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# **De'ath Sound**

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Masters in English Literature (Creative Writing Thesis Option).

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0-612-29515-X

## ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of De'ath Sound, a short poetic novel (of approximately 27,000 words), and Check Your Sex at the Door, a critical postface.

In the novel, traditional notions of plot and character fracture, and the underlying story, a kind of impulsion towards plot, plays itself out in ambiguous, even disturbing ways. The work itself, much shorter than a traditional novel, shares some of the sensibilities and structures of a long poem. The use of repetition, recurrent imagery, and the rhythm of sound, informs the narrative.

The postface, intimately connected with the fictional text, employs language, syntax, and rhythms of speech which echo those used in the fictional text. As in any good work of fiction, language is privileged, suffusing and even disrupting form and content.

## ABRÉGÉ

Cette thèse se compose de De'ath Sound, un bref roman poétique (quelque 27 000 mots), et de Check Your Sex at the Door, une postface critique.

Dans le roman, les notions traditionnelles d'intrigue et de personnage sont éclatées - et la trame sous-jacente, sorte d'élan tendant vers une intrigue, se déploie de façons ambiguës, voire troublantes. L'oeuvre est en soi plus concise qu'un roman traditionnel et emprunte à la sensibilité et à la structure d'un long poème. L'emploi de la répétition et d'une imagerie récurrente contribue, ainsi que le rythme sonore, à la dimension narrative.

La postface, intimement liée au texte de fiction, a recours à un langage, à une syntaxe et à des rythmes de discours qui font écho à ceux employés dans le texte de fiction. Comme dans toute oeuvre de fiction réussie, le langage y est privilégié: il suffit à la forme et au contenu - jusqu'à les perturber.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Robert Allen for generously offering to read this work, and for providing me with intelligent and intelligable feedback. As well, I would like to thank the members of the NFA workshop, Amanda Marchand, Diana Tegenkamp, Joseph, Lance Blomgren, and Christina Thompson for their comments, which enabled me rework and improve this text. In particular, I would like to thank Gail Scott and Robert Majzels, whose writing has opened new and exciting spaces for all who have had the privilege of reading their work; Jean Dussault, for generously offering to translate the abstract; and, Sarah Westphal, whose comments have shaped this thesis.

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# **De'ath Sound**

**by Anne Stone**

*sister-roses (all the roses in the world)*

There is a tent at De'ath Sound's Bread and Honey festival, a small yellowing canvas tent. You must pay your dollar to enter. An old woman, anemic, back bent, sits in a lawn chair by the door. Above her head, a sign promises disease and deformity. One can perceive the vacant stare of "Cyclops: the one-eyed pig!" in the blunt figuration, the dangling "o." Wind rustles past the derelict tent, a sow tamping down its bed of soiled straw, flinging loose clods at bare ankles, lazily snorting. Six short legs protrude from fattened belly, swollen and dumb. I have paid my dollar and entered this tent. I am familiar with the small wrinkled fetuses suspended in each pickle jar. I come here, time to time, spit on the jars and wipe clean the dust and dirt kicked up by the curious. When I am alone, I open the sea-chest on which the fetal pigs rest, and wipe clean the one jar kept from public view.

A plague of forgetting has fallen on the women of this town. Once called De'ath Flats, it was renamed in '36 to the Sound. To draw tourists to the festival each spring. The circus now leases the old man Potter's field six days out of the year, where the ferris wheel is visible from both the main thoroughfare and Main Street. But the hanging haunt of it is unchanged. For all the spatter of neon light and staged sound, for the carny's call, people still hear the breath the breath has just under. De'ath Sound, the sign says, land of bread and honey.

This old circus woman minds the curse by staring silently at bare earth, palm open for dollar bill as I pass. From time to time, once each year at least, she slips into the tent and would lay a single hand on my shoulder, would surprise me with the bone strength of her fingers. The sudden pinch of love. It would be a sharp dig deep down under the collar bone—the hurt on account of the curse.

To bless us, our mother cleansed her swollen womb with goat's milk. It lingers now, giving my presence a peculiar, slightly sour smell. It is this bare smell, like the sour skin of a newborn, that sister scrapes after. Milky eyes struggling to clear. Our mother, impossibly old, and visible only to me, stands behind her, to complete the gesture. And we gaze at the shapes our old haunts cast in ringing round Roses, my sister, my love.

From a childhood stoop, I could see the top of the ferris wheel fold under the tree line. Soon, my sister's small yellow tent, and all that is left of the old hotel, will collapse and fold into the back of her truck. The old woman will sigh as she passes the town limits, breath freely for the first time in days. Only then will she be struck with worry for the rack of fetuses in the back of her pickup. Only then will she open the sea-chest and discover her loss. A plague of forgetting has fallen on the women of this town, pass the black spot, palm to palm.

The curse travelled to this place with our mother's fetal pigs. Long before my sister and I were born, they say, she spit on the hot tar dust of the road, and bought up the land around it. Settled the remainder of her circus into jars. Placing what was past in a mixture of brine and vinegar. Later, this liquid shape would hold my stories, preserve whatever there was left of me.

I have seen the flats, where the sky is as squat as a snake basket, and lays low against the land. I saw a woman cross the road yesterday, face drawn with chore. Felt the drunken loneliness of midnight's last call. Young men in Sunday suits, each standing behind their woman, perched on barstool, as inscrutable to me as any species of wild bird. Tomorrow to church. If sister washes her pickup on the second line, the cows are drawn, like a woman's face. Though none care to catch the fetal purge. Except, perhaps, our mother.

Somewhere a face, many faces, taught me to become plain. That beauty is a trick of light. That tired and drawn in darkness, flesh recedes and bone is joy. Pass the black spot, palm to palm.

## 2

*Mother De'ath, 20 June, (18 roses)*

Or passed. It is past, already.

Mother De'ath kneels before the bed, as if in prayer. But what prayer could she offer up? What words would soothe the old bones, the empty cradle of ribs. The gutting of fish, maybe, a love of flesh so taut it slices the belly open. And what does this "love" reveal? A few odd stones, an embedded hook. A gullet that loves the rusty snare so hard, she has to saw and twist to wrench it free.

Maddie reinflicts her wounds, time to time, to keep her throat supple. Otherwise, she fears, her voice box will be swallowed by long and looping ribbons of scar. The burns on the palms of her hands are doled out as carefully as wartime sugar. An empty tureen promises long hours of temptation, fingers sliding low as they spark the gas flame. She remembers her father's fingers, how impossibly dainty and lady-like they were, as they removed the gall. The trout's stomach had been presented to Maddie, who laid it open on a rock, hoping to scry another, smaller trout, a crawfish, or even a ring. Once she'd found a small metal fishing weight, worn to a fine green patina, that she mistook for a gem. Her father had opened the weight's mouth with his knife, and pressed it closed again over her necklace with his teeth. But the gem-green of it came off on the hollow of her neck, leaving it as dull gun-metal grey as the sky. And then the gulls had come, to bicker over the eyes. And, watching the fish heads knocking in the shallows against rocks, Maddie had felt the weight dangling from her neck grow heavy, drawing her down to the river below. It was her father's hand, on her shoulder, that had broken the spell.

This sudden urge for touch recalls itself to her. A simple need for more than the clean white starch of hotel sheets. She stares hard at the linen laid on her stripped-bare mattress by Roses, the rust-coloured stain and the sag. The pillow case laid across the bed, an open sac, to swallow whatever scraps there are left of her. Maddie turns the case inside-out, her fingers searching out the fishing weight, some phrase, some debris dislodged from memory, perhaps. Finding nothing in the case but the cold white clean of it, she turns to go. Somewhere, an object whose bare insistence will restore her to herself. Whose simple dimensions will assert nothing more than its own existence. Won't implicate her in its shapes or textures. Will, in offering no shape or place for her mind to rest, reassert the content of her skin. The rustle of her dress. The

susurrus whisper of her stockings. The clack of her heels as she walks down the steps and out. Yes, she thinks, a simple touch. Though she can't recall why the urge, the urge.

At market, the shapes sound through her fingers. There is the soft rustle of brown paper wrapped meat. And there are words for the shapes on the tongue. The *pound* of meat fills her mouth, her arms fulfil the cradling shape of a leg of lamb. The butcher is beautiful and young. Under Maddie's glance, the bones of her face elide like shale, her features fall like shale. Measured and marked, the butcher passes the shape. The *pound*. Just so.

These shapes hold their reality in them. Not like the slip of time, which wraps one man into the next, so that it is an effort to remember. But tell it to the roses, tell the roses how one man or another, sounding through the depths of you, can make you disremember which one it was, or when. That first insistent cry she made, a demand for name. And Maddie looking down at roses, as if to say, *who told you* it had to be like that? and looking past the roses to the wall, she mounts fragments of faces and clockwork parts, turns the white light on each in turn and makes her choice. It was no different than these fingers of asparagus, lined up before her now, this would be the thumb, this the index, and the rest leaping into place. Peas for eyes maybe, a cauliflower brain, string bean well placed, and voila, my love, there is your father, well made up, and good for you, too. Eat, my darling, eat, eat, put that mouth of yours to good use. (And that cauliflower brain.) Maddie tells her stories of the dead and gone, who, crouching, murmur liar from beneath the bed.

When Tom Died, she laid her body out on the bed, waiting for his ghost. Almost certain it was the living who laid on her next. Almost. But not quite. Sometimes, you go blind when a man dies like that, and sheets have a way of stretching then shrinking the bodies wrapped in them, but the small of his kisses on her neck could tell her. Tom had Died. That was all done, finished. This child's toy all mapped out. Perfectly figured. Had she done wrong?

Frozen goods, labelled and figured, soundless. Not even the shuck of peas to frozen peas. What had she buried in her husband's grave? The soundless shuck, maybe. Turning meat. But the whispering. The whispering from beneath the closed casket. That was sure.

Mother De'ath knows the dead cannot follow her here. The dead can't penetrate the blinding light of the IGA. The vegetables locked behind glass are reduced to a faint electric whir. The moon-faced boy, who scrutinizes her purchases, tries to comprehend the asparagus fingers, so like a hand. Thin wire ties the flesh and holds the faint semblance together. Cauliflower dotted

with eyes, two too many eyes. A washboard belly and a string bean, a dried old pod of a string bean laid between the meaty legs. His eyes pass over the ripe to bursting plums, and focus finally on the child's block, the single plastic square; the number seven and the letter G. It sits on the cauliflower brain as though the vegetable creature were experiencing some childlike moment of clarity.

It is this single instance of order that disturbs him. An order which might distract his attention from the strange fetish lying in her cart, give it time to render the rotten pod clean, normal, if he just blinked an eye. Take his own incipient sex out of circulation, entirely, make it other and strangely unpodlike. Or maybe she got off that way. Maybe she wanted him to touch that dried pod, place it on the scale, give her the bare measure of its insignificance.

His eyes stay with the plastic block. "These are only sold by the set, *lady*," he says.

Maddie raises a brow at the lady-word. Lady-bird. Flighty, and dismissive.

"I'll have the one," she says, "just the one."

The clerk mutters something under his breath. But Maddie has heard him. The child said "old cunt," she heard him clearly. Is that what she is? she wonders. Not some unearthly haunt wandering the markets of this world, but an old cunt. Worn and wrinkled. Not some disembodied fever, as Roses would have it, her presence read like some strange infectious disease. She had thought to haunt him with her impromptu fertility fetish. But he had located her in the living as surely as a punch to the gut. Mother De'ath is struck by the image of small curling wrinkles, laugh lines marking the entrance to her sex, balanced maybe by a tatoo of Cerberus, warning trespassers off.

She hears the whispering dead gather close in her breath. But already she is touched, surely the dead cannot be touched. And yes, how she wishes she were dead, as hands, cool and white as eggs, urge her from the counter. She grasps the leg of lamb in her arms, like a child. One blow to the skull with the leg bone, and this boy will fall to his knees. As white as an egg. The hands will fall away, and she will have long seconds to convince the crack and wheeze of her hip to run. An old cunt born on stilts. Broken stilts. Screaming out loud, "old cunt, old cunt." The whispering dead confined to a small envelope pinned to her blouse. By roses. And inside the envelope a name and address, to be summoned in case of haunts. Postage paid.

The manager's hands pull open the envelope and remove the scrap of paper. And place her, like that. Suddenly gentle, because the cursive hand has placed her, as mother. "My mother," the scrap says. "Mother Goose and lady-bird," he thinks, "fly away home." Place her,

like that, in the back seat of a yellow cab. And the driver raising his eyebrows as he receives her daughter's scrap from the manager turns to say, "It's alright, lady, I know the place," as he rolls out.

Maddie kneels before the bed, as if in prayer. But what prayer can be offered up? Little roses has undressed her and taken her lamb. Poor little lamb, she says, poor little roses. What can be offered up? What words to soothe this souging voice? What words? What shape to soothe her hands, but her own sad shape. Back bending to bed, skin sloughing loose to hang from her bones, empty as a question. No shapes to sound through the fingers, no wrapped meat, but the meat of her. And nothing for the tongue to shape, no body here to shape it for. Nothing but nothing.

Maddie's thoughts turn away from the nothing to measures of oblivion, to the smudged black of charred bone and the sudden clarity of flame.

### 3

#### *Solstice, 21 June (18 roses)*

Roses could be this nothing: an awareness, a pause looking into a pause, the strained shift in speech which has preceded her entrance into any room since she turned the wrong end of the gun. A shifting silence which has taught her to construct herself out of holes. Become nothing more than a series of deflections, a slipping intuition. Roses De'ath sips bourbon and descends. Something of her still haunts her room though, considering the wallpaper, fingering the frayed hem of a blouse, spinning an intimate monologue which is sometimes spilt into the hotel air like musky incense, a little too revealing to be polite. Later Roses' body will return to this place, maybe a little drunk, to lie down and sleep. In the meantime, she concerns herself with obscure minutiae, the crack in the teacup, the tiny scar over Bat's lip, which is shaped like a tooth.

Roses slips stockinged feet under the table and finds Bat's lap. An intricate brocade overlays the dusty rose papered walls with black velvet. Upstairs, her white uniform is hung from the brass hook like a dried skin, like the empty hanging feeling she got when August was out back gutting rabbits for the stew. And today, she thought, maybe she was missing the point. Because she couldn't understand anything about the animal until it was a bloody husk. She remembers the first blow, inaccurate, it glanced off the skull. Nothing to see. But she'd raised a roof on the skull. Or torn the carpet. Any old domestic metaphor would suffice for the squelch of blood. Then August had laid hold of the mallet, and she'd cut her eyes long and slow, until the mallet was laid on the bench, and matted with hair, and the corpse was still. But not before it laid its bloody spoor across the thin layer of snow. Roses retraces these spoor, reads in them a desire so strong it catches her by the throat. But desire for what?

There is no snow, she reminds herself. It is a trick of memory which could just as easily leave her to imagine black footsteps laid on the carpet when you are learning to dance, laid on the carpet when you are too drunk to dance. She imagines her body laid on the carpet, a language, like this or this. And his mouth, as he crouches over her, forming words. Roses deftly replaces the image with Bat's, before telling him about the dancing footprints. Maybe something of the slant of her eye lays her body down before him. Because it seems to lay there, between them, an unspoken apology, even as she allows the rest of the story to fall into broken phrases, and scraps and debris. The waitress will come by and brush them from the table top with the

crumbs.

Bat still wears his road-work uniform. He's been flagging old ice-heaves, and filling pot-holes on the second line. His truck moves with the confidence of an old woman's hand, threading her way through warp and weft. His consciousness is attuned to sudden declivities, and he follows Roses' narrative without difficulty. As she tells him that a man's penis resembles a blind baby rabbit, he senses the cul-de-sac, and knows she hasn't begun to tell him what is really on her mind. He knows he must forget these dead-end passages, the bloody prints, the heel of her foot pressing down on his blind baby rabbit. He lays her stocking feet to either side of him, and she laughs, as though he has just now cottoned on.

Roses modulates her voice carefully, and Bat traces the scales. Underneath all her talk he hears a single phrase. The letters elide and repeat. She's not so crazy. She's not so crazy, after all. Just old. Just old and tired. But not so crazy, after all.

Bat knows of Mother De'ath's return, hell, the whole town did.

"She's not so crazy, after all," she says.

But her words fall flat. A disappointment she had never intended or even realized, laying her words under.

Bat looks to Roses, and thinks of August. He grips Roses' small feet in fists. He doesn't want to hear her say it. Of course, he thinks. August is out slaughtering the rabbits. August is out. Deadened to her, and falling past, somehow. August had Mother De'ath, where did that leave Roses? Bat regrets telling Loralie he couldn't see her today. She had wanted him to take her to the zoo. Loralie was crazy for animals in cages, she couldn't get enough.

"There aren't a lot of people who'd understand about me and August," she says.

Bat shakes his head in disbelief, "yeah," he says, "you got that right." A little hard, maybe, his voice.

The waitress places a bourbon in front of Roses and another tea in front of Bat. It was Roses they made the exception for. Roses' mother had owned the hotel outright. But then she'd grown old and fond of flame. Harvey bought half the place from the bank. Had a lien on the other. He took over the accounting, and was making a slim profit, even after he'd insured the place, and spent enough to mount extinguishers on every wooden beam there was. Roses worked the rooms to pay board after they lost the house, and August the kitchen. Still, together they'd managed to keep half of what Mother De'ath alone had kept whole.

Throughout those days, August had watched in amused disbelief, shaking his head at Harvey, and saying, "I ain't seen no ghost with a zippo, Harv." And Harvey, his hands idling in the air, as though trying to describe some mathematical formula which was beyond the slim vocabulary he commanded, would finally let his hands come to rest in his lap, nod and reply, "can't be too careful," as though it were a summation of the world. He found August irreverent, the way he referred to Maddie as if she were dead. He had once tried to tell as much to August, to communicate how even the bare whisper of her would reach out to her somehow. As though the stars themselves would echo her name. And she, standing slim miles distant, would reach through the glass and pluck the vibrating light out of sky, read it like braille, and sense the shape her absence had come to assume. He'd looked at August, his hands describing this complex curve, before falling still. "When it comes to a woman, August," he'd said, looking for just the right words, "you can't be too careful."

"Speaking of careful," August replied, brushing aside the reference to Maddie, "you might want to think about that hutch out back, all that dry wood and straw, could go up any second. Might take my hogshead with it. To hell with the hotel," he'd said, "think about my whiskey."

"I guess you can't be too careful," Harvey said, uncertainly, wondering if August was just having him on. But he'd installed an extinguisher by the hutch door, just the same.

Bat slowly releases his grip on Roses' feet. Looking past her now, he is remembering August coming to see Bat's mother some months after Maddie's whispering had begun. What Maddie De'ath had done with Roses was unthinkable, his mother had said. She had fetched Roses away from the field herself. But Bat had never known anything more than the most oblique of references to "the field," and so considered Roses under his own roof worse somehow, as it had rendered his attention brotherly, and obscene.

Later, August just had to look at Bat once to know. He didn't say a thing to Bat. Just smiled and stroked Roses' hair, asking her to "sit by her old man." Bat pictures those nights, when Roses' mother was laid up in the hospice, and August and Roses closed up the hotel. The steps as dark and inviting as a kept secret. He knows about Roses and her half-crazed urges for touch. He has occasionally been partner to them, and felt her hands move over him as indifferent as air. As though he had assumed the wrong shape at just that moment. But her hands on August. He has seen her touch August's hand, arm, hair, and there was nothing like indifference to it.

The slow-moving frames flicker past, until, sickened at the progression of images, he refuses to think.

“You want a sip of my bourbon?” she asks.

“No, I like my tea fine.”

“Suit yourself,” she says sharply, as though withdrawing some unspoken invitation. As though she might have dressed him, if only he had drunk from her glass. And, not knowing how to “suit himself,” he sits, uneasy, a naked man.

She holds herself apart from him now, and begins her retreat. Her talk as thin as onion paper, and bereft of portent. She tosses a casual invitation his way, to the summer solstice party on the second line. But he already knows he will not come. He remembers the last time, remembers leading Roses between the long rows of cages, laying his hand inside her blouse, the warmth of skin, a faint trace of aureole before she flicked his hand away. He remembers the way the cage doors creaked as he raked his hand along the row. The slight, acrid smell of rodents.

The whispering has begun. He can hear the whispering of Mother De’ath alone in her room. A burnt almond smell and the floor’s faint creaking. Mindful of the dead, she whispers. He stiffens as Roses leans over him. She is thinking of the scar she herself bit into his lip long years ago, licks the scar, lightly, as if it is hers without question. And fades, up the stairs into the sougning silence that no portion of him can penetrate, that no imagining can ever bring him past.

# 4

## *Solstice, 21 June (17 roses)*

She misplaced him, time to time, by a doorway looking outwards to the street. On the night Bat recalled by the heat on his palm, the slim imprint of her breast, she had left him standing at the outermost threshold, as she listened to something distant, some sound or voice. She thought that she could hear August breath and turn and murmur in his sleep. She hardly noticed Bat's fumbling grasp, his night cold lips touching her own. She lets the door close between them, listens for the murmur, but it is gone.

Bat is slightly bewildered when she leaves him outside of what is, to all appearances, a public space—that a place he could choose to enter, as a stranger, is denied him through familiarity. He has tried objecting, but his arguments are too transparent, too resonant, and he can't bear to say what he knows too well. Bat doesn't want to think of the admittances denied him in a place that could be bought by the night. When the door closes, he stops existing in relation to her. He lets his body become a vanishing point—his thoughts that far removed from his body's small, though insistent, contradiction.

Roses constructs a fluid sense of privacy that shifts hourly, rendering slim demarcations between what is hers, and what just is. The part of the hotel open to the salesmen and passers-by, just is. That place has no more to do with her than the white uniform hanging in her room. But the pantry and restaurant are hers, after hours, when the guests are forced to use the fire escape for whatever assignments they can drum up in a little spit of a town, like this one. Aside, of course, from whatever August had on.

Roses turns and lets herself into the pantry. Her fingers find what she hopes is a bottle of barrel whiskey. She hums a few bars of the song she picked up by the mink cages as Bat toyed with the buttons on her blouse, she hadn't noticed beyond the song, but something moves her to dispel the thought of him, once again, with a flick of her hand. She moves through the hotel's kitchen, unstumbling, to the cupboard where she thought the glasses were kept. Damn. She'll have to drink from the bottle.

"Cigarette?" he offers.

"Yeah."

The old man, eyes accustomed to darkness, has been watching her all along. No so old, forty maybe. Mother De'ath was what? sixty? Roses lays hold of the cork with her teeth, spitting it free. "Shit," she says, "its goddamned cooking wine. What the hell does Harvey want with this shit, anyways."

"It'll take the grease from the kitchen walls," he says, chuckling softly.

Goddamn him. "Where's the whiskey, anyway?"

"Out back by the hutch."

Roses takes a long drink of wine before walking out. She empties the bottle on the grass, and then struggles with the hogshead. When the cork gives, a splash of whiskey finds her lap. The old man hands Roses the funnel. She folds cheese clothe in the funnel to strain the swish, and refills the emptied bottle with barrel whiskey. "What, no party tonight?" she asks.

"Loralie's asleep," he says, handing her the coal-stick. Roses holds the bottle up to the moon, and stirs the whiskey with the burnt end until the blanched yellow liquid turns to a rich amber hue.

Loralie was August's response to what was left in Maddie's absence, a whisper maybe, under the creaking floorboards, a breath the breath had just under the skeletal steps. They rented her an old drafty room for business, but let her lay up in the third floor kitchenette. She made next to nothing, after August's cut, so it was the "least" he could do.

Roses imagines August sitting in the chair, Loralie lays on the bed, wrapping herself in the white of the sheets. What words did he tease from her then? What story did she offer up, night after night, to hold them, just so? Perhaps there was none. Just Loralie wrapping herself in the white of sheets and August laying his boots against the head board. What did their eyes say when they met? If they met? The rustle of paper money is in his pocket. The rustle of sheets. There were words between them, maybe the same words each night.

Roses leaves the back door open. The moon lays hard against the hutch, filling the small door with its full, heavy face, a baleful though disinterested observer. Roses is always conscious of the moon's position, it lays itself into her, so that she seems to sleep as she drags the length of her spine against it. They sit in the back room, the one her mother called a parlour, after she was ill. August was touchy still, to sit back here and enunciate the word was enough to turn his mood for weeks. It was the only way she had found to get to him, yet. You could say what you wanted about her mother, she'd discovered, just don't mention the parlour.

But the word was there constantly, it was laid on the flat of her tongue like a coin. She could not swallow it back without choking on it, she could not spit it out, without having it there, just there, between them, the gold glint of betrayal. She found herself tonguing it aside as she spoke.

“Tell me again,” she says, watching his bare and empty hands fold, and produce the blade. She smiles, as, folding his hands once more, it vanishes. A moment later, the bruise of August’s hand round her throat, though the blade, miraculously, fails to appear. Roses sucks air between her teeth. Better the blade be in sight, she thinks.

August was a magician, sleight of hand, illusions. Spent his talent playing cards. No one actually came to play poker, except Mike the Pike, but if they wanted Loralie, they had to lose to August first. Kept him honest, as he put it, that way he wasn’t taking a cut. Roses has composed a series of lives for August, but he was born too late to be a tanner during the depression, or a bootlegger, floating bottles down the Tomofobia river. When he arrived in De’ath Sound, some years after Tom was laid under the stone by the river, he had nothing but the boards laid out in the back of his truck. No roof to hold the rain by, no walls against the winds that stripped clean the flats time to time—dropping the debris some two or three towns down the way—just a good sound floor to dance on. When he laid the boards down under her mother’s roof, she knew that Maddie didn’t have a chance. That Maddie, for all her thought, had somehow never laid in a floor herself, not like that. Or been laid down over the nothing, and found it had come, somehow, from inside of her. That under those boards, was the fall. Roses knew that if the boards were ever pried up, there would be a hole, cut clean through her mother’s belly to the other side of the world.

The only skills August possessed were lying, playing cards, and skinning rabbits. When he put the white apron on, he was more of a talker than short-order cook, but people forgave his sorry-looking eggs for the conversation. Though Thursday’s gibbelote had the whole town in and half again on Friday till the stew-pot was emptied of all but the bones. There was a secret to it that even Roses didn’t know. The red flare catches her eye, and she knows that the hole that is her sister is dreaming August’s fingers, the draw of cigarette. The remains of her sister’s dream tumble through Roses. “Tell me again,” she says. Looking at his back, the way the bones of him informed the shirt, the lay of him.

“You have to look at the finished product, that’s the trick. If its a pair of boots you want, you have to see that boot in the living skin.”

“No,” Roses shakes her head and walks, whoosh, through the moon, comes out on the other side, its heavy face slipping past her now and falling, falling fast. Leans on the hogshead and says again, “no.”

“Forget the boot then,” he says, and, as he leans in the doorway, she can make the skeleton, make the bones. “A muskrat,” he says, “with a muskrat you *case* the skin – they’ll want to make the bellies up separately from the backs. Simple. Just tie your cord to the branch and hang your wire hook from that. Splay the legs and hook them under the heel, like a V.”

August splays his fingers and Rosie wraps her arms around her chest, to keep from falling with the moon, falling into that empty space just under the sky, some big hole dug God knows when to bury it, like a crock of peaches, comes up drunk on itself each night, but one. And then not at all.

“Slide the knife under,” he says. “Start with the hind feet and slit down the legs. Bugger the tail,” he says, “its worth nothing on a rat, and turn her on the hook, easy, side to side to work it down. Pull the skin, gently, like you’re opening a sock the wrong side out. You have to be patient, Roses, and cut the nose button, the lips, so they keep to the skin.”

“But a bigger animal–,” he says, and Rosie pictures herself, the moon, skinned, “–you, for instance.” (If Roses had a bit more hair on her chest, he once told her, she’d make a fine rug, to lay Loralie out on.) Roses likes this part, the fairy-tale telling of it. She folds back into the hogshead’s centre and leans into the last of the moon, takes a drink from the bottle before offering it to August, who ignores her. “I’d lay you out on your back and slit you like a rabbit, tail to chin,” he says. “Then I’d slide the knife down the front of those legs.”

The line is like old time stockings, maybe you’d been so drunk or loved that you’d draw them on the wrong side, she thinks. Too loved, she thinks. Whoosh.

August tosses the filter. “Boil your skull in a pan of water, that’d make you tender, girl. Poor Bat,” he laughs, “can’t get his head around how hard you are.”

Roses knows the rest, knows he’d tie her with her own tail, then, when she was good and dry, slide the skull in, teeth and all. Roll in the skin, like that maybe, roll in her, turn her up and lay in her. “Poor Bat?”

“I’m not the one who’s hard,” she says. “Bat’s the one who’s hard. People just don’t see how hard he can be. All that polite dinner talk he got from his mother, now that’s hard.”

"Didn't say it wasn't," August shrugs.

"If things were different, if it was me in love with Bat, he'd have me tied in no time."

Roses shakes her head. The bone pliant. The cheek, angry now, swells like a fist.

August laughs, "it isn't the other way around, that's my point, Roses. A young woman like yourself should be out there, you shouldn't be out back drinking whiskey from the barrel with an old cob like me. Look at yourself, Roses, you just ain't got it in you to stay. I know that. I've always known that.

But he had it backwards, she thought.

"You're one to talk, August. Loralie so in love with you she'll whore out of Mother De'ath's parlour." Roses says it deliberately, pronounces the U as a sliding diphthong, emphasizing the inaudible O. She says "par-lo-ure." It is her mother's enunciation—after she was ill. Roses does it so well that it frightens her.

August grabs her arm. "It's a back room, Roses, you'll call her out—"

"She's not dead, you stupid fuck, you can't call her out like that, she's not a ghost."

August's hand holds Roses suspended in air. The moon has vanished, though a low light hangs still over the hutch roof. Roses concentrates her entire balance on those five cold fingers. Stumbles, when they release her. August leaves her, splayed on the hogshhead like some unearthly sacrifice, climbs the stairs and finds Loralie. Slips his head under her arm, and leads her down the steps to the front door. Loralie wakes when the chill air hits her, turned out of the hotel like an unruly drunk, she turns back, slams her fist into the door, over and over again, screaming, "goddamn you, August, open the fucking door now. Goddamnit, what'd I do? Fucking open the goddamned door now! You hear me, you hear me, August, August!"

Roses climbs over the back fence and is crossing the Mchalnuts' back lawn as Loralie wakes. The lights come on of a sudden and jack her like a rabbit. But Loralie's screams shatter that illusion. She is winded by the time she reaches Bat's house and folds over her knees, considering her options. There are remnants of "home," even here. The possibility of forgetting the boundaries between what is hers, and what simply is. The possibility of sleep, dark and dreamless. The kind of sleep that seeps into the skin like warm water, leaving lips full, and thumbs swollen.

She climbs the trellis and mounts the slim mantle outside of Bat's window, spying the quiet calm, the rise and fall of his chest as he sleeps. Roses' eyes adjust to the dark, and with the moon peering in over her shoulder, she can see the childlike fullness of his lips, the delicate

paleanness of his eyelids, the barest hint of the blue-pink branching of veins. His eyes flicker under, at the rush of dream.

And then, hand pressed flat on the window, to ease it up, her eyes find the place where the sheet betrays the slight rolling of palm. And she slows the pressure of her hand to a stop, transfixed with the act of laying into memory the precise rhythm of his pleasure, as though, hearing a song that moved her, she just had to listen, and could later produce the notes. Having scryed the shape of the song, she is able, before it cycles through, to disregard the flat slip of a finger, the unconscious shudders of pleasure which shape his hands in ways he hadn't meant. When he finishes, his hands slide under his head, and his eyes roll open.

Roses, having forgotten the word for "parlour," lowers herself from the trellis. Maybe something of her lingers, though, because Bat catches some new quality to the moonlight which disturbs him, some lurking sense to the sky. Roses hears Bat's window slide open above her, and, stopping to light a cigarette, says, "I just shut the door like that, huh?"

"Yeah," he says.

"You forgive me."

"You coming up?"

"Y'know," she says, "sometimes you make me forget that I live in a hotel," and walks away. Bat looks after her, until, crossing the side street towards home, she passes out of sight under the Mchalnuts' windows, blind as baby rabbits, and turns onto the main.

Loralie, a dark hump, is slouched in the wicker chair under the sign of the prancing man. Roses slips under Loralie's arm and leads her to the front door. Jesus, Loralie, she thinks, its unlocked. She hadn't even thought to try. Goddamn her, Roses thinks. Goddamn her to hell.

# 5

*Loralie, 22 June(17 roses)*

Loralie couldn't tell the difference between a locked door and a closed one, no more than a caged dog, Roses thinks. This morning, she'll wake caged and smell the coffee. That Roses is a doll, she'll think. Then discover that her ankles and wrists are tightly bound. It won't bother her, much. Roses hums an old show tune, bustling about the tiny kitchenette, the perfect picture of domestic joy.

"Somebody should put your face on a flour package," August says, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "you're a regular Clabber girl this morning." Loralie's had the same thought. Only she never could have expressed it so succinctly. She tries to tell August as much, to make up for last night, and discovers her mouth is taped shut. Roses watches Loralie struggle to speak. It looks like someone has slipped an arm into the pocket of her back. Roses can see the stretch of fingers moving under Loralie's face, but the puppet's rag mouth is sewn firmly shut.

Loralie thinks that Roses will help her, that whatever strange circumstance led to her being gagged and bound to the kitchen chair will correct itself under the influence of Roses' cheery domesticity. Roses pours Loralie a cup of coffee, places it before her on the table, smiling sweetly.

"Good morning, Loralie. Did you say something? August, I think Loralie must be feeling a little low today, look, she hasn't even touched her coffee."

August looks at Loralie and shrugs, "don't you worry about her, she's just slow to wake." August lays his newspaper collection out on the kitchen table. Roses selects an issue from 1939 and places it in his hands. "Look at this," he says. Roses leans over August's shoulder.

"War," she says.

"Not yet."

"It's inevitable now."

August shrugs. "I hope you've been saving Loralie."

Loralie has been saving, a little, a very little. A hundred dollars, now. But why is he asking, what is this she's supposed to be saving for? What is this war, that slides from paper and open lips, to look into her little tin-box, and count what little she's got. She's got nothing to say

about some war-word that catches her in the kitchen, tied like that. The way there is nothing to say about a stolen peach. Because she stole the peach already, ate it, even if she can't remember the stealing or the taste, somebody can point to the core rotting over there in the heap. And talking about the stealing of the peach can't change the bones in your hand, can it, sometimes? Or the soft cilia of its skin, or the legless meat of it that can't but lay under your teeth. Like the word for "peach," which makes her forget the other word, the one she can't seem to bring to mind, now.

"You could do worse than be a whore during wartime. Better to be where the action is, of course. But there'll be plenty of men passing through places, along the way."

There'd be plenty of men passing through "places," along the way. Her "places." Or was there only one? She remembers laying on the bed, wrapping them both in the white of the sheets when sleep came on her, seeping into the skin like warm water, leaving lips full, thumbs swollen. And August, dowsing her sex with his tongue, scrying the shapes of her hips, and positioning them, just so. And she, suddenly needing to know the shape, but it was impossible to measure the folding swell with his tongue, so what could he say? That her sex was incomprehensible. That it wasn't square or round or oblong. That the passage passed nowhere, and everywhere at once, depending on how you looked at it. That to tell her the shape of her sex, would be telling her the shape his mind took when he passed into her and how chokecherries were tart, and how a cut was when you drew off the blood, it be telling her what was past and what he remembered of every other place he'd been but that one. What could he tell her but, "Loralie, darling, you can't think like that, you can't spend your time thinking like that."

"Spent time." No, that's the way she can't think. She can't think about "spent time" at all. Not that way, and she'd turned to August, looking at this bed and the next, at all the things that got spent, thinking about how men got themselves spent and how it ruined the sheets, or them, or both, or so they said, and about how money got spent, but not so much on her, and about all the beds she'd already laid in and all the beds she would lie in, and all that time, and she'd said, shaking her head against it, "lets just say time spends me that way."

August leans back, smiling, laying heavy boots on the table top. "You just have to position yourself in one of those places, Loralie. The old ones," August continues, "the old and the flat-footed, they'll be your regulars now. Pay you in ration chips, I guess."

Worse. she thinks, plastic chips. Which isn't even like spending at all. Loralie can picture the cheap plastic tokens that August and Mike the Pike play with. There was something to the fold and rustle of bills that was for her, something that went naturally with the fold and rustle of sheets. But those plastic tokens had nothing. Were nothing. Where tokens of what? she thinks, some fucked-up kind of esteem. When could esteem ever buy you a pack of Chesterfields? They'd play themselves out like castanets in her tin-box. Like some child's toy, and that had nothing to do with her anymore.

"Don't work up a sweat, Loralie, for all you know they'll erect a boot camp in the old man Potter's field," Roses says, "not twenty minutes walk from here." It could be that the old man Potter's tooth was in her tin-box, under the fold of bills, Loralie thinks. A canine like that didn't ever belong to Roses, no matter what Roses said. No tooth like that ever fell from a woman's mouth. As rare as hen's teeth, Roses'd said, pressing the bone shard into Loralie's palm. Potter's tooth didn't bode well for the field. Not a field in De'ath Sound without stories to frighten children, keep them close by the roadside, scattering at the sight of shadows made sickle-strange by something of the wind as it passed through the corn rows.

The old man Potter's field and the farmer's field, both. She could outrun the old man Potter's haunt, wooden-legged as it was, but the farmer's idiot son, sleeping straight as a pole in those corn rows, hair matted with cobwebs and bristle, you could mistake him for a scarecrow from a distance, so still. Then suddenly you're alone, that scarecrow shadow stalking, stalking slow. And you think, I could of swore it was farther off, but then you think, maybe I'm walking fast, just thinking, and its still as still as death. Right?

But blink, just blink and it draws close. In her dreams, lately, scarecrow has been drawing close. The hang of shirt familiar, somehow, like somebody she once knew. So that maybe, she thinks, she'll turn and look and—"used to be," she thinks, the phrase warming her, fumbling after something of better times as it does. Until she remembers, it never used to be.

"Course," Roses says, "the old man Potter will need it regular enough. He'll have money to burn when they buy him out. When times are tough ... " Roses lets the thought slide sideways into Loralie. "August? Have we ever told Loralie about Potter's bird-leg?"

August isn't looking at Loralie, just now he is looking at Roses. She speaks of the old man as though he were alive. The silence was absolute. She doesn't know about Mother De'ath's preserves. When he does look away from Roses' eyes—cow eyes, eyes that know the touch—he sees them still. The way they are all brown sometimes, abstracted, like no particular colour at

all. Or white, purely white. Like the idea of nothing. Falling between. Maybe, maybe, he looks away from Roses' eyes to see the chair topple, to see Loralie fall. And knows, maybe he knows that a mind can turn. Maybe he knows of a place, so hot and dry that it is absolute—but they were blue, just yesterday, the eyes were blue. Against the white of the sheet-white white of her uniform, they were blue. He looks away from the eyes, maybe, and knows that a mind can turn. Turn eyes blue, for instance.

Or turn the mind. Of a sudden it turns the mind, so maybe you find yourself in a strange place, an unknown language, maybe no words, maybe just the words for “hunger,” “fatigue,” “loss.” Maybe the word for “train” or “bus stop,” or maybe just “stop.” Words of dispossession, though, without sentences to house them, without a word to express the subject, surfacing. Like the hot plain of the sun, all “still” and “hot” and “quiet.” Then the strike of light turns Loralie's iris out, so that she sees the room in washed-out reds, lurid veins projected over the kitchen table, and dust rises, stars and planets, from Roses' bunny slippers, she's left the door open behind her, the balcony door, and clammers down the fire escape to the rabbits. Crazy messed up in her mind. Roses feeding tiny planets to her slippers. Does that sometimes, up on the balcony. Loralie thinks “hungry,” “tired,” “lost.” August standing over her with a butter knife, and she's thinking “hungry” “tired” “lost” and he's laughing, isn't he? like he's happy for her? “hungry” “tired” “lost” and her eyes turned out so he is peering at her from inside of her brain, his bloody hands in her mouth pinning her tongue now the “cold” the “cold” the “cold” is past.

August rocking her, soothing now, and she hears Roses screaming, “look what you've done, August, look what you've done. Can't you, just once, wash all the way to the bottom of a cup? I'm gonna be sick. See this, August, this is a *scrubber*. You use it to *scrub* to the bottom of a glass. Jesus, August, I don't ask much.”

But Roses stopped screaming long minutes before she left to feed the rabbits and she's the one who's shaking now. Watching August pin Loralie's tongue to the tiny bowl set in the base of her mouth, watching what lays in the bowl, a twitching bleeding thing. The only thing that is still, that keeps this world from skipping through the universe, August's hand, holding Loralie's tongue. Bleeding. When the chair fell back, cut clean through the tip of her tongue. Blood pooling long seconds in the bowl before August tore the tape away. And Roses wondering, what flavour has she lost? Salt? Has Roses cut salt away? Salt blood. Roses remembering the old man Potter saying, “no dog's ever bled to death from a cut to the tongue,” saying, “could cut

the whole tongue away and still it wouldn't bleed to death." But a dog's tongue is flat. And now, without salt, so is Loralie's.

Roses never meant a thing by it. It was Duggs, Duggs telling her that water set to boil took the same amount of time, whether you started with hot or cold. But its a goddamned lie. Roses knows its a goddamned lie. But every last one of them, believing him. Saying, "Duggs would know Roses, Duggs would know." So she sets the burner on high, bringing the cold to a boil, and counting seconds. Then the hot. And again. And again.

"Duggs," she says, "come take a look at this." But Duggs just set her to the task again, saying she must've done it wrong.

"Everyone else can bring them to a boil at once, Roses, must be you."

Even Bat. Bat moves over with Eva and together they bring it to a boil at once. Roses boils water over and over again. A tiny Bat turning fleshless in the beaker. Maybe, at the end of the term she will be qualified to make tea, maybe. But that's all. The others onto frogs now, and Roses with the beakers still. Still, she doesn't hate Duggs, just knows its a lie. That somewhere, someone decreed that this would be the beginning, maybe in preparation for a war.

Roses is up early the next morning, boiling water, over and over again. Eventually, after the twin kettles have come to a boil, six, seven times, she will make coffee. Loralie slumped in the kitchen chair where Roses left her. She sleeps like a child, limp as a doll. Roses takes the tweed rope from the closet and binds Loralie's limbs. Now Loralie is boiling water, over and over again. "Hot or cold," she says, looking at Loralie, "which is it, "hot" or "cold.""

Bat stands on the fire escape. Unable to decipher the heap of bone and blood that is Loralie and August. "The rabbits are loose," he says, lamely.

And they are, though Roses never forgets the hutch door. Right now, Roses is thinking of a temperature at which all things stop, simply stop.

Like the rabbits, which leap about the yard before freezing of a sudden, forming a shifting tableau. They leap around and past her, stilling like blunt pillars of salt behind her, just out of arm's reach. "Don't look back," they seem to whisper, though Roses know's not one of them is married to Lot. The yard is riddled with rabbits. Pluck a small bundle up and drop it in the hutch. When there are no white rabbits left, Roses looks over the fence at the Mchalnuts'

vegetable garden. The remains. Sure enough, rabbits nibble at the desiccated greens, purple veined. Turnip top, maybe. Roses crawls under the fence, calling out *conejo coniglio gibbelote*. The rabbits scatter. *Coniculus rabidus multum pollere*, and one, one approaches. Roses catches the little bundle up by its ears and folds it into her chest. Slips under the fence and drops the small beating thing into the hutch. Slips back into the McHalnuts' yard, counting desperately. But they are all white. Like the night in August's truck, the individual trajectories of a thousand flakes of snow are made clear, then dashed, and she too dissolves, whoosh, into the window. The same dizzy feel to it, like her hands – white hand there and there, maybe a foot there, belly curled by the lettuce row and her hairless head set over by the step. No, she says, no no. Just the rabbits I can see. Leave the other rabbits for another time, come collect them next week. She bellies under the back fence, crawling close. Hello, Mrs. McHalnut, she says to the parted slat. On hands and knees, creeping. Elba snaps the jalousie shut and sets Dirt on Roses.

Dirt's as old and stinking as a live dog can get. But there's a move or two left in the old dog, and his stagger is deceptive, the gentle set of his jaws, too. He trips, just trips over it, eyes so bad, but that nose tells him to snap, just to snap. And Roses can hear August turning the truck over, what now? The alternator belt, tired rubber, riddled with dry cracks, cries like that whenever you shift into first. Roses' sister swallows that precious noise inside of her, leaving Roses to think of August's truck. She doesn't think about her hands, covered in blood and spit, thumbs forcing the old dog's jaws open, or the limp torn rag that is finally released. It is Tuesday, her sister tells her. Tonight Elba will be taken to play bridge by Bat's mother, her one constant charity (aside from Roses). Billy McHalnut will play a hand or two of cards with August before losing gracefully, and his son, Billy Jr. will study for the physics midterm, and stare himself blind at the vague dark space that is Roses' window. Roses can see him at night, his humped silhouette, his featureless face staring round as a pumpkin, and sometimes she slowly, so slowly drops her dress to shoulders, to waist, to waste, before sliding the blinds closed, sharp as a slap.

Roses wants to lay it all out for Elba, start with the rabbit corpse, then the limp rag which is Loralie, half-conscious on her kitchen floor. Wants to tell Elba what Billy's doing when she plays cards Tuesday nights. Roses wouldn't hesitate to drag Loralie's corpse under the fence, if that's what it was, lay it all out for Elba. Her own dress dropped to the waste the waist and Billy Jr. staring over his shoulder. Point then to the bloody hole that services Billy on Tuesday nights, between ten and ten fifteen, before sliding the blind shut. The blind shut. But she knows

Elba, knows she'd have to tell it over and over again.

The meat is spoiled and the skin is ruined. Dirt sniffing after. Roses climbs onto the Mchalnuts' back stoop and knocks at the jalousie window. When the slat parts she is kneeling before Dirt, corpse in hand, leading the old dog back through the hole and into her yard. She ties the dog up, and throws him the corpse. The back door is slightly ajar, and she can hear the angry clatter of breakfast dishes over the low thrum of morning conversation, Harvey's none too pleased with August. Roses climbs the fire escape rather than pass through the public space her back room has become. Rather than pass some man or another on the inside steps, emerging from a paid-for bed or the smell of the shared bathroom she'll clean later, in her white pants and shirt. The clothes erasing all that is personal. Smoothing the sharp blades of her shoulders, the jut of hip, her face blanching, all colour absorbed by the ubiquitous whites. Roses stands on the balcony. August won't look her in the eye. He is on the phone with the doctor, saying, can't you stitch it up? Can't you do something? Come out and take a look then. Bat is holding a bloody ice cube to the space between Loralie's lips, the stump of tongue. Loralie's eyelids flutter. Loralie. All day it will be the same bone-tired thought of Loralie. Loralie. The word repeated until it is senseless.

*Roses, 22 June(17 roses)*

Until, certain she knows no more words for rabbit, she draws herself a bath. But not before loading her dead father's Luger (1908 -- a real beauty). She slides the gun under her mattress, and then, on second thought, into her night table drawer, admiring the elegance of it, the heft. She doesn't once consider its awful utility. Tonight it is one of a dozen small semaphores, like the cut of her panties, that minutely calibrate her mood. Billy Mchalnurt surmises the cut of her panties immediately, from the swivel of hips, the faint sensation of iced taffy on his tongue (so like gold lamé). He doesn't once look up from his game of cards, even as his chin sends neuronal shockwaves to his brain, impressions of skimming catlike the perfumed cotton gutter.

Loralie hangs over August's shoulder, trying to count plastic tokens, but the riot of colour dismays her. The boys are playing a version of rum, she thinks, draw five cards, throw down your triplets, discard high, and boom, the cards laid out on the table, all round. Mike the Pike keeping score. The deal rotating. Loralie follows the deal, leaning over one shoulder and the next. Wondering why they play at one remove, why the fold of bills under the box and the toss of chips, red green blue. She watches August play two hands off, just playing for the low, and not the win, then of a sudden he is grasping the face cards, holding them in, and not even blinking at the discard, but counting, counting. And his card comes up, and shoots him through the moon. Billy never seemed to catch on, August taking the hand but low, low. And of a sudden the points thrown down, never caught out because he's counting the cards and Mike the Pike is to his right. Loralie is sitting, now that she's caught sight of Roses, sitting at the dinner table, sighing and salting her meat. Slowly licks her lip with the stump of tongue, feels the thin hurt of scar. The wound tastes slight, not salt. She thinks it will scar nicely. She imagines the blunt ridge playing across the uncut tip of August's sex, exciting pleasure and guilt at once, guilt without a trace of remorse. But this slight lick is too much and opens the wound. A tiny spray of blood, on her hand, her blouse. Loralie turns away from Roses and swallows. Closes her mouth, tight. Loralie has taught herself to cover her mouth when she laughs, as though laughter carried some potential threat, or was the medium of some vague viral infection. Her hand hovers over her lip, has hovered, just so, since the chair fell back.

Roses circles the table, it amuses her that Billy has never caught on to the arrangement, or if he has, assumes that Loralie is worth the price. As she leans over Billy's shoulder he is certain he will have her tonight, all that is left to guesswork is the price. He imagines it will be low. But Roses kisses August on the cheek and leaves. She'll be back, he thinks, with a shoulder of her dress torn or a bruised cheek, some such device. Billy chuckles to himself and August looks up. It is almost as though August can divine Billy's thoughts. Almost, Billy tells himself, but not quite. August looks bemused. He lays down his cards. Damn, Billy mutters, if Roses isn't back soon, I'll have paid for Loralie. Billy knows that it is Loralie's price folded under the box, the only formality is moving the chips to August.

On Tuesday nights, Loralie shares the room with Cole. Ali Cole had was a couple hours on Tuesday with her man, when her husband was working the swing shift. She paid half the room, and left by ten. She is still upstairs when Loralie leads Billy up, they can hear the quiet curses slipping under the door. Billy stands on the stairs, the second floor roof rattling a little. Just a little. As Loralie slips in the room, Billy finds himself walking up, wondering what could shake the floor, a bit of dust falling now, and then silence. Broken by the shrill tones of the women below. He can hear Loralie telling Cole that if her man ain't finished by now, its an undertaker he needs, not a woman. Billy said that on their way up, it's something Loralie couldn't have thought up on her own. Billy heard it himself somewhere, or read it in a book. Now he has passed through the doorway, and stands outside of Roses' room, and his fingers trace the doorframe, the soft ochre paint beginning to peel. The frame isn't justified, and he surmises that the whole foundation shifts, slightly, to the east.

His boy's voice breaks with disappointment, and Roses' monochrome voice coldly performs the scales. Footsteps, and Billy backs away from the door in confusion. Could we try again, his boy asks. And Billy forgets the money he's lost to August, forgets Loralie and Cole, struggling in a rectangle of light some place below him, slumps down in the hall facing Roses' closed door. Loralie's voice up the stairwell, yelling, "Billy, c'mon Billy, tell her. Billy Mchalnut's paid already, I gotta get this room, Cole. Billy? Billy? Tell her Billy." Billy's slumped in the hall, thinking, can't you just shut up. The creaking steps of salesmen and travellers below him, leaning into their doors, and listening.

Billy Jr.'s voice sliding out from under the door, spilling with the light and laughter, Roses' cold laughter. The door flung wide and the light spilling onto Billy now, Billy Jr. following, saying, "Pap, what are you doing here? What about Momma?" And he isn't wearing

the suit his Mother bought him now. Billy, looking at his son, thinks, his shoulders aren't so stooped, its that damned suit. Saying quietly, "yes, what about Mother?" Looking into Billy Jr.'s eyes. Billy nods and turns back to Roses, to collect his stoop-shoulder suit, a bit of pride, maybe, he dropped with his pants by the bedside. He'll have the hump and the tea on before his Mother comes home from bridge. His Pap reading the paper, smiling thinly and kissing the questioning wrinkles from her forehead, and saying, again, and again, and again, "that's Billy Jr. right there. You know our Billy? Don't you? He's aged some, sure. Don't cry, Mother, of course he wouldn't hold it against you. How was bridge? You don't say, no, I hadn't noticed how much Loraine had aged. Have a cup of tea, Mother. Billy Jr., rub Mother's feet, can't you see, she's had quite a shock." But the lines get worn with time and are delivered poorly, the script gets old.

Billy Jr. turns to Roses, her dress is unbuttoned, sleeves wrapped round her arms, fabric falling back from the protruding ribs like a half-skinned rabbit. The triangle of pubis peppered with black hair, visible through the slit of her dress. "Stupid whore."

"Two hundred dollars," she answers.

"But I didn't even get ten minutes!"

"Should've settled the price before you began." Billy Jr. hears his father's voice from the doorframe, knows he is looking down at Roses on the bed and he feels soft. Protective. Feels it is wrong for Roses to be seen this way by anyone but Billy Jr. himself.

Billy steps towards his father, swinging the door closed behind him. "Pap, he says, lend me the money? I'll work it off in the store." His father nods. Billy slips through the crack of door and lays the money out on Roses' night table. "Sorry about --" Pap, he was about to say. But that would sound childish. Billy Jr. is a man now, he doesn't have to apologize to anyone. Except his mother. "Nothing. Sorry for nothing." Roses hasn't covered herself. She lays on the bed, blind. Her eyes don't register Billy Jr. or his borrowed money. He might as well pocket it, he thinks. But he isn't certain she wouldn't strike him down with those cold slit eyes, all white, he isn't sure about anything as far as Roses is concerned, not anymore. He lays a dollar on the night table, next to the two hundred. A tip, like a waitress or hairdresser. Then lays down another three. "That's four dollars. Right there." He doesn't want to seem unworldly. But he wants her to acknowledge the money, to nod or blink or move an arm. To strike him down if that's what it takes, so long as she acknowledges him. Him. Billy Mchalnut Junior. His Pap didn't pay two hundred dollars for him to be ignored.

Billy stands over Roses for a full minute. He's paid for the privilege, he reminds himself.

But the whites of Roses' eyes unnerve him, and he backs away. Watching her expressionless face for some change, a heave of chest, maybe, a suck of air through teeth, bared though they might be. Nothing. Nothing. He wonders how long she has laid like that, and time. Time. Maybe she's laid like that all along, laid under him, blind and unconcerned even as he struggled to enter her. Billy McHanut Junior screwing a blind, half-skinned rabbit. Not Roses, Roses slipped away and left the half-skinned corpse on her bed. Nobody can know this but Billy.

Billy's shoulders hunch into his suit jacket. He leans over the bed and fingers the loose folds of skin, of her dress, he reminds himself. He can't help feeling that he is somehow responsible. That he did this to her. And then he feels better. It is not something that Roses is doing to him, but something that Billy has done to her. His sex has somehow rendered her corpse-like and blind. Billy leaves the door open behind him. Let them see what Billy's done. Let them see what Billy's done to Roses.

Roses in the rabbit skin is dreaming of a silver airstream.

She imagines running from shit poor town to town, sleeping in one dirty stinking hotel room after another. She'd remember the bathrooms. At the De'ath Inn there are three rooms with private bathrooms, all on the third floor. The second floor rooms share a single bathroom. There is a small hook latch and a broken toilet dispenser -- Roses tried to put the roll on the wooden lathe and the hinge slipped and the paper slid into the waste basket. Roses knows these details, her geographical knowledge of the world is laid out in lists of minutiae. The centre of the world is the back room of the De'ath Inn, papered in a dusty rose, a raised black brocade. If you rent a room it is with the illusion of newly papered walls. But you find yourself in a cold place. So cold, so cold. All yellow peeling paper, mattress soiled, metal coils biting into your back and a rust stain like a running wound in the sink.

A silver airstream.

A silver airstream is like a bullet in the temple. Roses can't imagine why anyone would drag the same old motel room after them, night after night. Why they would erect the same room at the side of some macadam road in what might as well be the same old town, night after night. Why anyone would prefer the same old same old squalor over the possibilities of someone else's dirt. The day they hooked an airstream up to August's pick-up (which was not likely) would be the last day Roses ever took it out. It would sit and rot. A closed museum. She would pierce the gunmetal sides with nails, board up the windows, remove the wheels and ground it on bricks. Fill

it with rabbits.

As Roses in the rabbit skin lays dreaming, Bat passes the McHalnuts in the foyer. Strange that McHalnut would bring his son. Bat knows him slightly, they attend the same high school, though Billy Jr. is a junior. Billy Jr. glances sidewise at Bat and snickers. Won't be good for Roses, Bat knows, Billy'll have it all over school by lunch period. Roses living in what amounts to a whore house. Not that Roses'll notice. Aside from physics, she spent her days at the hotel.

August is in the back room, playing cards with Mike the Pike and three others. A man stands by the stairs, who, for all his attitude, should be wearing a black fedora and fingering his belt. August looks from Bat to the Pike's companion and nods his head. Bat takes the steps two at a time. Roses' door is open and her light is on. Her open eyes shifting. Roses is dreaming. Small twitching dreams on her eyelid and thigh. Trembling.

Her dress is open.

Bat slowly constructs a sentence. It is slow work, and the phrases threaten to fly apart, the subject leaping away as he composes the sense. He thinks, Roses is dreaming with the lights on. Yes. Roses is. Dreaming with the lights on there is. A lot of money on the night table and Roses is. Dreaming with her eyes open. His fingers slowly draw the door closed, but for a crack, a slim interstice to connect him with Roses thighs and the black of her pubis and eyes, dreaming with her eyes. Open. Better yet, turn and go.

"Bat," she murmurs.

Yeah, Roses. Bat's thorax contracts like a flicked bug.

"Bat."

"Yeah, Roses." This time the words out loud.

"Is there an airstream in the driveway?"

"No, Roses."

"Good."

Bat, standing over her now, thinks of whiskey. The smell of whiskey. The way that it is processed, assimilated, becoming protoplasm, before being broken down into simple substances, into breath and sweat, a faint odour that clings to the scrotum, and the drapes, and Roses' dress. Bat hopes that Roses has been drinking, that she has been drinking a lot. He can't bear the other thought. That the whiskey he smells is what remains, that and the money.

She is asleep.

Bat will slip Roses from her dress and cover her with a blanket, ease her into the sheets like a sleeping child. If his hands will stop shaking. Bat has the irrational urge to take the money from the night table, to button her dress and take the money, to render it all a lie. But then he remembers Roses in physics class. Roses boiling water over and over again. He knows if he does this thing now he will never again be able to enter her room and find her any other way. Bat closes the door, leaving Roses dreaming with her eyes open as he found her. Walks down the steps, one at a time. The back room abandoned now. Though the rattle persists. He enters the kitchen and looks in the pantry for the swish bottle.

Get what you came for?

August places two shot glasses on the kitchen counter, pours them each a drink. For some reason, there is no one on earth Bat would rather share a drink with at this moment.

Answer my question.

Yeah, Bat says, I got what I came for.

August shrugs and takes a long drag of his cigarette. Maybe August knows what story Bat's heard, knows Roses just let it go, let it all go. Maybe he says to himself, let Bat figure what he can from the scraps overheard on the telephone, small lines in the paper maybe, things his mother and father whispered together when they had no idea he was near. As far as Roses was concerned, there was nothing to tell, so of course she didn't tell him, the story wasn't hers. Maybe August thinks about telling Bat about the field, what it really was like in the field. Not the hard cold way they tell it, by habit, but the softness of the man. Roses' father. Long gone now, just the shell of the place falling in on itself. An old stoop, like a dock almost, but no water to edge into, no house to make it a stoop either. Just the boards nailed in air, almost. But for memory. August knows what Roses was doing on the wrong end of the gun. Maybe he'd be the one to find the words to tell Bat. Tell him she was just daring the worst and knowing if its coming nothing but nothing is going to stop it, but she'll look it in the face, always, where ever she is, she's looking in the face of the worst, so it can't ever slide into her slow, like it did Mother De'ath. Course it took those peeping-boys some time about their discovery, weeks before they told what they saw in the field that day. Roses had no knowledge of it, she was the only one in town who didn't hear her own story, or the eye-witness account. Just the whispering silence where ever she walked. For a time, there was nothing she could do wrong. Then it turned. It turned so that maybe, they thought, it was her even then, her turning the wrong end of the gun. Thought, but didn't say. That maybe they should've let the old man be, not his fault, then, not

the fault of his bird leg, her turning the wrong end of the gun. Came to see it as Roses had, from the first, and despised her for what they had done for her. Maybe, August, looking at Bat looking in on Roses and seeing what she was, seeing the way he despised her for what he hadn't done for her, thinks about telling Bat about his own people, but from the outside in. Maybe he *thinks*, but doesn't. Just pours another drink. Maybe content to watch Bat's wondering look of *hurt*. Maybe saddened by it. Maybe thinking it somehow paid a little, for the old man, for Roses. August does look Bat over and say, why don't you lay up with Loralie tonight, she'll be free in a couple of minutes.

Bat doubling, from the swish or the blow of dreaming eyes or the hot and cold of it, he doesn't know, just the gut turning to water, warm water and he's running up the steps to the washroom on the second floor. Has to strip down, remove the soiled pants and underpants and clean himself up good. The cool water on his face, rust coloured water that never seemed to run clean. And he steps into the hall, shirt hanging, sex hanging, arms hanging low, and Loralie's waiting, August's steps ascending out of earshot, and she smiles at him, and says and says and says just so. She says it just so.

Wipe your mind clear of the old man Potter's field, of the bird leg and the talk. The bird leg first of all. Wasn't mentioned in any of the stories he read, just whispered here and there. The thing that struck him through. She says, without saying, come with me and wipe your mind clear of dreaming rabbit skins and love, yes love. Wipe your mind clear of that place that was never meant for you, that place that never was. The hot of it, right here. Yes, the hot of it, come touch the hot of it, wipe clear your mind touch the hot of it, right here. And its better this way, just turn and go from that place, and yes, yes, here is yes, here. Just so.

The sleepless turning of lonely salesmen, turning under sheets that Roses washes herself each morning. Do they know the quiet damp of the basement where the sheets are folded by Roses and a woman who knows just how to wipe the mind clear, yes, she comes down to Roses and for a time, each day, the hardness is some place else. Certainly not in the sheets, each woman grasping two corners and folding each into each other. Roses as white as the sheets in her uniform and the woman who knows just how to wipe any old mind in any old thing she finds, sometimes an old work shirt of August's. The clean fold. Nothing of her hip erased. Nothing of her blanching, or paled. Just without names, just so. And this woman with her, all quiet in her whites not needing the clean sweep, but holding it in her somehow. Neither needing anything from the other, but the clean fold, each into each. Maybe one bends the head, just so, into the

hand. Nothing of the girl Mother De'ath lead out to the Potter's field. Here. Nothing of the  
whore. Here. Just something in the door that's bothersome. Something in the memory of the door  
leading up.

*Roses, June(12 blood-red roses)*

Maybe, she thinks, I'll open that door and be twelve, and Mother De'ath'll be waiting for me, to take me out to the old man Potter's field. Maybe I'm folding the sheet that will lay over the man, the passer-by in a slick automobile, who'll stop at the side of the concession road and stare to the line, jack pines bent like wild men and something like wheat. A clutch of pampas grass. Maybe I'm making a clean fold of the sheet of the man who sees something idyllic in the old man who leads a dog towards the jack pines, who'll snatch a photo, who'll piss into the wind.

Right then Mother De'ath wasn't Mother De'ath. She too was a tourist. Roses **knew** better than to disabuse her, hands like bones clutching at Roses' wrist. If Roses' stumbled those hands would pull her up. Wouldn't they? Wouldn't she fall into the haunch, wouldn't the haunch sag and grunt, and wouldn't the bone grip grow taut?

When Roses was twelve, Mother De'ath took her out to the old man Potter's field. The field was no place for little girls, unless they travelled in packs to pelt the old man Potter with stones. Old man Potter's field was the place for an old and sick dog, where for five dollars, the old man Potter would set the stupid beast's occluded eyes staring to the line, open a hole in the back of its skull with a shotgun.

Stop and peer, maybe, like now, at something on the trail. Maybe think the frog is breathing. The place where blue-black beetles hive through the belly, laying eggs in its wide mouth. The frog carcass would be flat as an envelope, but for the swarming beetles which seemed to fill its paunch with the seethe of viscera. Mother De'ath flicks the carcass aside with her foot and Roses watches as a sow bug crawls down Mother De'ath's ankle and disappears inside of her shoe.

Roses sits on the old man's stoop and chews her hair. Mother De'ath smooths the front of her dress, slips bone white fingers in her purse, fusses, runs fingers through Roses' hair, cussing herself for not thinking to bring a comb. She asks Roses to spit on the hem of her dress and rubs her chin, searching the tracks for signs of the old man's pick-up. "It's growing dark,

Roses, and I'd best be starting back for town. You wait here for the old man, he'll know what to do."

Roses' eyes locked on Mother De'ath's shoe, wondering how far she'll walk before the sow beetles crawl from her mouth, lay eggs in her eyes. Roses knows her mother is dead, though walking, something of the crows that fly over her, the crawlers that open up the secret dead under her feet. This woman before her is a tourist, a stranger. Roses lets the strange woman pin five dollars to the front of her blouse, it is all the same to her. And then she waits, inside of the airstream, for the old man to appear. The old man's gun, hung at an angle, over the door. She kneels beneath the shotgun, preparing a path for the bullet, a slim passage between the barrel of the gun and her mouth, which is open a little.

Roses down the rabbit hole doesn't stop to consider her situation. To put the marmalade back into the cupboard as she falls seems too much to ask. Instead, she falls into the rhythm of falling, makes anagrams of the wooden letters that litter the kitchen floor, swats at a shifting constellation of fruit flies hovering over the sinkful of dirty dishes.

This is what Roses knows. She knows that old men sit and drink coffee at the diner on King Street, *La Toit Rouge*, they sputter stories through chalk teeth. That Portugal is a naked woman laid topographically over the world, or else she is a month, perhaps she is June. That the white rabbit Alice followed into the tunnel that day probably put its tongue into her mouth, though the sex of a rabbit is no more than a newborn's thumb. That the old man will probably want to squeeze her nipple between forefinger and thumb, much the way that August did as he taught her to sex the chickens. That if you squeeze too hard, the chick will die, its sex hanging from your thumb like the insides of a clam.

The old man Potter is as near a dwarf as you can get, while still being a grown man. Roses had only ever seen him scuttling through the fields at a distance, had never noticed the thickness of wrist and finger, the way rolls of skin slid from his neck into his collapsed chest, like an erect and hairless rabbit. Away from the tree line, accompanied only by his dogs, the old man Potter looked like any other man. It was only in relation to Roses herself that his obtuse dwarfism became pronounced. Roses looks up from where she kneels.

"I'm late," he grumbles.

Roses is wearing one of the old man's soiled undershirts, which she plucked from a heap by the door. She slides under his blankets and pulls on her jeans. Time is no longer her concern,

she stares at the small fray in the blanket, pulls at the thread, feels the weight of the woollen fabric on her head as she sits up. Where her skin is bare, the urge to scratch. Roses runs fingers across her scalp, counting black fly bites. Flicking loose scabs with her fingernails.

"I'm late."

Roses rises from the blanket and slips her blouse over the old man's shirt.

"What's this?" The old man fingers the five dollar bill, slips it into his pocket and brings his face close to Roses'. "What's your name?"

Roses runs fingers across the braille of her scalp and considers her options. "Alice," she lies.

"Go home, Alice."

"I can skin a rabbit in a minute flat."

The old man grunts and picks up his gun.

Roses kneels before the old man, her eyes, white, stare blindly ahead. She prepares a path for the bullet, a slim passage between the barrel of the gun and her mouth, which is open a little. Roses slowly unbuttons her blouse, fit to die in an old man's undershirt. Which is soiled, already. She folds the blouse over her knees. Places it on the ground beside her.

"Stop that," he mutters.

Roses can feel his eyes, the doubled pupil, scattering from the sight. Looks ahead at the small humped form pricking its ears at something it hears just past the line. Watches as a red mouth opens in its back. What would it have said, she wonders, if the bullet had slowed and the mouth had spoke? What word was it so desperately trying to articulate with its opened flesh?

"Damn it, girl."

But Roses is off and running, she slips the knife from her pocket and cases the skin open, as August has taught her. The old man peering over her shoulder at her work. She slits the sac of stomach and large intestine open, to scry its secret word, before tossing the offal to the dogs. Roses cleans her knife on the grass when she is done, the corpse, childlike, dangling from her hand.

The old man takes the carcass from her and scuttles homeward. Roses' slow strides behind. Roses stops at the draw behind the airstream and strips down to her panties, walks into the water slowly, avoiding the minute green storm clouds that float just under the surface.

When Roses emerges, her long legs support a colony of leeches. August sits on the stoop, cigarette in one hand, whiskey in the other. The old man beside him, hiking trouser leg above his knee. Roses looks at the scaled flesh, the protective scutate surface, at the bird's leg. August flicks his cigarette and takes a long drag, drawing the ember to a pitch, before turning it on Roses. He starts by her thigh and slowly works his way down. The old man's dogs, gathered under the stoop, snap jaws at the charred bloody worms. August burns each worm twice, the first burn leaves the flattened body dangling from its second mouth.

Roses is angry at August, angry at him for telling the dwarf her real name, for imposing Mother De'ath on yet another identity. Roses thinks maybe, when August finishes, he will back his pick-up into the old man's airstream and pull away. Leave Roses alone on the stoop, disengaged from all context, a dock in the midst of a desert, promising everything, delivering nothing. Roses sits cross-legged at the nulla, wooden letters scattered in the dust at her feet. Roses and her anagrams, spelling and dispelling the sea.

Roses takes the cigarette from August's fingers, careful not to look at his hands, just the draw of red hot and the long white stick of it. She burns each of a half dozen leeches, so that they dangle, half dead, from a bare purchase on her knee. She coldly dispatches the rest, and begins to experiment with these six. Listens to the hoarse voice of adult grief for a time, before turning cold child eyes on August. Practical eyes. Eyes that know that dishes must be done and dinner served, no matter who or what was dead or gone. "Mother De'ath was crazy," she says, "like a tourist, and now she's dead." Roses has forgotten her dangling annelids, she is watching for the hurt to bleed from August's eyes, for him to explode somehow, burst like a blood vessel, so what was left could get on with things.

"Your momma's not dead," he says, "sick, just sick Roses, sick."

She's put away. Like an old cracked ceramic bowl, Roses thinks, put away in the back of a cupboard some place, or in a box in the basement, up in the attic maybe. Put away with the cracked and broken things that nobody can find a use for. A doll with one eye, a cart with a broken axle and the wood base cracked in a violin, can't nobody fix a cracked violin, though could sew another button eye, attach another wheel. Cracked, like an unloved violin, even Roses knew they had to be played, kept from the cold the hot the damp the dry, and played. Can't bear to burn the wood of it even, cause of what it once sang. That's where Mother De'ath is now, with the cracked violins that can't ever be played again.

"We had to, Roses."

"She told me you would. You come to take me home?"

"Not exactly, Roses. Not exactly."

"What then?" Can't put me away, she thinks. No basement or attic or box of unloved cracked old things for me. Can they hear me singing?

"I thought I'd leave you with your father."

"By the river? Why would you leave me by the river?"

"If you can call that a river," he says, eyes skitting over the sulphuric green surface of the draw.

"By the river." Roses has his eyes now, has them caught still. "By the river." No white to the eyes now, black. Just black. Slatted close, like louvres. "By the river, August, where he lives under the stone?"

"August," the old man says, shifting his bird leg, "that's no place for the girl, just now. She can stay with me a while."

Then they are talking of broken violins again, though its dinner time, and that crazy old thing that couldn't sing. Roses applying leeches to the old man's calf. They find no purchase on the reptilian scales and fall away, or turn back on Roses, sucking the palm of her hand. When she has rendered the last leech a greasy smear she turns stomach-big eyes on August.

"What's buried in my father's grave," she asks and the bird leg starts shuffling. "Mother De'ath asked me to write her when I knew."

August looks out on the draw for a long time. So long she thinks he will not answer. She is hungry, now, really hungry, and wonders when they will think to eat. "You want to be clever" he says, finally, "you just send Mother De'ath an empty envelope, that'll keep her busy a while." August is looking at the empty hungry space inside of Roses' belly, now, at Roses' twin. Roses wonders why the dead twin has been left dangling from her slim purchase, why she hasn't been completely cut away. Why she still senses a stranger's pull, the drag, the dead half of her twin hanging from her navel like the ruined head of a leech.

Mother De'ath speaking to the dead half of her now, not Roses. No, not Roses. Mother De'ath whispering to her sister, "what is the matter with Roses?" she asks.

"The scar on my navel is from the doctor's spoon," Roses says, "the doctor pulled too hard with his spoon and tore my belly open, just so."

"No," Mother De'ath whispers, "no no no. That's where we cut away your sister, or

most of her, you still have her womb, you know, a little sac. We named you Rose, originally, your sister, too.”

“You named my vagina?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she whispers, “it’s not your vagina, it’s your sister’s womb, and it’s still your sister’s, it just happens to be inside of you. Besides, I named the part of her that hung out of your navel that too, its what she would have been named, had she lived.”

“But her womb’s still living.”

“Born without bones, your sister, excepting the tiny skull, which was like an egg-cup. Just hung from your belly, like a little jelly-fish, a discrete sac. But the forceps mashed and tore her, so there was no helping her, either way. I fell asleep outside of the operating room, when they cut her away, and she came to me then. Whispered your name. Rose, Roses.”

Mother De’ath ignores Roses and speaks to her navel. Asks Roses’ belly buttons little questions and nods her head sagely. She asks, “and is Roses feeding you? and do you sing? and do you miss me? and have you had a bowel movement today?” Roses backing out of the kitchen slowly, her hip nodding her belly’s mouth, so that the little lips whisper “yes, momma, Roses’ taking care of me, and yes, momma, I sing and miss and had and I.” Then Roses is running, through the hall and out the back door and she slams the door closed, behind, closed tight, and out towards Bat. Bat with his oven mitts to sleep at night, Loraine ties them to his wrists, and Bat with his little games of jacks and his collection of dead things caught in rock and then Roses turns and turns, uncertain what way to run now, turns and turns, then runs back through the gulley to the hotel, and back into the hutch, the rabbit hutch, where she will live on grain and wilted lettuce, and seconds of all sorts, and when they discover her hairless, wrinkled body in sixty, seventy years, she will know only rabbit words and know only rabbits, but not be a wild-girl because the rabbits are tame, so they won’t want to study her but dissect her and get a good look at the hole that was her sister. Match it to her remains, maybe, what’s left in the pickle jar. In a corner of the hotel basement, on a pine shelf, hidden behind the peach preserves.

That’s where August finds her shaking and shaking in a pile of rabbit turds. Lifting the lid on her to find the stew bones, still wrapped in fur, and little Roses shaking and shaking, fists pressed close against her belly, and he leans into the hutch and says, “c’mon girl, it’s time you learned how to sex a chicken.” There is a thread pulled from her knitted sweater now, trailing long, worried through long fingers to hang past her thighs to the ground.

*sister-roses, July(12 blood-read roses)*

Roses' twin is a little girl with a thread hanging from her belly. There are little beads on the thread. Each bead is an object in time. When they come to take Roses from the old man's airstream, she struggles. She bites Loraine and glares at the blue-men with crow-glitter badges and dares the black winged birds to sweep down out of the sky and pluck their eyes clean. Her twin whispers, "quiet, quiet." And Roses knows that her twin would have calmly accompanied Loraine, all the while selecting beads from the thread, so she could lay a story out in the small word-things that trailed from her belly. Maybe pluck a chicken from her navel and sex it for the men in blue. She certainly would have convinced them to let her live as she wanted, and, Roses conjectures, lance the malignant tumour that towered above her.

Roses' twin would not have been upset at Mother De'ath's whispering, would simply have appended details of the faecal matter she passed each morning to the trailing thread. She wouldn't have deserved an unkind word, a slap, a corrective turn, wouldn't have deserved any of the harsh treatment she received at the hands of the calloused world. The world would be a small bead suspended from the slim umbilical cord that trailed behind her as she teetered forth to make morning tea. She would have been too quietly contented to drink coffee. She would have sold off the rabbits, sliced the hogshead in two, filling the halves with white rhododendrons firmly rooted in a 1 to 1 to 3 manure, peat moss, topsoil mix. She would have cared for Mother De'ath, or hired someone competent and smelling of starch to do so for her. If she had the chance. Roses would have ripped the creature from her belly long before the rabbits were sold, had the monster-head dreamt of sliced barrels, white rhododendrons and faecal matter appended to a string. But it hadn't. The little creature seemed to like Roses, and mocha java. Yes, it possessed her, but it also gave her dreams.

For a time, the monster-head lived and prospered, the umbilical cord dragged long miles behind and the beads were the scraps and debris plucked from Roses' mind. The crumbs from the table top. Dancing footprints. An empty envelope. Her sister had no notion of time, didn't obey the demands of chronological narrative, but stole, indiscriminately, from future as well as past. The Class VIII, parasitic terata, under the pinch of forceps, was rendered like the insides

of a clam, enveloping small things inside of Roses and sealing them away. The shape of a fire before it was lit. The knives. The knives.

The first morning Roses' woke at Loraine's, she knew to build the fire, she knew where to find the oak burls, shaped like triangles, and where to find the newspaper. She knew she would need matches and that the matches would have to be lit. Roses knew to stack the wood in the cast iron stove, and she did. She stacked the triangular burls like a four year old at play. Made towers and castles, laid the newspapers up against the towers and lit them. But the papers were damp and the wood was stacked high and the damper was closed. Roses had forgotten all but the most elemental of shapes. She did not know the shape of a fire before it was lit.

Roses did not know the shape of a boot. She could lay the boot by the corpse and place the knife in her hands and look from the boot to the rabbit and nothing. And then not even the corpse. The rabbit wandering from patch to patch, the mallet in her hand, still, and nothing. Bat would tell her stories of how she had once been able to skin a rabbit in less than a minute flat and Roses would just shake her head in wonder.

One day the little monster-head sealed itself in a membranous sac and simply disappeared. Roses forgot about the twinned womb and the parasite, though, when first waking, she had the sensation of slim tentacles extending through her body like a second set of nerves. But the tentacles slowly atrophied and Roses awoke with the urge to slam fists into her belly, over and over again. Then that was gone and she awoke forgetting a dream and feeling something invisible beating at her, just beating and beating, or wings maybe, angry and flying. The sense of being alone in the world, as it broke like teeth, or slipped into the sea. The desperation with which she came to grasp the small things she alone knew. That hot water came to a boil before cold. How to pinch a chick between forefinger and thumb and remember something for an instant, before the insides turned out and the chick died and forks. She knew the shape of forks, though she had to stab a pickle fork into the palm of her hand to know, really know, and spoons, the constant terror of spoons, like open wounds by Loraine's dinner plates. Though one day knives were just gone.

Loraine had to set the knives out herself each night, because Roses never came for them, no matter how many times she was asked. Loraine finally sat the girl down and put a knife in her hand, but her hand fell limp and her eyes went white and the knife fell to the floor with a clatter which seemed to wake her. And then she went on with the plates and the forks, as though

nothing had happened. Loraine, taught all her life to go on as though nothing had happened, had finally had to accept the fact that the girl lived in a world without knives. Though guns were another matter entirely. In fact, it was the keeping of the shape of Jonathan's gun from Roses which was a struggle. It wasn't every knife that disappeared, just Loraine's. And that bothered Loraine a little. Like maybe it could just as easily have been Loraine that vanished.

After a time with Loraine, Roses could list the things that she knew in a single sentence. She knew that the soup spoon existed by the plate with the bowl on it; that the pickle fork existed when the tongs bit her palm, and then vinegar existed; that the oven mitts existed each night when Loraine tied them to Bat's wrists and Bat's hands ceased to exist each night that he wore them, though his sex never ceased to exist, no matter how hot the red rash from the rough asbestos gloves, a rash she knew the taste of, though there was no word for the taste, or the damp dark place she lead him to, time to time; that Roses existed each night he wore them, hairless, like a skinned rabbit; and yes, the kitchen existed, as the place that Roses was most often, the place where the fire burned of its own volition; and the oak burls shaped like triangles where there, for no purpose as far as Roses could gather, but were simply allowed to exist by virtue of their triangularity, which was very unlike Loraine, who existed, unlike the knives which did not.

And then, one day, there was a rude shock. The seal broke. When August came for Roses and she knew about Loraine's knives and the shape of a fire before it was lit and everything in the world, maybe, except for August's hands, which filled the hole that was her sister and left no room for anything else; and how to skin a rabbit, which had simply disappeared down a hole some place, that Roses had failed to stumble on. She knew things that no one but Roses could have known. She knew, for instance, of a temperature at which all things stopped, simply stopped, like the feeling of being beaten and beaten, but miserably, not touched, and she knew how to achieve this temperature, simply by being with August, as her mother had before her, and how to survive it, so long as the hole that was her sister dreamt the world around her.

The clean fold.

*Roses-in-the-rabbit-skin, 20 June (18 roses)*

Roses in the rabbit skin lays dreaming. Something of the voice lingers. Whispering now. The whispering is back, the silence that hangs on the steps, not silence so much as white noise. A whispering white noise. The old man Potter lives with her now, in the hutch, he's lived in the hutch for years. Roses chases him yard to yard, trying to collect his bones for the stew. But she folds him and whoosh. Wiped clean. Potter is the only rabbit left her, since he slaughtered and skinned the others. Draping their skins across the door, because of the draft. Behind the silence, Mother De'ath's head hangs low, a slim thread of spittle falls from her lip, spools in her lap. She no longer wants for wool, Roses murmurs, leaving the old needle-woman to her solitary knitting.

And she walks, alone this time, to the Potter's field, wondering at strewn stew bones. But he waits, patiently, he waits the six years it takes her to dream herself to the airstream. His leg wooden now. Inside, there is a woman. Potter gives the hutch door to the woman with the long face, with the needle-long fingers cutting, cutting the door's skin into rudimentary shapes. She folds the shapes that are neither circles nor triangles together, basting seams, stitching the rags and bones into the form of a hat. The needle woman looks up and says, "there's a right way and a wrong way to turn the ash, go home, Alice, go home."

Roses in the rabbit skin lays dreaming. One floor beneath her, half a dozen beds. One man, maybe, slides his suitcase under the bed and lays staring at the ceiling. Maybe he's guessed at the quiet damp of the basement where the sheets are folded by Roses and a woman who knows just how to wipe the mind clean. Lays awake, picturing the sheets folding in their fingers. Each woman grasping two corners and folding each into each. Roses as white as the white of the sheets, as the white of her white uniform when she wears it and the woman who knows just how to wipe any old thing from any old mind she finds. The clean fold. Nothing of her hip erased or paled. Nothing of her name. Neither needing the clean fold from the other, but holding it inside somehow. Each into each. Maybe one bends the head, just so, into the hand. It's just something in the door that's bothersome, that's all. Just something in the memory of the door leading up.

*Loralie (some other rose)*

Blink, just blink and it draws close. In her dreams lately, scarecrow has been drawing close. The hang of shirt familiar, somehow. And she thinks, maybe if I climb those stairs I won't need to stare at the bars to see, maybe smack. He's just there. Waiting. Watching. Loralie doesn't like being watched, she knows what it means, she herself is a watcher.

For years now the watching has taken place so deep that Loralie herself could not tell what phrase, what gesture, what crooked finger pointing, left its indelible imprint on her brain. Maybe, she thinks, I'll walk up these steps, and the bars will fall away, and the door will be closed or open, and I'll know. The clean fold. She'll know: the face, the bones, the man that it is. Just something in the door that's bothersome, that's all. Something in the memory of the door leading up. Maybe she'll walk up those steps and know. She'll know. One grand trip to the zoo. She'll sit on a bench by the monkey cages, study the metal latches and digits, and calculate the precise number of movements necessary to set it free. She carries a steel nail file in her purse, and a copy of Don Quixote. To remind her of windmills.

Maybe up those steps is an envelope, waiting to be posted. An empty envelope, and all she's got to do is slip a card inside. A little note, telling somebody, anybody, the door is open. Maybe it can begin like that. Now. No more effigies stuffed with straw, no cutting like children. But the gut of it. Here, now. Scarecrow close upon her now and she's thinking, he has a name ... for *women like me*, and he's waiting pen in hand to get it down. To put her portrait in his journal under "hunger."

If Loralie had that journal, what would she paint now? No butterfly. That's sure. The clean fold. Scarecrow drunk, maybe, asking her questions. Wanting to teach her a new language to speak, in which the words were her, and she was what he had made her. "Hunger," "fatigue," "loss." The clean fold. Scarecrow asks too many questions. The kind of questions that lead to sorry old-men bars like the Paddock and brawls which, though meant to make scarecrow feel like a man leave him shaken, apologetic, buying a beer he can't afford for the stranger he has just insulted, all his inward straw abroad.

Scarecrow lives on chickpeas. Eats bowl after bowl of chick peas. One bowl, lost behind

a row of books with strange names, talking names, like Heidegger,” “Nietzsche,” “Kant,” is covered with a white haze, a fine filigree of mould. And Loralie. Is laying in the bed that he’s forgotten. But then he turns to her and wants to draw. Wants to put her in his journal under “hunger.” Maybe its just the scarecrow way. Thinking womens’ genitalia are like a butterfly.

And the scarecrow light opens, and Loralie spreads. Hoping maybe, just maybe, her sex will butterfly up. But there is no pencil here, just here, and he’s not drawing at all though his face is keen. And too late, she thinks of the persimmon he held in his hands, discovering the liver-red labia just under the skin, and he slips the paring knife between her thighs, her lips, and opens her to the light. Waiting for her to discover to him some papery thing which flutters, some wonderful secret which has been wilfully withheld. Loralie has no secrets, though. Not like this. Not under this. The light is precise, drawn tight as a needle, a blinding white hypodermic syringe to pierce the skin and hold it fluttering before him. Maybe scarecrow thinks he can kill the butterfly that well. That it’ll flutter, still.

The clean fold.

When Roses knew about the scarecrow light, she’d tell her. Loralie knew she’d tell her. She’d say, “August and me are the same. This hotel is nothing. Just some rabbits and cut trees. Just nothing. An empty front, with the word hotel written on a dangling sign, but nothing behind. But me and August, together, the same. He’s not out there, not out there at all. But part of me, so long, in fact, that I can’t even see him, just inside of me. Except when we fight. And I think that’s why I like fighting with him. Maybe I catch a glimpse of him then, standing under the sign, maybe, leaning on the false front, and something in my gut turns to water, warm water, and I can feel him slowly withdraw, pull out. Leave him time to time, just to feel the cold of it. The hot of it. Just to feel the cold and hot of it.” When Roses said it, of course it would be true. Roses and Loralie would stand in the desert. All the false fronts collapsing into dust. Then Loralie pictures the words falling from Roses’ mouth, the way she has with the mouth the way the way she just bites the lip some and the hot of it and the swell coming on and the lip, words falling from the lip like little letters. The clean fold. Together then, they could kneel in the dust and gather together the scraps and debris.

Then one night, Loralie is dreaming and god, its enough to make you fold, draw your knees to your breast and hold yourself in your own damn arms cause its gone. It’s always

something, Loralie tells herself, you don't realize it to begin, toss your hair, or lick your lips or let those inarticulate sounds rush past, move your leg like a child bowing a violin. But the day, the day you put it on to finish him, that's the end of love in a series of genuflective gestures.

Bend of knee. Precise pressure brought to bear on hip.

She'd found that clockwork in his straw-belly and set it to Time.

What scarecrow couldn't understand was the way each ounce of her flesh knew him, the way her thigh could complete the formula without remainder, how her body's knowledge, ultimately, outstripped his own. The brain was a parasite. And scarecrow, whose body had sunk into itself, whose skull was a dull lantern, lived off the brain.

Scarecrow reaches over and turns off the light before answering the telephone. The paring knife discarded in a fold of the sheet. Scarecrow has maybe twenty drunken uncles falling, with broken arms or legs or mumps. The telephone-Aunts die outright, every time, but the telephone-uncles swell and recede, break away into bits. Loralie watches as scarecrow hunts for his hat, his butterfly-hunting hat. It is in her hand. She is standing by the door with his hat in her hand when scarecrow looks. Then he is gone. And she is standing by the door, the closed door, with an empty hand. So when the Other Rose arrives she apologizes for Scarecrow and says, "come in." Says, "come in. Come in." Watches the Other Rose, the one with blonde hair in place of black, with dark eyes, that are always the same colour, and brown, fold left leg skyward, lick her upper lip, just so. "Come in," she says, "scarecrow's gone butterfly hunting." Cause she knows the Other's way. She says, "come in," she says, "hunger," "fatigue," "loss," and the Other Rose pours them both a drink. The curve of spine. Fingers long against the glass and she knows.

Loralie tells the Other Rose about her first time. Before she could read rooms. (Rooms are harder to read than books.) This room, for instance. Which doesn't exist. But for light, maybe. Or the room of the Other Rose, for instance, which is the same, maybe, but furnished with shadow. This time though, Loralie couldn't read rooms. Just the man holding his hand to her, leading her through this corridor, that room. Then he says he's going to have her, because she's walked from a room named "living" to a room named "bed," so this black haired, blue eyed young man has her. Even now, she thinks. He has her even now, and then, even as he smells of stale bread, he has her. It isn't enough for him, that Loralie lays back and removes her panties when he asks her, the man wants something more. Loralie wonders if the Other Rose knows what that is, what gesture would satisfy the memory. Loralie tells the Other Rose she

doesn't like beginnings anymore, or day old bread.

The Other Rose promises no beginnings. Just a long ride in a car to Montréal. To see the spatter of lights on the river, once more, so old, it isn't a beginning. So the Other Rose takes Loralie to St. Henri, where she lives. Takes Loralie through the abandoned granary. Later, it burns to the ground, and they look at the odd blood orange glow of the opposite sky, past beginnings already. The Other Rose's arms are tighter. Her fingers, longer. Small cupped breasts, too small to bear the black of the bra that rises up to cinch the swell.

The phone ringing and ringing, like scarecrow's out of uncles or something. Like the receiver is bone. She says to the Other Rose, "scarecrow was never at home with me, I walked into the bathroom and saw him squatting, as though it was a public toilet."

And it does makes the ringing seem like a wrong number. Puts the ringing in her pocket, as the Other Rose talks through her, the tongue curling through her sex as she drowns the ringing in her pocket and the bend of spine reaching the mouth and falling, just falling, just so. But morning comes. Like an end. The bells of three churches ring for the dead. And if you walk past the depanneur, like scarecrow, you are stopped by a teenager on St. Emily who wants a cigarette, now, who somehow knows to put the request in English, maybe its the straw that hangs from his shirt. Stopped on the stairs by the super, who pulls a five dollar bill from his pocket, says the Other Rose paid him that five, just to keep him quiet. About things. Shuffles off, one leg stiff, swung over each step and brought forcibly down, a dead limb, wooden.

Scarecrow stands outside the door, listening to the whispering room. Thinking, maybe, just maybe he'll turn and go when he hears the clop and drag of dead wood ascending. Drags the key from his pocket and lets himself in. But the door is windowed with glass, and the whispering is stopped. Scarecrow's shadow on the glass was enough. The back door is open. The Other Rose sits, drinks coffee from a tall green-ribbed glass, and looks in the brown puddle for scarecrow's reflection, not at all surprised when it appears.

Blink, just blink, and it draws close. That scarecrow shadow stalking, stalking slow. And you think, I could of swore it was further off, but then you think, maybe its me, because its still as still as death. But blink, just blink, and it draws close. The scarecrow draws close. The hang of shirt, familiar now. Cross the tracks. Fifty yards down the line, boys set snares for rabbits. Imagine scarecrow caught in the slim wire. Dream it, maybe. But scarecrow steps over loose rocks and railway ties alike. Catches an arm outside of the metro, and you wonder how the arm stays in its socket, why it doesn't pull loose and let you free. Fifteen feet over, a dozen huddled

figures wait for the bus. The bare scrub, like a wire brush. Wonder how the rabbits manage to put meat on their bones. Don't hear the scarecrow talk, don't hear the accusation. Just the bus line jostling, as one cowed face or another turns to you from the queue. Trying to forget *what* little English they know. Try, try to forget what little English you know. Loralie tries, but the only other words, "hunger," "fatigue," "loss," maybe "train" or "bus stop," maybe just "stop."

Scarecrow's bone finger pushing into the arm that won't loose from its socket and the words. The words. There is one thing scarecrow wants and one thing only. Give him this *thing* and he will turn. Will turn. Will leave you utterly alone. Words, Loralie, he wants your words. Loralie remembering a room. A room with a bed, and sheets so white they simply cease to exist against the doors. A room of doors, then, a room of doors to lay in. And scarecrow turns her on her gut and traces figures on her back. But she saw. She saw the hurt of words, carved, blood red in skin. The clean fold. Blind, like that, maybe. Maybe arms sweep the air, maybe fingers fumble with scarecrow's straw gut. But the words, the words shudder through her. The clean fold. There are, somewhere, broken bones and bruises, they exist abstractly, like colours or nursery rhymes, or Loralie singing, *"this old man, he played three, he played knick knack on my knee, with a knick-knack, paddy-whack, give a dog a bone, this old man came rolling home."*

Scarecrow interrupts her, chases her now from room to room until she is lost. Says, finally, he wants some money, too. Ten dollars, for what he spent on gas. And all the rooms are false fronts, falling into dust. Loralie opens her carpet bag purse and gives him the money. The rustle of money is in his pocket. Now, he instructs her, smiling, say it now. There is no room to say it from, just Loralie, out there, alone. And scarecrow knows it. Looks surprised, like he didn't believe she'd say it, like maybe she'd undo anything, not to say it. But it was said. No going back. What was left? But to make her say it again, and again. Pay for the privilege, maybe. Again, and again, until there was something laid into her, so that the words, so that the words, the words never stop. Surprised maybe, at the fly laid in his palm growing wing after iridescent wing, for the plucking.

Maybe, she thinks, the Other Rose still sits at the table, hands folded. Wondering *what* it is about the light, the bruised and bruising light, that falls through the window with the sound of dead bells ringing and the cracks, the cracks. What it is that keeps the Other Rose sitting *here*, still, hands folded. Scarecrow no more than a stick figure in the distance. Slight. Maybe, she thinks, the Other Rose still sits at that table.

Loralie studies the cages. Inside of her, this thing. As precise in its dimensions as **any** object. Maybe it is as round as an orange and lodged just under her rib. She is careful of **this** thing because it is dead. Not like a bird, but like the sound of a dead thing falling to the **dead** cold earth, or the bare smell of it, or a word repeated until it is senseless.

Kneeling on the bare cold earth outside of the metro, Loralie waits. One day she will plant this thing in scarecrow. She will wear a simple black cowl. She will be old, and bent, and tired. But scarecrow will be dead. Will lie in the earth under her, terribly aware. She will take this thing from under her rib and lay it inside of him.

Loralie sits alone on the bench. In front of the monkey cages. She unfolds the newspaper to the obituaries and begins to read.

Batty, Bernstein (nee Singer), Bigham, Bitch, Blanchard, Bould, Brief, Brook, Brown, Cap, Champaign (nee Wilson), Coffman, Cunt, Dalgaard, Edwards, Freedman, Gagnon (nee Grandbois), Godsoe, Glassman, Hardman, Harper, Hill, Holloway, Hunt, Kearney (nee Pierson), Kennedy (nee Clark), Klorfine (nee Teitelbaum), Lahti, Libman, Lindsay, Mac Kay, MacDonald, Marquette, Masse (nee Demers), Mastromonaco, McGregor (nee Fetterly), McIndoo, Meade (nee Dixon), Miller (nee Smith), Noik, Pickel, Prins, Rejwan, Ritchie, Rodger, Royal (nee Culbert), Shedrick, Slut, Small, Smith, Sorochnynski, Taitelbaum, Tajti, Whalley, Whore, I am a Whore, I am a Whore, I am a Whore, Wilson (nee Thinel), Wilson (nee Shea), Winter (nee Gray), Wren.

The clean fold.

*Solstice, 21 June (18 roses)*

The line man stands over Roses. She stands out, being the only natural brunette working the line. Her hands are red, under the surgical gloves, and her eyes burn hot. But she hasn't worked the line long enough for the peroxide to bleach her hair. It is a new thing, working for paper money to keep, and not just figures in Harvey's column, and pays eight dollars an hour, even part time. The line man wants to know if Roses is watching. But what is there to watch? Endless, bottles of peroxide shuffled into cardboard boxes. Roses is terrified of the skin flint touch of cardboard, but it pays eight dollars, even part time. She has managed a trade with Lucky Louky, who thinks Roses is crazy to have offered up such a plum position, where for long seconds you stand waiting, before walking the box to Will. A chance to chat with Will, even, before you return for the next. Yeah, Roses answers, I'm watching, watching the parade.

Look at me, he says. And she glances at his freakish blonde hair. Glass window stretched above her, along all four sides of the warehouse. A series of white-coated sexless creatures in surgical masks. She was given the tour, briefly, as they lead her down to the docks, they call it, though there is no sea, down to the docks.

Look at me. Handling her chin like produce, maybe, checking to see if its gone soft. If you're watching you can tell me the serial number on the bottle. Chin held firm in his hands, too firm maybe. Roses laughs at the line man and answers, plucks the eight digit number out of air, out of her sister's closet. The line man holding a bottle in his hand now. Doesn't have to tell her not to move. Again. Roses repeats the number. The line man drops the bottle to the line and walks. "You got it right," Lucky Louky says, "but you're not doing yourself any favours. He'll remember."

The next week Roses is put on June's line. June's request. At break, June holds her back, saying, "you think you're too good for Will? Huh? What, you think he's white trash?" The women gather, listening for Roses answer. "Say it," June demands. Roses looks up at June slowly, reads the scar over her left eye, the tired scar. Louky is looking at Roses, her lips moving, and Roses knows Louky is repeating the right answer over and over again, articulating it clearly, so that Roses can pluck it from the bleach bright air and lay it before June, a balm to

soothe that tired scar. A tire iron.

“Your words,” Roses takes three slow steps. The women watching June, to see if her answer is acceptable. June nods, almost imperceptibly, and the mute knot dissolves in the acid air and the women whisper quietly and move towards the lunch room. Roses stops and turns, “your words,” she says, “you think he’s white trash, and I guess you’d be the one to know.” Roses looking at that scar, looking hard.

For the first time Roses sits alone in the lunch room. It was, she’d thought, a mathematical impossibility. But the sexless white-wrapped bodies shrink away from her, arrange themselves so that there is a three foot radius around Roses that nothing can penetrate. The smoke from her cigarette curls away, breath is drawn with difficulty, as though the air itself were repelled. June is conspicuously absent. As is the line man.

She is shunted from the line down to the docks and lead to the change room, where she is given her last and first pay, up to the minute. The line man is out of uniform. Roses examines the small epaulette on his shoulder, hanging empty, the para-military pants. But the line man is no more than a wooden valet. Roses removes the white paper suit, stripped of a sudden to black bra and panties. Before slipping into her dress Roses lifts the envelope from his fingers as she would from a shelf. A series of brass hooks at eye level. She hangs the white paper suit from its ankles, splays its legs in an awkward V, walks six steps to the change room door, and turns. She wants to mark it somehow, to tear a ragged sex into its blankness, examine the blanched air under a microscope, determine precisely which molecule has been skinned. She wants to study something, mathematically, scientifically, an abattoir, an abbottoir. Goodbye Victor Vigo, the smile hanging. She is gone.

# 12

## *Summer Solstice Party, 21 June (18 roses)*

Roses has studied silence. Knows to cast her face down at insult and stir an awful empathy in all who are witness. She has taught herself the language of quiet abjection, the tuck of chin and fold of trembling hand. What she cannot teach, what no one has taught her, is to swallow that anger, to still her hand and voice, to tremble with a rage that never, never can be spent. Shoulder blades as sharp as knives stiffen in her back. Knees bend, prepared to deflect a blow that does not come. It is the symmetry of a dancer or boxer. A body perfectly centred can afford this tilt of head, this sidewise mocking smile, this slit of one eye. She would have done better to let her eyes fill with unutterable sadness, to tremble, to refuse to name the assault, to hold the word deep inside her, own it, let it mark her, sooner die than let it pass her lips. These boys, Jimmies lining the macadam drive, would have killed the line man dead, or would have if they didn't know her sad, crouching anger, the eye that slit itself like a wound over a cheek as fat as a fist.

No sooner had the line man poured his salt word in Roses' ear than she caught his ankle with her left foot and sent him sprawling over the rag-and-die rug, tossing her half-empty beer can at his neck. Maybe it wasn't some memory of long ago, some whispered words about how she herself turned the wrong end of the gun. Maybe it *was* the beer can that undid her, that turned the tide of public opinion. Maybe it *was* the wildfire rumours of her behaviour in the factory change room. Maybe they said, "pht, she wouldn't."

"Would she?" The would-she? tacked on a little too fast, maybe.

"And I heard she was singing low as she tore off that suit, nothing, nothing underneath."

"She tore up that envelope, the whore, wasn't the money she was after."

"Pht."

"We all have hard times, don't all strip down for the line man, though, do we."

"Just asking for trouble."

But the fierce one, the one as mad as Roses herself, saying, "I don't care what she done or sang or said, what gun she turned or didn't turn, ain't nobody deserve that. I heard what they was saying after, and ain't nobody deserve that."

There is a space that Roses cannot see. Cannot see just now. Something between her foot shooting out and the long corridor of place. Jimmies lining the macadam drive, two trucks off the track in the rain and muck of it. The old man firing up the tow truck, every rainy Saturday night he fires up the tow truck and drags his son's friends from the mud slew. Dawdle just a little by the mink cages, just a bit of plastic here to keep off the rain. Huddle a moment, at the end of the long line of cages, and catch a breath. Wonder, maybe, what kept Bat tonight, knowing that there's zoo enough here for us all.

A long limb of light reaching in to her now, here, this small place she just wanted to sit a space, just wanted to sit and think and catch a breath. But she knows the dress is all wrong, can't lay there skinned and shame them gone. Besides, it isn't in that they want, they made that clear, that place is suspect, too.

And it is her mouth that is bruised, with his hand pulling her hair there is an illusion, that each blow is her, her bringing her face forward. Not what he is doing to her, but what she is doing to herself. She knows this is wrong. One small minute between the punch to her gut and the reflex. When her stomach heaved into her throat. Only maybe it was the words, just the words that punched her. His fist, sure, but the words moved her stomach to her throat. Sit in the rain. Just sit a while in the rain. Wasn't nothing, Roses, she tells herself, wasn't nothing at all. Her insides cover them both. The kick is late. Is soft. Is the kick you'd give a wounded thing at the side of the road, not certain its dead, not certain it won't bare its teeth and lunge. No help in it. Just a cold assessment of the damage. Stride back to your vehicle then and check the fender for scratches. No scratches, drive on. Maybe they feel regret for a moment, safely locked in steel and glass, staring out of the darkness to the slow creeping light. But then there are a hundred other smears on the wet roadside, and maybe you get used to the idea. Wash its insides from your fender with mud.

Something has cut through the drunk of it, and she can't, for the life of her, think what it was. Not now. Not until she has crossed the field to the road and the first head beams pass her and someone leans out an open window and howls.

Maybe her sister has cut out on her too. Maybe she is alone in crawling into the ditch on all fours, alone in giving what little they have left to the earth, the sour dregs of her, some spittle, some stones. Roses' sister is fulfilling her own metaphor, sealing away the details. The way they cast laughing shadows, the way he washed his sex down with mud, as though it were cleaner somehow, much, much cleaner. And it is. The face, not the line man's, but another,

equally familiar.

A tire iron.

Roses looks up. She wants to see Loraine's sheet folding hands on Bat's wrists, Loraine's hands touching her, but from Bat, who is afraid to touch, afraid not to touch, and so gives just the sweetest lightest touch of air, the lightest press of fingers too frightened to bruise.

Will she wash her own mouth out with soap? Punish herself for the cussing wild tongue she owns? Wash it away with muck and shit cause its better, somehow, than the taste of salt, so slight. His skin.

It's this sound, where is it coming from, this sound? This weeping sound. The long arm of the sea, washing. Not to drown, no slight toe grip on the high wire, slipping, no swimming out past lazily nodding buoys, no rubicon or six foot rope, no drowning into the throat for her. Just this slow spun drift, a low moan, this desperate sea-scud of wind thrown past the awful expanse into alleys and gutters too small. Turn in on itself then, form wind-devils of dust and scree. Here. Just under the skin. Tap the finger tip against the throat, a sound, a hollow sound. Like a drum. The words, the slit of eye, and the curse. The wild longing curse. Nothing less than the curse that delivers itself from base of spine.

The clean fold.

# 13

*Maddie De'ath, 22 June (18 roses)*

August is the one to find her, sitting in the dark, body folded in an old sofa, its bones exposed at the knees. A cardboard box for a coffee table, maybe. A broken lamp. Her scarf placed over brass arms that reach up like a diver's for the shade. A leg of lamb. Turns the key and steps out of the truck, wondering at the trash some people throw out, maybe. Wondering at the way she's made a living room out of the heap at the end of the McAlastairs' mile-long drive. Takes her hand.

When it comes, it isn't the pleasant sort, the kind that falls from the sky like a blessing. But cold. Bone chilling cold. The kind of cold rain that lays bare the ligatures, slowly biting into the fleshy skein, unravelling old worries and opening the heart of them to any old body that happens by. August's body is old, and knowing. He can read her now, through the palm, the tired rags and bones of her saying, the older I get, the less use I have for men. The talk of her bones eliding with speech, so he cannot tell just when she starts to speak. Something of her, though, saying, "the older I get the less use I have for men. Seems all they do is forget. I'm one to talk, I've forgot more than I've life left to remember. The clean fold. It's not even that, so much, as all the life I'm living is happening at once. You see me moving through time, saying these things in order, when I'm saying it all at once. Seeing it all too. Some things clearer than others, but gathering together. The moving is so I can gather what's coming with what's been. I hope you've been taking care of my roses. A cold fish. So caught up in my own time, I haven't had much to give any man. Cauliflower in bloom. I would have sat out here all night, if you hadn't come for me. Couldn't face knocking at my own door. Maybe finding the locks been changed, or the colour of the walls, or that my roses were dead. Maybe so little as a new set of dishes, the old ones all cracked in a box some place. Don't tell me. McAlastair told me you lost the house. I remember now, I was at the hotel just yesterday. Sometimes, of an afternoon, I could hear the brass settling through the attic floor above, and I know the bed will fall in the middle, just a little more than it did, but maybe I'll have grown somehow, into that spot. Just so. The way your face is aging, as I watch, catching me up from the last time I saw it. The bones here, softening a little. Still, don't trust you one bit, not as far as I could

throw you, which is less and less, every year. There'll have been maybe thirteen generations of rabbits since I last saw you, but their nature doesn't change. They took to the hutch right off, and never saw a reason to change after that. Lord only knows what you've been doing under my roof these long rabbit breeding years. Don't tell me. The letter G and the number seven. Cauliflower in bloom. Don't bury the dead in my roses, it'd put off the bloom. I told those people I'd come home to die.

"The clean fold.

"The taxi-cab dropped me at the McAlastair place. There's something I want you to do. In among all those horses he's got a young heifer, no more than three. He picked her up at thirty four cents a pound, they'd tried to breed her but it wouldn't stick, so the meat'll be tender for sure, he says. He figures he's spent another four cents a pound fattening her, and the rate is thirty cents a pound to slaughter and wrap her. I figure he's spending sixty-eight cents a pound for the beef, at three hundred pounds, give or take, that's two hundred and four dollars total. I want you to give him that two hundred and four dollars for the calf as is. I want her as is. They fed us ground seconds at that place and I won't eat another lick of beef for the rest of my life. I want that cow to live out happy. Put my hand out to it, cause it looked so hungry for a touch, and the damn thing backed, got one sniff and backed. Damn things locked in a stall and everything that looks at her says "meat." You wouldn't know there was a sky above to look in her eyes. It's worth whatever sacrifice you have to make in order for there to be one cocky cow in this world, one cow that knows it ain't fated to the touch. Maybe, in time, she'll take to kicking on the back wall of the hotel when she wants to be fed. I'd like it a lot if she did. Hell, I'd let her eat my roses. Rub her with bag balm where she got bit with the thorns. They only have one row of teeth.

"The clean fold.

"I've been thinking about the crows, August. It was after Tom Died, and roses was just a girl. We went up to that cabin you had on the cliff, the spot just a rise in the swamp, and you were off and Roses was sleeping and the storm came on. I opened up the window and crawled onto the tin roof, was quite an angle. The air was still as death, as though it had never once known wind, and the crows were perched on the jack pines and on the limbs of a dead douglas fir, just silent as the air. Crouched. The whole land was crouched and waiting. I saw it coming from a long ways off. Just the wind stirring the tips of trees so far off, and the line moving dead centre for me. The crows, launched one by one, as the first breath hit them. They used to come, you know, when ever it was quiet. Gather, one by one, on the trees downing the slope to the swamp. Asking me something, again and again. I thought it was something in me that stirred the silence like the storm. But I was wrong.

They'd heard of how the dead could walk and come to see. Crows are drawn to the dead, and they'd heard the screaming posts tell of a dead woman who walked on two legs and come to see it for themselves. I don't know if it was Tom Dying like he did, or the way we were carrying on. I don't know. But I was sick. I just didn't know it. You ain't sick, your just a man, you don't know any better than to behave like one. Me, I just want to live out my years without any particular notice from the crows.

"The clean fold.

"Take my hand then, stuff the old work shirt with straw. Put the scare up on the roof in place of a weather vane, maybe. Dance a step. Dance two steps. But take it slow. And the boards, the boards. Is it the same? Do you still have the same boards you came to town with. You know that's why I loved you, first. Came to town with nothing but a floor, no roof to put over your head, just a good sound floor. Dance a step. Dance two steps. But take it slow. And I knew, as long as those boards were laid sound under my roof, as long as those boards laid sound under my, as long as sound under and love, August. Yes, love. Old bones, maybe, but love. Not sick so much, as wanting to forget for a time, and die, yes, die into the sound, love, the boards, love. Laid love, yes the bones and love, yes love, the clean fold."

And maybe, seeing it as I do, from some bone lodged some place under the rib, you could never quite be sure if the faint hum was a man's voice, was August's voice, or memory. If she danced in the heap of trash at the end of the McAlastairs' drive alone, arms held before her, or held, held in arms not her own. Maybe you'd cry to see it, just so. Old, like that, love, like that, in a heap of trash, dancing on the stones, on the hot tar dust road cold and damp now with rain. Held in arms, maybe, not her own.

*Solstice, 21 June (16 roses)*

Held in arms, maybe, not her own. His arms, he thinks. He thinks he can say “love,” and break the whisper that sweeps the voice clean as she walks past. He thinks, seeing Roses at sixteen, that he can still the breath the breath has just under. He says, “it’ll be *wild*.” and she pauses, turns to look. The word rattling her brain like light, like a moth. Hit the glass lip then and know, know the light had been there sometime, but now, in the darkness, some other pulsing thing so like the hot of light, but different. is close, so very close. Send it reeling, then, into the slow moving bodies it has no name for, wings thrilled through with the vibrating air. Roses slips her hand in his to keep it from shaking, lays small kisses on the glass mouth to still her own.

He turns off the ignition and the lights then, and she asks him to wait, just sit awhile. To hear the music reach her as if through still water, distorted and strange. Laughter drowns and senseless fragments break the surface. Time twisting up and around her through the hollow space. Ribbon slow by thigh and cincturing the waist the waste of a sudden. The kind of place a heart beat can turn the quick clay to water and she breaks, like that, like that. And throws her arms around him to find him so very real time. So very measured. Skin and blood still running to real time. Drops her arms as slow as seduction, but means nothing by it, just dropping the real time so the song is coming through her, the breath under the breath whispering, let’s go.

Inside, the lights low and the moving bodies talking too slow too fast and the music. The words jumping over the line or lost under the surface. Nowhere is it just right to talk, so she doesn’t. She couldn’t say, therefore, how it happened, without words to pair them off, to arrange, without even names between them. But she knows he was born in January, this much she knows. A colder month she can’t imagine. Maybe his name is Sol, like the sun. Later his name is Paul and words are all there is, running between them, demanding some explanation, some rationalization, some small truth. But now, there is the sun. Even January has some small sun, close to the ground, and a promise of little-r-roses.

Something of his touch begs her stillness, here in the dark. And he is moving through her, through the quiet of her legs, stilled beneath a breath, so it is the sound of him whispering through her and not the susurrrus gossip that stockings put on to thrill themselves. And Roses

knocking herself out with it, killing herself, but quiet, like he asks. Heady, they come up, the air heavy with her sex and smoke. Later, the boy who brought her will rush into the room, shunting the sheet that serves as a door aside whip fast, as though he will catch some small thing, some physical object, some clue to the way she melted into the dark and disappeared, before this small imagined trace vanishes too. Looking into Roses' eyes. Drunken eyes. Dreamy. The colour of them fainting slow. Her stockings gossiping at a wicked rate, as heady as the air. He can't tell, they whisper, he doesn't know the smell of sex. But he does! His body does, deep in the reptile brain he knows, though it doesn't trigger the text book prints, the locker room caricatures, the thing he does when he is alone in his room, because he is alone in his room when he does it. The two of them thick, sitting on the quilt, somebody's little brother's room maybe, or a guest room, an alcove in the basement blanketed off from the music and the talk. The boy thinks, somehow, that he shouldn't be here, that this place is not for him. It is complete already, with Roses and this man. But he grabs her arm, thinks maybe she'll allow him this, his right to take her home, as he had brought her.

She is easily pulled, the stillness learned.

The boy finds himself growing angrier. Maybe something in the smell of her says she is not for him. The sun sliding up behind her now, slipping an arm around her waste and watching the boy who believes that the code of junior high dances can erase what hangs in the smoky air. Roses doesn't hear his desperate love calls, feels only the warm of the arm holding her, just so. The boy tosses a trash can against the wall of the house. Odds and pairs gather beside and behind Roses, drawn by the tin scuffle. And they laugh when he tells Sol that he can have Roses, he can have her, he can have her. Sol turns Roses on his wrist and asks if she knew him. "No," Roses answers, "I didn't even know his name." Which is true, now that she has forgotten ever knowing it. And he pulls the hair back from her neck and kisses her, like she's done something right.

The next few weeks are a dream. Except for the daylight. The way he wants to take her, really, in the daylight. Not just have her with his mouth, but entirely. As though it is new to her. And it is, the daylight is. He demands absolute stillness in the room he rents for them at the De'ath Inn. Harvey waving them past, and, in tacit agreement, charging the boy a rate he can afford, often, and not seeing Roses at all. And, if seeing her, not knowing her. Her legs bare now, not risking a sound and the grainy light renders her legs real, the slight black hair, too thick, too low on the thighs. The bruises on her knees, browning in the light. And she wonders

how he bears the weight of her. How his eyes can stand the absolute detail, the minute marks and pores. How he knows where to begin. Her body is heavy, bloated with light, an orange left in the sun, wrinkling and falling heavy, bloody insides browning like day old liver. Only when he has gone over each detail a thousand times, burned her into him, so if it fades, it fades only a little, will he consider darkness. Maybe the bruises will fade, or the scars on her legs, or the colour of her sex, which is the hot blush of chokecherries simmering into cordial. Later, these details are all he has of her. No body to pin them on, just the bruise, the scar, the simmering blush.

Roses holds the sun, the small of it, close to ground. The feel of his arm sliding behind her back, just so, comes on her now and again and whoosh, the breath is gone until she struggles to pull it back, just this one time, just this one time, and then her body remembers and she can forget the effort it is to breath without his arm holding the small of her back. Roses' body is a spidery thing now, spinning itself only in darkness. She thinks if she lets another man touch her that way she will simply fly apart. And it was the one lie she never meant to tell that did it. The one lie he told for her.

Time to time she thinks what if? what if? The moment she saw that face looking from her to Paul, as if to say, "her? that's the sweet girl you've been telling me about?" And it wasn't just the way she turned the wrong end of the gun, by then. It was the way she turned and turned and had been, just been, all over. Not even to laugh, the face looking from her to Paul, not even to laugh, because of how serious the talk was then. He was going to make a life for them. "Her? Her? You don't mean?" Puts a whole new spin on things, how easy it was for them to have each other behind the hanging sheet. On how she moves, a little, just a little, couldn't help herself but slide the hips a little.

That one look was the killing for Roses. Sol laid a little longer in the dream. Paused at the table to tell his friend that he'd be back, after taking Roses home. She had him drop her at the walkway of the house she'd lived in as a girl. But the bloom was off, already. And she was shaking through and through. Not even to ask him to stay, a little, not even to delay, a day, a night. What she wouldn't give now.

When he returns, it is to take her to the river, where Mother De'ath lost her mind. Does he know that too? The friend is at the table, she is sure, waiting, waiting for Paul. No matter how casual his tone, no matter how matter of fact, no matter.

"The truth is important," he says. "You can get over anything, so long as you have the

truth. Is there anything, anything at all, Roses, that you want to tell me?"

"I need to know," he says, "I need to know if there's anything I need to know."

How come she can see it now? He was begging her, just begging her, say it. Make up any old thing for him to bring to that table at the Inn, just any old thing and he'd have believed it. A story, a simple story. Roses, and we'll be alright. We'll damn well outlive anyone who says it was never that way with you, Roses. We'll damn well outlive them. But there is no story to tell, she thinks. The story was never hers to begin.

# 15

## *Roses, 22 June (18 roses)*

Roses, looking in the mirror at bruised lip and swollen cheek, is remembering that no story ever belonged to her. That stories belonged to Potter's bird leg, impenetrable to leeches, and to August's hands. When she was a girl, those hands took the small sickly rattle of a bird from her as she slept, and held it under the surface to drown. And she thinks, it's better this way. She thinks, what story could I offer to the sun? What story could I offer? She had given him her scars already, and that was enough. Her scars and bruises were burning in his brain. What could he have wanted of her words?

She remembers walking side by side by the river.

"Truth? What truth," she'd jeered. The tilt of head, the questioning lips. "The chokecherries are in bloom," she'd said, spinning from his side to the blossoming tree. And, jutting out her chin, she'd decided, based on the easiness of it all, of the way she'd fallen into him without thinking, that it would come again. Assured that the touch would come again, after the next rain and the next. Maybe not with Paul or Sol or whatever his name was, but the touch, for sure. And if a chokecherry in bloom after the rain wasn't enough, then she had no need of him. "There's your answer: what truth?" she'd said, out loud and laughing, "I do love the rain."

The clean fold.

*sister-roses, (a swallow's nest of them)*

Or did. Did love the rain. Sitting in the back room of the Inn, alone. No moon to see through the door, and so it's closed, now. The faint white noise, the whispering, falling close upon her, the sougling silence settling through the boards, a fine powdery dust. Lick the lip of the bottleneck clean, maybe. Or start the next day's wash. And the next. Because all of a sudden it will be hard to keep the sheets free of dust, of whispering dust. And what is there here for her to do now, but age, maybe. Bottle of wine lost under the floorboards. Gathering dust. But then, maybe a stranger will come to town, will send the silence reeling. Spit maybe, on the flour white quiet so it congeals, juggle balls of spit and silence like fruit. Maybe Bat will come down those stairs, and she'll think, its come down to me and you. Either I sit here and age some, or it comes down to me and you. Wait for him to offer her something, maybe, anything, she can turn. Could turn the blade of a knife to a man's sex, a cigarette to a finger, could turn the offer of a glass into a love that would bite clean through your arm. Could turn you, Bat, even you. So she sits, this hungry space, waiting. Until, looking at her now, I can begin to see her face. The bones come through, first. And then of a sudden its there, the eyes, hazel green, with a spot of black just under one pupil, how could I have missed that spot? Her eyes. Her lips. She has strange liar lips, pencil thin in worry, but bite the lip a little and it swells, smile and it swells, feel the thrill of it, and it swells. Her nose a little crooked, but with her head's tilt the crook is more expression than bone, like she could, of a sudden, straighten it up. So that looking at the crook of her nose you know you could spend a lifetime performing for her, juggling spit and silence like fruit, or offering her the blade, or a cigarette, offering her cigarette after cigarette to hold her talk, hoping, waiting, for that one moment she isn't looking at you with that amused crooked look. Her neck a little thin, a little pale. Makes you think of the strength of your hands, measure them, maybe, in uncomfortable silences, against the thin, the pale, the break. But her hands, you can never quite get a look at her hands, can't recall them when you are apart, though you tell yourself you know the scar on her palm, and you can draw the scar on the blank white page, but then nothing. And she leaves you feeling a little like your clothes don't fit, or the hot of you, the touch, isn't enough, isn't there, is all wrong. Can't change the crook of her nose. Can't change

the scar of her. Can't reach into her rib cage like a bird cage and have something of her perch on your hand or pluck out your eyes, or name, can't name the thing fluttering in the cage, the pretty bird. The pretty bird. Still, there's something in you that makes you want to let it die, let the silence lie like dust, settle maybe, on the crook of her nose, still those lips, set her parts to clockwork and time. Or was that the way of a man sometime, many men, that made you practice the eye, the lip, the hurt of it? Or curl up maybe, and weep. Just curl up alone on your bed and weep. Lick the dust from the bottle neck clean. Not sure now that it isn't you sitting at the table. Not sure it isn't your story after all, that it isn't your reflection you've caught in some shiny black surface, an eye maybe. Not sure that the spot isn't black, that it isn't passed left palm to right. Maybe it's just somebody you loved once, distant now, so that the thing inside of you, that thing as precise in its dimensions as any object, comes clear. Maybe its a room where you sat one night listening to a story. The story. There was only one. Maybe its that the story was about you. Maybe you distrust it, the way its laid out A to B, like that, like that. It could be that the linearity of the story is what broke you, the whispering, maybe. No bodies to pin it on. No bodies at all. Just the whispering voice, and maybe that was it, the whispering voice that laid the story out from A to B. And I can't recall now, sister, whether it was you or I that broke or if you were there, or I, or just the story laid out from A to B that broke, clean in half. I remember the telling never seemed to end. I remember my face, or yours, who can recall? and the water falling. And I remember the voices over the rain and one voice over all the others, and what that voice said might have been what happened. To you, to me, to any number of women. But wasn't. It laid too clean. It laid too clean like the white flour of the dust or the word for dust or the thing that lays just under the rib. No amount of juggling could displace those words, so clean, so clear. The way that only lies come clear. The truth can't ever be remembered like that. Just an object from the room where the truth touched down like a hurt, or a balm, or where it broke something, a lamp maybe. Maybe the truth can touch down like rain, and the bulb implodes, the thin wire hot against the cold of it, shattering. So that when the whispering comes, so simple, the tilt of head, the crook of nose even, writes itself. You can't help but listen to such a simple thing, that says, there is no object under your rib, but mine, that says, there are no words, but mine, that says, if the story can't lay like this, like this, it isn't a story. That says, you do not exist. It sees a girl in the chair, maybe, who cries. She can not weep, the whisper tells us, weeping is for heroines and where is the story to house her? She cries. Who knows why, she doesn't exist. I remember wanting to run my fingers over the tilt, the crook, the swell, and know them, for you,

for me, for the story maybe, that broke, clean in half. But that whisper was running too close, and left me wondering how it could bear to do what's been done too too much already. I remember thinking it was never going to end. Because it was happening, just so, under our rib. Wondering if I could extract that object, but the whispered story said it couldn't be so. That if I scattered the seeds of it, it would exist, in the cracks, the cracks, in the hutch, over long rabbit breeding years it would exist in the white as flour quiet of your eyes. And thinking, you could turn the blade of a knife to a man's sex, a cigarette to a finger, could turn the offer of a glass into a love that would bite clean through the arm, but can't turn back? Can't turn back? Laugh a little, maybe. Lick the bottle neck clean. Put on tomorrow's wash, and the day after that, too. Descend the steps and laugh a little, maybe a stranger in his room above will hear you, turn in the sheets. Think of what lies under. Lord knows he will only cause you pain. He's guessed, maybe, at the quiet damp of the basement where the sheets are folded by a woman whose eyes are as white as the sheets, as the white of her white uniform when she wears it. She bends the head, just so, into the hand. Like she's listening to something distant, some sound or voice. But down the steps, it isn't the whisper, precisely. Just something past the door that's bothersome, that's all. Something in the memory of the door leading up. And I can't recall now, sister, whether it was you that broke or me, or just the story laid out from A to B that broke, clean in half. If there was a man, or many men that made it so, if the voice was one whisper or many, and if its telling fainted slow or dead away.

## **Postface**

**check your sex at the door****on De'ath Sound**

De'ath Sound is a short poetic novel of approximately 27,000 words. It begins and ends with the narration, or voice-over of the main character's dead sister. Throughout the novel (and I hesitate to call it such), the dead twin is a kind of narrative omphalos, existing in the belly of Roses, her sister, and sealing away scraps and debris, small bits of knowledge and images from the text. The opening "chapters" seem to promise a story, a plot, a dramatic curve, the conclusion to which is ultimately withheld. The appearance of Mother De'ath, in the second chapter of the novel, though seemingly a beginning, is really the end, the sewing up of all possibility, the closure of an incestuous loop existing between Roses and Mother De'ath's husband. What happens in the interim is no more than clarity and forgetting, a movement between the sougning silence that exists in Mother De'ath's presence, and a pulsion away, into purer silences, silences that don't speak. The whispering is given voice, and that voice is one composed of Roses and her sister and their story, a story that both breaks and is broken, clean in half.

**Why do the texts of Gail Scott<sup>1</sup> recur in the postface?**

The work of Gail Scott has been to apprehend what it means to exist in a particular cultural milieu. She has theorized a space in which women writers, anglos, exist in a French context which informs our work, but with a difference.<sup>2</sup> It is a space as subtle as fiction. Her work has

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<sup>1</sup> Gail Scott grew up in a bilingual community in Eastern Ontario and now lives and writes in Montreal. She was a journalist for several years, writing about Québec culture and politics for the *Montreal Gazette* and *The Globe and Mail*. Her books, *Spare Parts*, *Heroine* and *Main Brides* were published by Coach House Press. She has also published a work of criticism with The Women's Press called *Spaces Like Stairs*. She is co-founder of *Spirale*, a French-language cultural magazine, and *Tessera*, a bilingual periodical of feminist criticism and new writing.

<sup>2</sup> Gail Scott uses the term 'modernity' instead of post-modernism to describe this difference in approach. A direct translation of the French *modernité*, this word underlines the importance of contemporary French influence on women writing in Quebec. The word also evokes a practice

been imagining “a ‘writing subject’ in-the-feminine. Not the ‘self’ as a (feminist or otherwise) pre-determined figure, but a complex tissue of texts, experience, evolving in the very act of writing.”<sup>3</sup> Majzels,<sup>4</sup> in discussing Scott’s fictional works, says that they represent “a further movement in the struggle to disrupt the meanings already encoded in the stories, the syntax and the very words at our disposal.”<sup>5</sup> She is an important figure in the development of an English Literature of Quebec, a literature which is not exclusive of Québécoise writers, but very much informed by the culture and concerns of this province. I think of the Québécoise authors Blais, Dandurand<sup>6</sup> and Dé,<sup>7</sup> whose writing has had a great influence on me, and the French author Duras. As well, there is a huge tradition of English Language literature, which, perhaps, hangs a little less like law in this province. Scott’s work is a kind of *ligne de fuite* between these imaginative genealogies, where the inheritances of English and French-Speaking writers intersect.

### **Why does the Critical Postface have the quality of experiment?**

The language of criticism is often at odds with writing, and strategies are necessary in order to preserve something of the text and context. Any analysis must come out of the concerns of the text, with language, with syntax, with rhythms of speech. A content-oriented examination might

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consistently involved with questioning ideological assumptions.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Scott, Spaces Like Stairs (Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1989), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Majzels, a Montreal author, teacher and translator, is the author of *Hellman’s Scrapbook*, a novel. His translation of Anne Dandurand’s *Petites âmes sous ultimatum* (Small Souls Under Siege) was published by Cormorant in 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Majzels, “Crosscurrents in the Mainstream,” Matrix (1994), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Dandurand has published five collections of short stories and one novel. Three of her books, *Deathly Delights*, *The Cracks*, and *Small Souls Under Siege* have been translated into English.

<sup>7</sup> Claire Dé is a playwright with four short story collections (one with her twin sister, Anne Dandurand), a book of four one-act plays and one novel. Her collection of stories, *Le désir comme catastrophe naturelle*, won the Prix Stendhal, Grenoble 1989.

do violence.<sup>8</sup> The Critical Preface cannot exist as such, cannot address an academic committee or speak to an academic audience. Such an imagined readership implies a deference to authority which undermines the true function of the essay, as a kind of process, as “a perpetual work-in-progress” (Scott, 9).

There should be an “immediacy [to the essay, which] (even more than fiction) precisely intersects the period in which it is written. The way it is marked, at a given moment, by its context, its community, both of which are also part of how the writer is and how she changes over time” (Scott, 9). Though the academic study of literature has been of great importance to my development, its agenda is at odds with my own. When writing about writing, I develop a space from which to speak which is as tentative as the voices employed in fiction. I am as aware in my construction of the essay as I am in the construction of the fictional text, of the strategies which allow one to utter meaningfully, without disallowing movement. In short, the words with which I express will be as important as what I express. Language does not occupy the position of a glass, or spectral lens, through which meaning is scryed. As in any good work of fiction, language is be privileged, which is not to say that content will suffer, only that language will, of necessity, suffuse and even disrupt form and content. Far from being oblique, or inaccessible, I believe the hybrid text which arises from this work is far more capable of expression, far more meaningful in its co-existence and consanguinity with the fictional text, than a more traditional text.

**How does my milieu serve to locate the proposed text in terms of content versus language-oriented writing?**

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<sup>8</sup> “Virginia Woolf’s novels often comprise shorter pieces surfacing like fragments of a poetic mosaic (*The Waves*), or shot through with drama, essay (*Between the Acts*). Even if we take the short story in the strictest sense, we find outstanding women writers have subverted the genre even as they asserted new women’s voices. Gertrude Stein, Jane Bowles, Anaïs Nin (in among other things, the fragments of her diary), more recently Marguerite Duras, whose novels have grown shorter and shorter, more and more poetic. And in Canada, Sheila Watson. What links these women is their excesses, the crazy way they took risks in their writing. Stein and her sentences. Bowles’ characters, leaning wildly over the edge of hysteria. Nin’s fictional promiscuity. Watson’s theoretical sophistication. Paradoxically, these excesses are problematic for certain approaches to feminist criticism (Bowles’ *lack of* “strong women,” Stein’s *lack of* accessibility, Nin’s *overwrought* heterosexuality, etc.). Indeed, a content-focused “feminist analysis of such texts might even bring forth the kind of reproaches we often get from men: the accusation of being either not enough, or else too much ...” (Scott, 69).

Scott proposes a kind of divide between Canadian women writers living inside and outside of Québec. The difference between Atwood and Duras perhaps, or more appropriately, between Atwood and Bersianik.<sup>9</sup> Scott says that her “very notion of fiction has been transformed by the fact that [she] happened to start writing seriously in a lieu culturally distanced from the realist tradition of strong English-Canadian women writers, a lieu where women were more concerned with syntax and language than with ‘story’” (30). We are living in a time and place, where, as Robert Majzels points out,

it is particularly difficult for anglophone writers ... not to be concerned in some way with language and identity .... If writing is more than just a means of preserving something of our world, our systems, our privileges, our selves; if it is a working towards change, an escape from and a reshaping of ourselves from within language, then Montreal's particular hybridization of language offers new opportunities and new directions (17).

**How does this new form of the novel play itself out in terms of the construction of language, character, voice?**

De'ath Sound is a linguistic experiment in which traditional notions of plot and character fracture, and the underlying story, a kind of impulsion towards plot, plays itself out in ambiguous, even disturbing ways. The work itself, much shorter than a traditional novel, shares some of the sensibilities and structures of a long poem. In this way, the use of repetition, recurrent imagery, and the rhythm of sound, forms a narrative or thread to bind the work together. Why, you might ask, is it so important to deviate from traditional forms which are far more accessible? Probably less troublesome, as well. As Gail Scott explains,

The novel is the fiction form that most forces the writer to rub against the ‘real.’ By ‘real’ I mean that ‘universal’ represented by society's institutions: the practice of politics, of systems of law, education, etc. A woman, it seems to me, can write a short story, a poem, that might choose to remain in the margin of this ‘universal’ -- the society of patriarchy's creation. Not unaffected by it, of course, but, on the immediate surface of the writing, unconcerned. Something in the novel, however, leads one to acknowledge this ‘universal,’ even if only to reject it. Perhaps it is the novel's length, a length which requires one to engage

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<sup>9</sup> Louky Bersianik, a poet, essayist and novelist who studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, is author of *Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* (1979), *Maternative* (1980), *La Main tranchante du symbole* (1990), and perhaps, most importantly, the ground-breaking Roman Triptyque *l'euguélionne* (1976).

narrative, that is, to find some thread to which the reader might cling, or touch back on -- no matter how experimental, no matter how it diverges in form along the way. And this thread has a historicity about it, even if it's broken or displaced or perverted, which implies reference to the 'universal'(78).

In writing a work which is more poetic, more compact than a novel, I was able to achieve something of the "unconcerned" style which Scott describes, examining what might otherwise have been political concerns about the nature of identity from within language. As a result, the linguistic composition of character was be privileged<sup>10</sup> over any core identity theory which might be more prevalent in content-oriented fiction.

**Why is instability of narrative an important and necessary part of women's writing?**

Any concrete articulation of position, for once and for all, would bind, in its very essentialism, erasing all possibility of movement. Scott has managed to articulate a position which is tenuous, subtle and shifting, interconnected with textuality, economy, and language. Her fictional narratives are unstable, fracturing the traditional form of the novel, the chapter, even the sentence. What she achieves through this strategy, is a space for voice, which, gathered out of the scraps and debris, is capable of becoming other than it was, is not determined by a line of "story," by plot. As Majzels points out,

fiction (and writing in general) is the terrain where we most clearly encounter the intricate relationship between language, the self and the world. Without language, no concept of self is possible; indeed, language determines to a large degree what self is possible. Transformational strategies, therefore, necessarily end up tackling the structure of language itself. In her resistance to the tyranny of syntax, the fixed hierarchy of subject, verb and object, Scott breaks her sentences into pieces, peppers her paragraphs with fragments, interrupts the logical flow of the text and parenthetically introduces alternative interpretations (17).

Or, more simply put, it is to defer and to differ.

In De'ath Sound, characters are linguistic tacticians, more or less conscious of their role

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<sup>10</sup> "Instead of the 'well-rounded' types of psychological realist fiction, Scott describes subjectivity as an unstable terrain with shifting boundaries. This is a view of a person as a fragmented shifting web of identities in constant flux, continuously transformed by its every contact with the Other, simultaneously asserting subjectivity and dissolving it" (Majzels commenting on Gail Scott, 15).

as such, and more or less successful. The tactics these speakers engage in are shifts in perspective -- which implies the correlative shift in self -- like a quark, from one coordinate in the web of words to another. Each shift changes the narrative perspective, and implies a reconstitution of self from the new coordinates. I like to think of it as a linguistic genealogy, where the stuff of words are like DNA, shifting, mutating at will. Characters are capable of engendering their own genealogy, being, after all, no more or less than the written word. With these sorts of shifts going on, you are not going to get anything less than a fractured, impulsing plot. Were plot to be privileged, the characters would be no more than bodies in motion, each an instance of concrete identity, and fate.

The importance of such shifts is in how it situates voice. Luce Irigaray talks of a space, a “non-existent place, which has to be created or invented as she goes along.”<sup>11</sup> For,

however we conceive identity, it must be thought of in terms of the female imaginary, an imaginary that will bind the or attach the scraps and debris together into something which gives women a ‘home’ but which does not prevent their mobility, their becoming, and their growth. Identity is feared -- rightly -- because of its immobilizing and blocking tendencies; but without it there is paralysis. Multiplicity in the male imaginary means that women remain dispersed, separated, and scattered, unable to move (Whitford, 138).

Such a theory of identity is in absolute sympathy with the cultural, political and linguistic milieu of women writing, in Québec and elsewhere. It is a statement which is as true of our fictions, as it is of we who write them.

The piece that follows inhabits a space as subtle as fiction. In writing this postface, I’ve been thinking about identity, how any concrete articulation of position, for once and for all, would bind, in its very essentialism, erasing all possibility of movement. The essay has been situated, somewhat, by the act of writing the novel, but it is also moving somewhere else, opening up a space, which is either its own, or a migration towards the next work.

Lines, phrases, scraps and debris from the fictional text, as well as the texts, “critical” or

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray; Philosophy in the Feminine (New York: Routledge, 1991), 124.

otherwise, that I am reading, inform the piece. Cut away from its context, from the works of other writers, this essay becomes a scarred mechanism. The resonance lies with these echoes of other voices, with the doubling of phrases.

The piece maps out some of the very real tensions between forms, between imagined audiences, that I was writing in relation to. Finally, I think, those tensions relaxed, and I found a space which was, temporarily, at least, inhabitable. A function, I think, of forgetting the “subject” and coming to engage in this piece as itself.

**check your sex at the door**  
(an essay-in-process)

**Language & Spectatorship**

The spectator is simply supposed to know nothing and deserves to know nothing. Those who are watching to see what happens next will never act and such must be the spectator's condition.<sup>12</sup>

One could interrogate Loralie on her passivity, her lack of action, as one might apply such a binary standard to daily life. Is she moving through time? Yes, somewhat – though not necessarily forward. Does she affect action? These questions belie a deeper assumption about the nature of fiction. That it is mimetic, that characters are to be understood as in some way behaving just like us, and existing in a world whose unreality we suspend in order to participate in the illusion of its sameness. How do we differentiate between the unfolding of story which Loralie affects, and the narrative's unfolding of actions undertaken by Loralie? If we read literally, the first is an effect of the author, and the later an effect of character. If however, we come to suspend suspension of disbelief, if we come to read the story as a story, we can understand action and passivity as far more entwined, less capable of polarity, in short, less culpable. The effecting of a narrative voice, no matter what values that voice is encoded with, is, in itself, both the writing or speaking of the unstable territory which composes her, and a rewriting of the nature of identity, a movement away from the visible, into the shifting interior, with its terminal cul-de-sacs which may or may not open at any moment into sudden vista, or disappear, entirely, from view.

To suspend suspension. A ball describes a hyperbole from boy's hand to hoop. The ball is suspended midway in its trajectory, its perfect curve. We suspend the ball and trace its inevitable arc, from where it hangs, midair, like a still shot of some strange, newly discovered planet – a

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<sup>12</sup> Guy Debord, in Adrienne Rich, What is Found There (New York: Norton, 1993), 83.

strange thing, certainly – but we will withhold doubt, so long as we are able to guess its inevitable, irretrievable, path. Suspend suspension, and the ball drops. It no longer fulfils the curve. The hoop remains a metaphor, but for what? Something entirely else, I suppose. And the hyperbole? It never existed to begin, except as a predisposition to order imposed by perspective. Did I say hoop? I meant hole. There was some hole but it seems to have sealed itself away. Taking with it the same perspective which was willing to see all the laws of physics interrupted, momentarily, so long as the object fulfilled its imposed function at some later time. And the boy's hands? What has happened to his hands? So shaped to toss the ball a moment ago, they become completely other, the skin peels away like the skin of a fruit, a persimmon, and inside the liver-dark cells lie bruised lips. Now we can begin to hear the story, away from the arc of ball – which shattered, by the way, was made of glass – we can lay fingers against bruised lip of hand, and begin to read.

And what happens after? What path to take back to the “real.” Leash the dog, fully aware of the narrative impact. No object this. And walk, pulling, darting, hedge to hole, after this or that, until the path, once again, becomes normative. Until the dog is tracing the effect of something that you can begin to perceive.

It could be that some frightening thing has been tossed in the ditch on Keeler Rd. A remarkable stench, quite unlike anything you've ever known. You see a small clear bag, to begin, torn, holes bitten into the sides. An utter inability. To comprehend structure. Or, anything at all. Perhaps the bag is overfilled with moon-white worms, spilling, and, glancing at the way the brush lies, you know that something larger lies lower in the ditch.

The day is hot, and the next as well, and you find it impossible to do anything but walk on the opposite side of the road and swallow your throat for the smell. You skirt this incomprehensible, wretched stench. Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable? She asks at this moment. Nothing. You want to answer. There is no thing. Unskirtable.

At the edges of thought – familiar elements. You have heard of those women in New York, you suppose, that sniff at a perfume and discover its elements. You have thus far discovered, walking on Keeler Rd., what can only be described as: a species of dry mould; something faintly like old

blood, something bovine; the charcoal scent of mud, underneath an other, eerily earthy scent, like the stool of a frightened animal, you remember that from the stockyards as a child; and, stale sweat and offal as you might find in a slovenly fish store, closed for the holidays in July.

Once, you came across an IGA bag which contained the forelimbs of what seemed to be another dog. He interrupts memory in order to remind you, dogs do not have cloven hoofs. Yes, you needed to be reminded.

You are still. Trying. To apprehend meaning. A violent drunk, it is unpredictable. Pulls the books from your carefully ordered library. Slaps, and embraces you. Would have you acknowledge its paternity. Sobs into sleep.

You walk in its sleep on Keeler Rd. It is a drunken experience, speech is slurred and memory becomes strange. You are convinced of the existence of a conspiracy, of the tacit participation in said activity by everyone you see. You see no one. You sniff at meaning and try to discern the shape of the corpse. Cannot see the body of the writer for the writhing of worms, words, for the consuming force which surrounds them. Speech becomes messianic, meaning slips as though in dream.

Surely we have walked long enough to arrive at the “real,” you say. But what of your steps? I ask. Drunken now. You turn to me, expectations of suspension bridges swinging past. Chasm? I ask. A “true” story? you counter.

But the saccade draws another saccade, and not hyperbole. Or is it that the involuntary leap to word that teases you into believing something of the “real” might be revealed, pulled, like a rabbit from a sack. From a rabbit skin sack.

But you have not left your bed (*garder le lit/qui se lit*), I remind you. But silently spectated upon it.

No dream, this.

## She is Thingified in the head: Violence in Identity

However we conceive identity, it must be thought of in terms of the female imaginary, an imaginary that will bind or attach the scraps and debris together into something which gives women a 'home' but does not prevent their mobility, their becoming, and their growth. Identity is feared – rightly – because of its immobilizing and blocking tendencies; but without it there is paralysis. Multiplicity in the male imaginary means that women remain dispersed, separated, and scattered, unable to move.<sup>13</sup>

There is no identity without violence, perhaps. But to reject identity could be another way of failing to challenge the symbolic division, an attempt to locate violence in the 'other.'<sup>14</sup>

I didn't go looking for it, I came across it in the dark: a mocking thought which frightened me. It was much more certain than I was. Out of the blue, it hit me several times across the mouth. My tongue was bathed in blood, I was dribbling. If it weren't for the blood I would have said no.<sup>15</sup>

I didn't go looking for it. I came across it in the dark, a mocking thought which frightened me. I think, if it weren't for the blood, I would have said no. Who is speaking now? And again.

Where does identity lie? When the narrative, the voice of each woman, timbre and accent, works against identity. When tell-tale phrases, born of memory, move like rogue-viruses throughout the text, contaminating constructions of singularity. Una and Duenna, etc., etc., like some clock-work device beating out time.

There is no word like that for three, etc.

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret Whitford, Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine (New York: Routledge, 1991), 138.

<sup>14</sup> IBID, 138.

<sup>15</sup> Hélène Cixous, Angst (New York: River Run Press, 1985), 23.

And how is tying a woman to a chair, and precipitating the loss of tongue, of salt, like boiling water, over and over again? You tell me. The wider the stretch between like and like, the more work there is to be accomplished. And what is that work? But to find that mocking thought which frightens. To find that you might have said no, if not for the blood. A fine spray of it, like laughter.

And what is brushed from the table top with the crumbs? Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable? She asks at this moment. Nothing. You want to answer. There is no thing. Unskirtable. But cannot.

Skirt. 'The rest of the story.' Brushed from the table top with the crumbs? Broken phrases, scraps and debris? Detritus, capitalized, at the fore of a sentence, gathers to itself the cloak of authority, as though I were citing some ancient learned Greek, and not a rubbing away.

Roses as a palimpsest, a rubbing away or into, inscribed with multiple acts of possession. She possesses herself. And, is possessed by: Others – the very word casts slant light on it. Roses possesses the scar on Bat's lip, which is shaped like a tooth. Or, an act of violence. And again, it is a taste in the mouth. Of salt, so slight, his skin? But this cannot be, she screams, this taste of violence cannot be, so slight, so salt.

How can this rape taste of salt? The thought that mocks me. That I didn't go looking for. Came across it in the dark. It frightened me. Perhaps you did say no, after all, and there wasn't blood. Just the merest taste of it, so slight, so salt, his skin. Who is speaking now? And again.

In some fairy-tale dream it could be Cordelia's father. And the inscription on her lip reads, "I love you as meat loves salt." But, the thought that mocks me, how does meat love salt? I would have said no, if not for the blood. The rustle of brown paper wrapped meat. Measured and marked. Just so.

And, I love you as meat loves salt. So slight, the skin. A fine spray of blood, like laughter.

But for accountability.

## **She is Thingified in the head: Violence in Identity**

There is never a reason-for-living. Live for nothing; live for no one. If the reason occurs to you, run away, save your life.<sup>16</sup>

Which is, the keeping of an account. In which there are two hundred and four dollars. Four of which might be a tip, like a waitress, or hairdresser. Or just the working out of the slaughter. Just.

Culpability. And where is the writer after the text? Manufacturing an alibi, perhaps, **culp**ing rationalizations. And it is after the text. What is left, but to fall back to the old position, to **say**, effectively, that the text itself is not enough, is too much, is in need of mediation, meditation, some expert advice. That there is something lacking, in the prose, in the manufacturer of prose, some deprivation at hand, a hole to be filled.

And so back to the art of telling stories. Build a cartesian devil, a bottle imp. A small hollow figure, made of glass, which, when immersed in a closed vessel of water can be made to rise or fall, conspire with variance, become ambient with pressure. Conversant with dust.

But what vessel is this precisely? the prose? the manufacturer of prose? The one in the other like a fly in a fly bottle, the rabbit pulled from the rabbit skin hat.

What is left but to speak over the text, as though language, in this postface, was natured differently, was denatured, was hollow, and made of glass. And, it is a postface, a perspective built after the text, a reason or rationalization, and all reasons and rations are born desperately, still, seeming just right.

Run, she says. There is no reason. Write for nothing. For no one. And if the reason occurs to you, run away, save your life.

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<sup>16</sup> IBID, 16.

## **She is Thingified in the head: Violence in Identity**

We cannot neatly separate off our mediating praxis that interprets and constructs our experiences from the praxes of others. We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of a web in which others find themselves moving also.<sup>17</sup>

Why did I write this, and not some other, thing. There was the night I conceived of the way that stories could overlay you like white-as-flour quiet, the way that even if you die in them, repeatedly, the telling never stops. And the way that subject positions are forced occupations, and the way that these occupations are assumed by default. How even the tentative telling of a story which is meant to break that very silence, can be death. The construction of singularity, of the oneness of a thing, is death. At least a small death, at least to difference. Maybe that's why this novel ends the way it does, which is to say, it doesn't. But breaks clean in half.

Maybe that's why the women are so forgetful, picking up one another's narratives as a woman walking through the house unconsciously picks up dirty socks. Finds the scraps and debris of other people's lives in the pockets of her housecoat, on her desk, slipped among the preserves on the shelf. And they become part of her narrative, rupturing the linearity of what might be construed as purpose. The act of walking from one room to the next becomes the art of housing in one narrative all the detritus of our collected communal lives.

But back to the story. Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable? She asks, dipping her spoon in the pot. Too salt? I ask. Not enough? Mm.

She is thingified in the head when it breaks the silence, and the narrative she constructs is thingifying in my head. I shape around this thing, looking for fault lines. It is a mirror, which

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<sup>17</sup> Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others" (Cultural Critique. No. 20 Winter 1991-92), 21.

tilted, then fell, when they were renovating the flat below. A trip to the gynaecologist.

The fault line exists, and a single strike will shatter. But when the object breaks, it is multiplied in its sameness. Now the story exists, the same, the same, a thousand times over. And some of the shards look into the shards, so that now the story exists into eternity.

Was that deference, deferral, or difference? she asks. Spoon dripping. Dribbling.

Again, I didn't go looking for it, I came across it in the dark. A mocking thought that frightened me. It was much more certain than I was.

Out of the blue, it hit me several times across the mouth. My tongue was bathed in blood, I was dribbling. Not the spoon. Dripping. No. If it weren't for the blood I would have said no.

But it was much more certain than I was.

With dirty sock in pocket, spoon in hand. Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable? Skirting.

### **She is Thingified**

I am staring to the point of entry when she comes in, and so, I narrowly miss her. She passes around me, dips her spoon in the pot. Something like a skirt hangs as from the side of a saddle, covers the legs of the sofa on which she sits. She produces the spoon, first, and later questions. A series of safety pins forms an impromptu border, an odd end, scrolling down one side of her dress, hanging to just below the knee.

If we laid open her left hip joint, we could examine another head and neck, made of bone, which sprout from the capsular ligam. From its small mouth, a flat, triangular band of fibres slowly blend with ligament. Dislodged, just so, it would sculpt itself, become the anatomy of intercourse. The connubial gristing of teeth.

If we laid open her.

If we laid open her left hip joint. The particularity of it, the left, disarms. Dis-arms. The we, as well. The kind of signature that can authorize dissections, amputations, the amortization of all your affairs. In mortmain. Her hand then, the right one, with which she writes. Just here, the nerve lies under. Ulnar.

As meat loves salt. So to take the tourists there.

The isle of meat, and strait of salt. The deep branch of the Ulnar.

Mortmain.

### **The hole-envelope**

I tell R of inaudible inscriptions, and he offers me aspirin, to keep my heart from clotting. I am so slow, as to be prophesying a past in the existence of writers like Luce.

Il fait de noir, Hélène says to me. I reach for the switch. Barbara Amiel has written her "International Affairs" column again. Il fait de noir. Is this (de)nigration? The switch is broken. B writes of domestic violence. As though violence could ever be domesticated. She writes of consenting adults.

She is manufacturing sense, that is sure. A protestant hermeneutics, a rule of thumb.

The switch is dead.

Roses hums an old show tune, bustling about the tiny kitchenette, the perfect picture of domestic joy.

“Somebody should put your face on a flour package.”

Two pictures inform this scene. First, and surface-wise, the “Clabber girl” on the face of a baking powder canister. She smiles sweetly out of the frame holding biscuits, fresh. Behind her, a mother and three children, a rolling horse, a kitten, and something in the mother’s lap. A dead chicken, neck stretched and hanging over her knee. She is stuffing the hole. A little girl stands behind her lap, peering past its sex into gaping belly. She looks “interested.”

Each time I look into this picture, the girl holding biscuits, her posture and gesture, tells me she is part of this “mother” scene, has somehow emerged from gaping hole, which, in time, she will return to, so that the hole will lie in *her* lap.

Clabber sounds like... a non-sense word, except in its suggestiveness.

“But the puppet’s rag mouth is sewn firmly shut.”

The second picture is of “Hanna’s Lustro-Finish:” an old advertisement from the forties or fifties. “Hanna,” I imagine, is pictured in a blue and white maid’s uniform, applying “finish” to the floors. The caption says: “Made to walk on.” I always hear it doubled, I hear: “Maid/made to walk on.” The advertisement is framed, it was a gift from a lover, a year after I left behind my white uniform, and the expanse of floors always in need of “finishing.” Nothing ever finishes the floors. They are in need of mopping, polishing, buffing, sweeping, endlessly. Nothing finishes the floors. Even the floors in a closed museum gather dust.

Loralie thinks that Roses will help her, that whatever strange circumstance led to her being gagged and bound to the kitchen chair will correct itself under the influence of Roses’ cheery domesticity.

The fresh biscuits in the portrait are not for you. They are not edible. They taste of wax paper, ink, and glue. If you struggle hard enough, and your teeth are sharp, maybe you will be rewarded with the bare taste of tin. Monochrome biscuits, in black & white. They offer no sustenance. The succour they offer is of a different kind: “sucker,” I hear.

Words of dispossession, without sentences to house them, without a word to express the subject, surfacing.

The violence is not domesticated, though it occurs in a domestic setting. And is it better somehow? or even different? I ask B, to be bludgeoned in a yellow kitchen, where cheery daffodils nod from the walls?

The “Clabber Girl” is informed by other memories, of baking bread, a six hour process which is ongoing as I write. The bread rising, and being “punched” down, every half-hour to hour, until it is divided, braided, and placed in stove. Baking bread is a violent, organic process.

Or, the buying of bread. And the tattoo on the wrist of the woman. I do not look at her wrist, ever, because I know what is there. The blue of the tattoo, I think, would hold my stare. I might fall from time, somehow, crying out loud. Du pain. I say, only. Du pain. Breath short. This call she hears dawn to dusk, every working day.

The politics of the surrogate-object.

Where do we locate politics, for instance, in a bread-roller? Is it different, somehow, if one is bound to a chair, and interrogated by a universal other? Or, by Roses in the guise of the “Clabber Girl” carrying out the work of the state, unrequested. Offering coffee between lies. Succour which cannot be availed. Coffee made with water which has been boiled over and over again. How far back shall we take this?

This scene involves an inversion of expectation. I wanted to map or shape the domestic, and the violent. The act of violence is both purposive and accidental. I wanted to explore complicities, notions of action and inaction. It is, not accidentally, the first time we enter the consciousness of Loralie, the looping narrative which will only come to cycle through later in the text. So that even as Loralie is rendered “passive,” she is mapping out identity. Finding those words of dispossession, even without sentences to house them, even without a word to express the subject, which is self, surfacing.

Clusters of domestic images abound. How do we read these images conjoined as they are with violence? A butter knife, as opposed to a butcher's, slippers and not jack-boots. They seem to offer a kind of comfort, and yet. And yet.

B would have us conjoin these absolutely, as Hélèn would say, she would have us dipped in conjugal oil for the pot. Prepare for the connubial gristing of teeth.

Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable? Violence maybe, even the bare smell of it.

But then, there is something else to this, something beyond this rationalization. Something in the violence itself, in the violent reworking of self. Something that would do violence, any violence, in order to shape her self, her selves, for her use.

But the switch is dead.

Oh yes -- complicity, and language. Had I mentioned those?

### **hole, envelope**

I imagine Roses as a girl-child, and rather small for her age. She would never have managed silence. Her voice, high-pitched, shrill, an incipient fish-wife, her "maiden-head" broken, a small smear of red sea, through horse-back, perhaps. A fighter, stabbing fork at the communal plate of meat. Was that your hand? Coy, bleeding. Blood-read.

Dinner phrase #1: "biting off more than she could chew..."

Dinner phrase #2: "eyes bigger than her stomach..."

A sound track accompanies this piece, by Patsy Cline.

Played in the long underground tunnel of a metro, or under sea. It comes to me as if through still water. Broken and strange.

**check your sex at the door**

*Dissection* [of the lingual region]. After completing the dissection of the preceding muscles, saw through the lower jaw just external to the symphysis. The tongue should then be drawn forwards with a hook, and its muscles, which are thus put on the stretch, may be examined.<sup>18</sup>

The penis is periodical and tidal. In its fullest form, it is never a fraction as large as western culture has lead us to believe. An unseeing, blind baby rabbit, tethered to belly, some inches below the hilum, conveying the simplest forms of sustenance throughout its passages. Watching undersea with Jaques Cousteau, we saw a vulvar creature whose lips inhaled and exhaled the sea. It was the colour of a simmering blush, and drank and expelled noisily, a hungry child whose lips are numbed to the precision of the orders of the brain. Though sea-quiet. We ate lemons and reiterated the motion of the sea.

The smell of the sea. The rank stink of rotted sea-weed. The taste of salt. There is no border here. Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable? G answers, first, and from the gut, honesty. At the border of the sea. The point of entry, a toe, a foot, a thigh-splash. Bring yourself under and the nostrils drown in an incomprehensible fluid, there is no sense to be understood, it is "too" present. But stand by the sea, "skirt" the sea, and the nostrils are flooded with scent, with sense, assaulted, salted, one drowns in this smell, pleasantly, desperately. Until, if I have "skirted" the wet of the sea, and even the smell of it, I am no longer in relation to it, standing before some fried crab stand. There are referents to the sea. Fried labial relics, perhaps, and for a price. But its existence has become a gesture. And what I have skirted, something else entirely. Something smaller, and saleable. Small curled penises, some of them, breaded and deep-fried. Earlier I opened my foot on a shell fish and bled into the sea. Now I dip these little friends in mayonnaise and slip them onto tongue. And tooth. And gristing of teeth.

This smell different from what I had known. The river, polluted and swollen with dying salmon. We would come to see them jump up the rock face and bash their brains in falling back. Il se

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<sup>18</sup> Gray's Anatomy, 209.

rabut sur... Is that caviar in their opened bellies? I asked the birds.

Further down the river, the salmon trap. A concrete bunker, mostly submerged. The river flowing in its opened end, and whirling round its middle compartment, before being shunted through the grate. A sucking whirl in its centre, to drown in. As I nearly did. But someone hanging from hole overhead dropped their body down, like fairy tale hair, to cling to.

Bodies tossed from the bridge. Further still. Climbing the impossible geometry of triangles mounting triangles, and throwing themselves to the waters below.

And throughout, the smell of the river, of dying salmon, in our hair and clothes, on our breath. There was never any denying where we had been. Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable? Smell. These smells are unskirtable. They cling to us.

Our sexes smelled of dying salmon, or, later, the careless wrack of sea-weed.

Coitus as interruption. A rupture of labial discourse. And, a man's sex is unfortunate. Replace umbilical with a simple umbel, perhaps, a "poly-vocal" outcropping of the multiple sex. Where to begin? Where to suck, this? It might have skirted Freud's imagination entirely. The penis as a simple statement: in need of problematization, which is different from a problem, which it is, already.

Our sexes smelled of dying salmon.

And not the woman's sex as humectant or infectant.

Our sexes smelled of dying salmon, or, later, the careless wrack of sea-weed. There was never any denying where we had been.

## **The hetero-sexes**

Heteros, the other (of the two). It expresses contrast, comparison. In which one must always be the loser. Hetero-taxis: an abnormal position or arrangement, as of organs of the body. A rupture of labial discourse. The phone rings.

Slip tongue between his lips. Pry open his mouth. Explore the rutted surfaces, the exposed bone. His tongue lies "passive," "latent." A "false" floor on the base of his mouth, tickled into "being." This censored vaginal kiss we engage in (but mythos, vagina dentata? the connubial gristing?) His age. Which has softened flesh, the thickness of breast no more surprising than my own. The "homo-erotic" motion, as I bend him before me and press bone of pubis into the cleft of his ass. This polytrophic lick, and the social caste of insects. The things we ate at the sea-side stand, forgotten now, in this. But the warm smell of rotting vegetation, of salt sweat, and skin.

And the other has passed between our lips so many times now, that we are familiar with its smells, tastes and textures.

The saddle was made from the hide of a cow. Something like a skirt, two lips or flaps as might cover the legs of a sofa or chair, between my thighs and the belly of the sorrel mare, and the colour of dry leaves. The rupture enabling discourse? The discrete separation of blood and membrane. Hymen rubbed raw and burst on the saddle-back of a sorrel mare. A small bloody smear. And thinking, that's it? That's all there is to it? Well, then. It needed no "rehearsal."

And it never was.

Our sexes smelled of rutting salmon, or later, the sea-rot of dying weed.

And there is an underside to this game, a dangerous current, a centric whirl which threatens drowning. What cling to now? No fairy-tale hair descends, no centric force clinging to the roots of her hair. And there are simple problems. In this text, anyways. You can count them like the fingers of your hand. In the other book, there are two hundred and four of them. Simple

problems. Insoluble.

And what is it that makes this surface hetero-sex so simple? A denial of the issue. What issues forth. Liquid and indistinct. What is insoluble in a woman's sex? Placed in sex. (Dis)placed in sex. Lodged. In throat. The phone rings.

Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable? this perhaps, of our differing sexes? A point of departure. A small point. Under froth of the sea, spinning past.

She asks, Qu'est-ce qui est incontournable dans le féminisme quand on écrit? And I am prophesying what has come before, spiralled into becoming before me. This text, this poly-vocal sex bound through others, ligatures and arterial tangles feeding, noisily. Though sea-quiet.

The taste of lemon reiterating the motion of sea.

The smell of salmon-rut, or later, the sea-rot of dying weed. There was never any denying where we had been.

### **There was never any denying where we had been**

Here, the matter of what's unskirtable in our feminism gains a nuance. That women's circle must be not only an ongoing presence that fosters the process of reinvention of her body in a language no longer reflected slant from the realm of patriarchal meaning. BUT, for it to work for her as artist, this women's circle must be propitious to (her) self-invention while resisting closure, i.e., the tendency to become, in its vision, a new convention.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gail Scott, Spaces Like Stairs (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1989), 130.

...she and her sisters are dressed up for the explosion (the end of the era) in robes of stunning irony: obsessed with understanding the gap between their feminism and the physiological residue of experience (battering, childbearing, love, nuclear waste... which also have their truths); obsessed with the pull between ideology and the unconscious, between the mask (a slant attempt at synthesis of meaning) and the laughter that in the same breath assures transgression...<sup>20</sup>

Undeniably, this is no longer a postface to what was written, but a movement towards something other. Something unseen, because unseeable and unwritten. Marking the transition from what I prophecy in what is past, and what is becoming. At this point. Small point? G joins the carnival taking place in the streets. I think of joining her, but am stuck in the phrase, you catch more flies with honey. I am very careful with the honey, to keep it sealed, to check for flies before opening the jar, to dip my spoon in quickly and swallow the substance down. To trace and retrace the residue in my mouth with tongue. To keep my mouth *down* I wrote, and not *shut*, until it dissolves. I am, in fact, a little afraid for this piece, (simmering blush), thinking of the places it has to go. The flies et al. Smoking too much, to calm the bees in my belly, sing them to sleep. My right hand still on the wrist, I see. Though in this I am ambidextrous, so if they took one, I would be fine. Would punch keys with the blunt stump. Sharpen it to a point. If you cut a single finger, the skin recedes, so that bone protrudes from the cincture. What a wonderful thing to wave at schoolchildren. To dip in the honey jar. To clack on wooden tables. To shue the fly from the fly-bottle. The rabbit from the rabbit skin hat. Join G at the Carnival, to prophecy the weight of tourists. Point the way to the small yellowing tent. Befriend the bearded lady, and her contortionist lover. Rhythmically clack a bone finger, shaped for the skinning of persimmon, against the fetal pig's jar.

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<sup>20</sup> IBID, 134.

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