There are two of you, one of me. Convention suggests the *menage à trois* is in my favour, but I know better. Two penises are better than one, you tell me, but you tell me so many lies I can't say which I desire to believe most. Every time I reach my palm towards one forehead, I should also stretch to the other. Otherwise, you tell me, our machine won't function. But I don't think so. We've made this love story up in so many directions nothing can break it.

But one of us could disappear, and the other two could still continue. Would continue. We've made this triangle so tight so tight even the loss of one angle wouldn't subtract its energy.

So. We may each be seduced by invisibility, but my desire is ubiquitous, look:

I aim both hands towards your temples.

There are many rules I'll break, but intimacy isn't one. People use sound as a barrier against connection. You say a person's name and then you don't have to touch or be touched, though we long for both. That's why they want me to

Speak so badly. Each thinks if he can get me to pronounce his name he's safe from my probing fingers that digest breath.

I met a boy who rolled marbles under his tongue. Two, three, six, he'd plop between his lips, suck back inside his cheeks. Jawbreakers that refused to melt, slippery against his teeth. Smooth against the inside ridges of his mouth.

The laws of gravity throw objects to the ground before we notice they've abandoned our fingers. Words have a density hearing people don't recognize. I see them spill from Alec's lips and gather in a puddle at his feet. Thomas is hearing, but he's also Deaf. We rub our arms together in conversations that endure for hours. Skin against skin, our hands rhyme each other's thoughts.

Alec is either a hero or a thief. The legacy of the hero is a people stronger than their best weakness. The legacy of the thief innumerable claimed losses, the excuse for a lack of precious possessions. Alec will steal the voice of an entire community: a language spoken with arms outstretched to embody meaning. Even a hand reaching frightens Alec with its implication of grammar and syntax. He will steal the manifestation of communication. Only a great thief could perform such a prank. Only a great hero.

I met a boy who sucked lollipops till his lips rainbowed. His throat a tunnel breathing sugar. When I kissed him my mouth borrowed the taste of red, blue, mango. I dreamed ice cream out of his lips. He could explode ice cubes with the simple execution of a smile.

My own eyes lick the air dry. I breathe: in-out, in-out, shallow pockets of oxygen pushed through where my tears begin. Alec and Thomas play that the world is a toy. They hide countries in the attic and shout messages from one city to another. I never hear what they're saying, but am a witness to the laughter when a word connects with eardrum. Thomas has designed a digital counting system which he demonstrates to me across the room. Alec doesn't see; he shouts out his successes and failures, even when his back is turned away from me. Yet never questions how I manage to gather the score. Between the three of us rest layers of loyalties, secured in so many directions not one of us would guess where to begin unravelling. Thomas halts his rampage to hold up three fingers, one bent at the knuckle. I don't want to be content. I don't want to be so happy I can't remember straining to make my brain hear.

Alec bought me a diary for my birthday. He gifts me with pages blank of words.

The body is only as reliable as we expect. My father believes that I emerged – fully formed, perfect even down to the delicacy of my eardrums – out of his forehead. Birth through the vagina for other children.

How does he explain away my loss of hearing? Other senses accompany me along this lucky life, and besides, it's mothers who are responsible for fevers and prolonged delirium. Father says if he'd been there I never would have caught the Scarlet Fever that stopped my ears. Father delivered a daughter out of his eye. No wonder I've got perfect vision. No wonder I'm not

frightened by malaria or spring fever. But Father never lets himself sneeze in case his body releases an afterbirth.

What I can't hear, I write in my diary. Making nothing into words, making sound visible. I write down "birds" and right away the "b" curls into the shape of a flying animal whose bones are hollow. Alive on the page. Mother says she wakes up mornings on account of singing birds. I don't believe her. I remember singing. Lyrics. In church or on the front porch before bedtime. *Mama singing in my ear cuz that's where words go.*

Where words used to go.

Now they just disappear. Until I catch them in my hands and make them stay put on the page. I read faster than Thomas. We sit on the attic roof, Alec looking for both of us, and we read. Same book, same page. We turn each leaf together till I get impatient and rush past. Then I hold the page half-way between its flip, and lean into what happens next. Even holding paper between where Thomas is and where I've come to, I get lost. When I'm inside a book, I hear again.

Words in a book remain in a straight line till my eyes dismiss them.

It must have been a deaf person who invented writing. The need to see sound. Who else would understand how a person loses herself inside the looks of a word? Inside its vision?

Thomas chuckles and I look over the pages dividing us to see where he is in the book. His finger gestures to the word "diaphragm and it hooks me two pages backwards. To the boy singing opera at midnight. Then I remember what hasn't happened yet, and I'm off again, the pages gathering between us, and Thomas will never catch up, he'll never catch me.

The attic roof is all slopes and angles. Thomas shows me the opening in the ceiling. Every time we climb up Thomas says we have to reinvent gravity again. Every time we climb up, he says, we create a need for ledges, a need for the temptation to fall. Thomas says he's been falling most of his life, from his childhood into his job as a labourer, from carpentry into mechanics, from electronics into the hands of Alec the mad inventor.

Except he doesn't say mad inventor, only I tease Alec about madness and edges. Thomas loves Alec more than he loves himself. Thomas believes he is the odd man out in this triangle, believes he has already lost although no contest has been declared.

Truth is, he'd rather lose than win. Thomas wouldn't know how to beat Alec, not even when he's better, so much better, at touch and knowing when to close his eyes. Alec doesn't trust the world enough to close his eyes except when sleep forces them shut. Alec doesn't trust his body. Thomas trusts his limbs so thoroughly he never questions their science of rhythm or movement. He lets his blood pump fast as it needs to, steps out into the sky when his skin demands blue on blue on blue.

The English language has no proper future tense. But I can pronounce tomorrow. On our wedding night, Alec will offer me a wire from an instrument that mechanically conveys human voice. I will hold in my hand what I cannot hold inside my ears.

Alec carried me on his back today. I am too old for such games, but I ran towards his body and leapt onto his hips and he embraced my legs in a backwards hug. Then walked forward tirelessly, my chin hooked over his crown. He walked till he reached a hill, then began a descent. I looked down from a great height with no fear of falling. I will always be able to see the road ahead while Alec carries me. When we returned to the attic, Thomas kissed me on the forehead. He stared at the path I'd just coasted. That kiss the intersection we three have arrived at. An ending of sorts. A beginning. Sometimes your whole life is decided by a detail. I didn't kiss Thomas again.

I met a boy whose lips were designed by his other lover. Who'd kissed and kissed him till his mouth was all anticipation, his longing mere memory. I myself was recovering from a drop of great heights, from a love that I'd slipped on and that I called falling.

Really, I was thrown.

He crawled inside my damaged arms then wouldn't stay long enough to heal his mind. Or his expectations. I lost both, of course, for the mind is a paltry substitute once the heart has been stimulated. My passion multiplies.

Some prefer the loneliness of sanity.

He disappeared through the gaps between my fingers, that boy. Wandering lost and upside-down in a world that doesn't recognize hunger as emotion. His want included his chest and thighs, but it was his lips that continued to refuse water, holy or otherwise.

Having lost the ability to swallow, he travelled to the Arctic and unhinged his tongue from the back of his throat. Left it there to freeze. Where it lingers, immobile, awaiting a promised taste of thaw.

And my own body parts?

I have dismantled and sewn them back together so often I am all seams. My body a spiderweb scar. A reminder.

Oh, not of him. Too many lovers have worn through these limbs for any single one to impress my skin with more than a trace of indelible ink. No, the scars remind me I once could be hurt. I once was whole enough to be broken.

Remind me: I once misplaced the ground beneath my feet. And I lament my forgotten talent for stepping – blind – into open air.

Alec's hands belong to parlour rooms and piano playing soirées. His veins stay put inside his skin, and even weeks and weeks of grease and metal grit and hammer bruises won't convert his hands.

Thomas's arms crawl with veins. I rest my fingers in the crease inside his elbow and feel the throb of his body pushing outwards. Once I saw Thomas rub the bellysides of his forearm along the bellysides of Alec's. Alec jumped aside.

As if he'd never felt such soft.

His skin is all soft he just doesn't know it. Thomas wanted to stroke hairless against hairless, but wasn't prepared for Alec's fear. What hasn't been written down is harder for me to believe in. Thomas traces fingernails past the inside of my elbows. Alec leaves the room. His eyes open.

Once he's gone, the stroking ceases. If Alec would close his eyes he'd see the entire planet strung round and round with standard stovepipe wire, transporting voices. Thomas closes his eyes and sees a trail of discoveries Alec hasn't yet had time for. When I close my eyes I see the same thing as when they're open. Except imprinted on the backs of my lids, instead of air.

They leave me out, these men with their boys's games. The underside of my arms is too much like the rest of my body, and predicting the future is as effortless as predicting the past. I have no camouflage.

Boston. My Boston. A city cracked with love and leftover corpses of previous inhabitants's battles. I live in Cambridge: a word captured inside a city captured inside another. The bridge connects the inner and the outer. Boston has two faces, one corrupt, one exuberant. Not a division between those who

prefer claret to whiskey, but a city distinguished by those who, having sworn off claret, turn finally to whiskey.

Boston's inhabitants become real by wearing a mask. Masks. The only code needed to unlock this city is the code of triumph. That's why Alec is the true Bostonian and Thomas will always forever be a man from Salem. Boston is two cities. And I belong to both.

Alec prefers kisses that begin with his lips closed. Sealed with a kiss, he mouths at me. He takes these catchphrases too seriously. Sometimes a moment in a person's life will rhyme with an event of the past. Or the future. Thomas kisses me with his whole body.

I used to live in the ocean but got tired of a raw fish and seaweed diet. Cooking a luxury you don't appreciate until the very idea of flames has been drowned. In water, it is impossible to remember dust or old age. Most people need to believe in wrinkles, though their reflection frightens. Looking at water from beneath its surface contradicts the possibilities of a mirror. Every time I stared through the ocean's rim out into air another vision of my face evaporated. Narcissus in reverse.

The ocean swallows men whole then spits them back again only when women begin a lavish ritual of combing blood from their skulls. Their greying scalps shaved with stones decorated red.

I grew grey hair, when I lived in the ocean, emerged from that water with no memory of what I looked like and a head the colour of moon.

Thomas dives into lakes on his days away from the city. Nothing ever catches between his teeth. The trick, he tells me, is not to care. He never closes his mouth or holds his nose, but opens both and lets his body absorb what it will. As long as his lungs are closed, he cannot drown. As long as he locks his lungs shut, the Sirens leave him alone. They want his name but not its container. But what if you *want* to swallow water? I question him. What if catching a mermaid's tale between your teeth is part of the trick? He smiles and repeats: the trick is not to care. Alec sees only container. He doesn't understand the body can be a wrapping as well as its own treasure. He stares at my face when I speak and thinks he sees me.

Sometimes he does.

Mostly he witnesses my eyes performing miracles my lips can't fathom. But I am from Boston and there is always more than one solution to becoming invisible.

I met a boy who had hair the colour of cinnamon. And a body so full of grace I couldn't touch him. His mind was filled with prairie love and how to swim to China on the back of a horse. I'll find him in books I haven't read yet. Yet: his favourite word. His voice is the length of my bead necklace, and as circular. He rejects the acquisition of knowledge. He says the principals of property and merchandise oppose learning. His mind too cluttered with broken primary-coloured crayons he eats like worms, and with graphs of the underworld charting the devil's progress as misunderstood bystander.

This boy carried butterflies on the crests of his shoulder blades. He weighed more naked than when burdened by the costume of personality and social disguise.

You live inside a book I want to read.

I travel often to that point when I first met Alec. He was so expectant then, his impulse to teach written so darkly on his forehead. Sometimes, I attempt to change the order of my appearance into his life, his into mine. I try to meet him in the street instead of that confounded attic, try to meet him by accident, instead of Father's pre-arranged tutoring. I grab his sleeve and whisper my distorted words into his well-tuned ears. But each time I steal into the past I recognize his face. Anticipation. For his brave new deaf girl. For his wife-to-be. Much as I'd like to shake up the story, I am unable to deny him this.

When I travel forward I don't change anything. Why distort tomorrows, today? Arrows pointing, tensed to release. My hands reach out to stroke scalp beneath thick strands of hair. Thomas will bow out and Alec will win the lottery. We know this script already, but the two of them never speak it, trusting, as they must, in spontaneity. If only Thomas didn't love Alec so much. If only there was more at hand than this counter-clockwise chase.

They think I'm deaf but I remember the feel of sound trapped inside my ribcage. I used to eat words when I was a child, before getting sick eroded my vocal cords. Before getting sick erased other people's hearing. Alec says he likes my voice, he strokes my hair when I speak my own hesitation. My words stumble and trip over themselves. Alec doesn't ever smile.

Thomas hears me whether I speak or not. Thomas says the choice is mine. Thomas insists on reincarnation, that we three who have been together before, will be again. Not necessarily born into the same language. This appalls Alec, the man of science. But Alec doesn't need visions, or at least not this one. His voice will live forever.

I met a girl whose fingertips were on fire. She talked through the flames that reached from her fingernails to air. She slept with buckets of water beside her bed. In the morning the water had evaporated leaving the buckets empty. The flames licked the slight hairs on her wrists. Her forearms. I could only love her at noon when the sun reflected her body's perfect desire.

Thomas has promised to teach me the art of conversation. Skill, he tells me, has nothing to do with it. Patience is a myth. Listening is more about the tilt of the head than about which sounds tickle healthy earlobes. Conversation, Thomas tell me, is about the simple conjuring tricks of any amateur magician. Pull a word out of a hat, he says, and they'll see a live rabbit.

Those of us from Boston live in two time periods at once. My parents chose the present and some forgotten time buried in 12th or 13th-century England. I live inside the 19th and 20th centuries, but unlike Alec I'll travel both directions. At least until my limbs tire of evading the three dimensional.

I met a girl who spoke with both hands. Only the Deaf could understand her. My parents never let me near another deaf child, fearing Dumbness might rub off. Alec, self-proclaimed champion of The Deaf, pushes me in the

direction of lips I can't read, ears that can't unscramble the thick words on my tongue. I couldn't speak her language, this Deaf girl's, though her ears rhymed with mine. My parents don't understand I am more than my disability. And Alec will never see that I am also so much less.

Wherever I wander, my speech defines me. Labels other people hang from my skirts. But I know how to live inside a disguise that masks silence. Even a diary is only one clue. The trick to passing as Hearing is to learn as many tricks as possible. Memorize what other people listen to: the scales of a piano, the national anthem. A line of a poem blown back in my face.

I met a boy who thought passion was an apricot pit you could choke on. He would choke on. He bit into fruit gingerly, or first split it open with his fingers. It's not that he didn't like surprise, he just couldn't allow himself to rely on astonishment. I used to rub his cheekbones, the bottom of his jaw leading to his chin, kiss the hairs on the back of his neck when he wasn't looking. He thought my passion was aimed at him, but really it was my own body I coaxed alive. My lips wandered everywhere except for where they longed. He waited for my fingers to abandon his skin so he could turn around and not kiss me.

We climbed trees together, and hung upside down from the lowest branches. Our knees wrapped around bark and our heads brushed the tips of grass. He wanted easy sex but not love, and thought that passion would lead to both. Or to neither. I didn't tell him that you can have no depth without surface, and that the air is so thin and stretched here on the surface that breathing becomes dangerous.

So it should be.

My lungs contract and expand and my blood beats at its own pace. Fast. Even upside down, kisses end up in the belly. But they begin on the stretched surface of skin outlining the mouth. A kiss neither easy nor expected. Unless you crack it open with your knuckles first. Unless you dissect it before it is born.

Platypus love. Alec and Thomas explain to me that we are a bridge holding hands over water. They discuss the implications of letting go. Men like to believe in drowning as a solution to love. But winter announces itself outside the attic window and the river chokes on ice and snow drifts and groaning. And on grumbles from below unattached floes that crack the jagged edges of river bank. How can they not understand that seasons change everything?

The sweat on my brow icicles into diamonds that cut. I play with long division and with the buttercups Thomas has stored in Alec's apartment. Each one hangs onto a fistful of my toes. This room is also about who leaves and who returns. By spring we won't need the yellow blossoms but for now we cater to the near-invisible petals. By spring, we'll be nowhere near here.

Alec and Thomas play ping-pong on the tables. They have cleared all the wires to one side, and aim the ball at the centre. They play against the rules. Thomas lacks desire or competition. But Alec can taste the rewards of the future. He is so close. So close. If they could see beneath my eyelids they

would drop their game, run to embrace me. One in delight. One in fear. Not that my vision is so startling, but uncertainty is one game neither has learned to embrace. Yet they play on. They play on.

How does the future fit into our triangle? A man can go his whole life without a climax, die in a state of anticipation. But he must believe in phantoms and must chase after what he thinks they might teach him.

Most men live inside the climax that just happened, its echo still throbbing inside their fingertips, implying a climax parade to follow. These men lust after tomorrow, revel in today.

A man who climaxes only once – and early – walks on a path that leads away from memory. His whole life a dénouement, he hopes for a Second Coming to blast away the present. Hope, an emotion rooted in past triumphs.

The sun set twice tonight. Once it dipped below the horizon and once it disappeared into my mouth. The first sunset followed nature's law of cycle and expectation; the second hid from the solemn vow of forward. Both Alec and Thomas think that when the sun sets the moon becomes possible. But there it is: triumphant in the sky, hours before the sun risks approaching the lip of horizon.

A woman who climaxes once has been interrupted.

EPILOGUE

Sympathetic vibrations

* * * * *

Kites in the Bell Museum in Baddeck include Hargrave box-kites, Oriental kites with long heavy enormous tails, kites with no tails at all, Graham Bell's cygnet, the Siamese twins, Mabel II, beeswax and celled kites. Kites, finished and photographed black & white against a grey maritime sky, represent a version of flying.

Wednesdays, the museum staff hold kite-making and -flying lessons.

Graham Bell's giant ring kite reaches 30 feet in diameter and requires 12 men to throw it. The breeze catches between its hundred spokes and transforms the kite into a Ferris wheel that won't turn down again.

In 1906, Graham Bell's valet wakes him with the news that his first grandson was safely born (his own sons all stillborn or died in infancy). His immediate exclamation: "But can he fly?" Graham Bell later justified by explaining he'd been dreaming kites.

Telephone facts:

The desire to imitate human speech reaches as far back as the bible, as far forward as science fiction computers.

In the *Book of Job*, God asks: Canst thou send lightnings, that they may go, and say unto thee, Here we are?

The Oracles of Delphi speak their prophecies through funnels whose narrowed tips peek from the temple walls.

The string telephone is popular in Persia, China, and Ceylon long before the Europeans copy its design.

When his telephone first becomes popular, Graham Bell suggests "Ahoy" as the greeting when one picks up the receiver. T. Edison suggests "Hello," Gaelic for "Holy Be Thou," more appropriate.

On New York City's Broadway Street in 1880, there are over 350 overhead telephone wires visible.

The Spanish-American War employed the first telephones during war-time.

Bell laboratories conceives the technology for the m-9 gun.

The final telephone gadget Graham Bell sees invented is the dial telephone. Touch-tone "dialing" appears after his death.

At the time of their deaths, T. Edison holds over 1 300 patents, Graham Bell holds one.

FAX machines transmit the written word through telephone lines.

The world record for number of people squeezed into a telephone booth is 88.

* * * * *

By the time Aleck has successfully invented the telephone, every school but Hartford teaches Oralism and Oralism only.

Mabel Bell turns more and more to poetry as a way of digesting the world. She loves the visual rhymes she can recognize on the page. Her favourite poetry is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose visual descriptions of the fantastic appeal to her sensual cravings.

Reach out and grab each word; a stone in your mouth. What he used to tell Mabel, when he was still her teacher.

Graham Bell, now a millionaire, encourages Oralism and supports laws that will prohibit Sign Language by deaf people. He wants to ensure that deaf children don't grow up abominations.

I want to invent the sound of a lover's voice a hundred miles away, he once told Mabel. He believes he has achieved this invention.

Sometimes your own lips betray you.

a local villager remembers Professor Bell:

He goes up there on sunny afternoons with his thingamajigs, and fools away every blessed day. Flying kites. He has dozens of them – all kinds of queer shapes – and they're but poor things, god knows! I could make better myself. And the men that assist him – grown men – go up there and spend the livelong day. Flying kites.

The greatest foolishness I ever heard.

CREDITS

Although the characters in this novel are based on historical people, the characterizations and events are fictional and should be read so.

I am indebted to the following texts for much of my research and information about Alexander Graham Bell and his times:

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