

An Intimate War

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The first time we divorced we did it on a serviette.

I arrived first. Sitting outside on the wooden deck nursing my first gin and tonic I watch you get out of your car and walk towards the restaurant. One hand brushing the chunky curls off your broad forehead. The other hovering protectively around the zip of your jeans trying not to draw attention to itself but needing to make sure that you are securely zipped in.

You always are but you always check just in case.

The rituals of your body are so familiar they ache in my chest.

You slide onto the bench opposite me and run your hand through your hair again. Locks so luscious they should have belonged to a girl they said when you were small. And a face so extraordinarily pleasing to look at that I tend to get lost in its contours and lose the thread of our conversation.

I have given up trying to make sense of this thing that lives and breathes and bubbles between us. I know longer care to define its shape. Whether it is karmic glue or animal lust or good old-fashioned heart-spluttering love it has begun to creep into the cracks between us. It's in your eyes. In the clear infinite blue. Pinning me right there. It's in my toes.

A few months ago they weren't cracks. They were canyons.

You're leaning towards me across the dark wooden slatted table. Compressing and filling the space between us with the earthy smell of your tobacco and your musky deodorant that comes in that bold black phallic bottle. Talking bullshit. Beguiling bullshit.

You say we need to divorce so that we can explore something else - another kind of relationship. A different kind of friendship. We can't do this while we're still married.

I dare not ask why not.

But I'm going to be told because you're on a roll and there's no stopping you now and you've got this smug little smile on your face.

Marriage is too safe you say. Married people never do risky things because there's too much at stake. They're too comfortable. They have all kinds of erotic fantasies that they never admit to their partners. The most exciting sex they have is in their heads.

I fiddle with the wedge of lemon bobbing on the surface of my drink. I know what this is all about. You want your fucking around to be wife-free. Guilt free. You're looking for the zipless fuck.

Now you're going on about divorce lawyers: We don't need them. They're evil. They feed off animosity. They *create* animosity. We'll never be friends if we go that route - we'll end up hating each other.

Oh God no please not that. I don't want to go to war with you.

Under the table my bare foot finds your calf. The responding pressure from your leg is subtle. Enough. Just enough to make me uncross my legs and spread my thighs a little beneath my velvet skirt. Now there's laughter bubbling up my spine and I say well okay why don't we simply sign something here right now?

You grab a serviette ask the waitress for a pen and your unruly scrawl snakes across the woolly page the ink blobbing and bleeding into the tissue paper as you write out our names and the date and the statement that we are from this day forward no longer man and wife. And then we both sign it and you say you'll type it out and send me a copy and you stuff it into the pocket of your jeans.

And then you lean towards me and you hold me with your eyes and their blue is inescapable and I say don't don't look at me like that.

We leave the restaurant our bodies touching yet not touching we climb

into the car in silence we drive along the main road across the railway line to the green belt next to the lake. There is no sign of human presence yet the stillness throbs with nightlife the moon shooting silver across the water the frog song welcoming us the gnarled tree trunk on which we sit seeming as ancient and as vital as mother earth herself. And so we quickly shed our clothes because to be naked in this place on this night is so right. Our limbs are entangled with the limbs of the tree my feet rooted in the ground my arms stretched out to the sky. We surrender ourselves to the night we are plant animal human we are melting moaning bursting our juices are mingling with the earth and lust is awful and holy like thunder and lightning and the wind.

ONE

They live in the same house in the same town for the whole of her childhood and her father comes home for lunch at one fifteen every day. Mealtimes always begin with for what we are about to receive.

She eats too fast and she says too little.

Her earliest memory is of the polished gleam of her mother's blue-black hair against painted white wood. She is two years old and is standing in the doorway watching her mother lean over the cot - her ebony hair glinting with indigo flames against the smooth whiteness. The contents of the cot have altered her place in the family forever. She has become a middle child - a girl with nothing but girlness on either side of her.

Their house takes up space at the end of a wide street. Poplar trees shoot up and up into the sky from the grass verge on the other side of the low white wall like elongated furry arrows. The tree which shades much of the front lawn drips furry lemon-coloured blossoms and a birdbath pushes itself out of the grass like an upturned stony mushroom. From the front gate a paved path carves its way to the stairs leading onto the wide verandah where a potted delicious monster taller than her father uncurls its fat fleshy leaves into the unsuspecting ears of visitors who come for tea.

Mother's flowerbeds are like seaside caravan holidays - they grace the edges of her childhood. Pansies poppies petunias cannas sweetpeas renunculas zinnias dahlias delphiniums geraniums hydrangeas all bloom easily in mother's garden. Rolling deliciously off her tongue their fancy foreign names are lush with promise. Yet the garden as a whole has an awkwardness about it as if its creator forgot to connect all the parts to the whole. Flowers line pathways that go nowhere and the lonely wire trellis

that grows on the edge of the rockery has little to justify its existence. Except for the fact that mother's climbing roses have to climb on something.

The roses never get to grow wild. Once a year her grampa comes to prune them. He snips and clips and slices the woody branches in just the right places. When she looks at those neatly trimmed bushes with their limbs so cleanly severed the cuts so raw so green she knows the rose bushes are hurting but she says nothing because her mother will say she is talking *poppycock*.

Her favourite place in the house is the cushioned window seat in the sunny lounge. The window seat is covered in orange-brown leather look-alike and stretches around the room under the huge windows. She lies there on her stomach with the edges of the sunfilter curtains tickling her toes she drifts in the still heat until she is heavy with halfsleep and the leather look-alike is sticky under her.

The bathroom has a built in dirty washing box next to the bath. It opens into the bathroom on the one side and into the linen cupboard in the hallway on the other side. They peel off their soiled things they lift up the blue wooden lid they stuff them down the hatch and the lid drops down. Sealing off the evidence that they are by nature unclean beings. A few days later their discarded clothes appear miraculously transformed - clean and ironed and neatly folded in our cupboards.

They never raise a hand to her. They never raise a voice. Their disapproval is quiet. Dignified. Whenever a bit of wildness tries to break out of her they simply tell her she's being *otherwise*.

She must have been an ordinary child before they tamed her. She must

have been a singing screaming running-wild child before the heaviness began to creep into her bones. Before she found the words *it's not the done thing* written indelibly on her skin.

On her first day of school she does something that is not the done thing. She doesn't know it isn't otherwise she would never have done it during singing lesson.

Her mother had disappeared around the corner abandoning her in a faceless brick building with a fearsome teacher whose eyes were small and bloodshot and who bore the unsavoury name of Mrs. Fokkens. Now she sits in the circle of children on the floor around the piano and takes off her shoe and sock because her toe itches. Thirty-three years later she will still recall the exact spot where her big toe itched because just at the moment when she starts to scratch her teacher's bloated body pounces on her and announces her badness to the world.

She sits frozen in a pool of shame with her naked toe in her hand. A part of her body which needed to be scratched is suddenly an unclean and obscene thing.

The tyranny of 'done things' squeezes the life out of her and her fear of the world reveals itself regularly in a tendency to faint. The fainting happens when the fear balloons into panic and there is no way out. The balloon has to burst and her body shuts down and the familiar fog whooshes into her head with a dizzy spinning white and yellow feeling a free-falling sinking into blackness feeling. Then far away voices far away faces are looming above her floating in and out of the fog and then the voices find the faces and the fog lifts and she is back.

To find that time has stood still and yet moved on without her.

Her first faint happens around the piano at home. The piano is being

tuned and her father is fascinated by the process - he is forever curious about the inner workings of things. She and her sisters are summoned to watch they stand around but the standing goes on for too long. She needs to move to sit to lie down but to do that is to draw attention to herself so she stands and she stands until the blood drains from her head and the waves of fog rush in and she drops soundlessly to the floor.

There are many things that she wants to escape from so she faints frequently. She faints at school during biology lessons. She doesn't want to know about bilharzia those tiny squiggly worm like creatures squirming into people's bodies laying their eggs all over the place and the pictures on the blackboard are big and horrible. She doesn't want to look she doesn't want to listen something is squeezing her stomach she needs air but she is imprisoned in her chair. She puts up her hand and mumbles *Teacher I feel faint* but it's too late she is already starting to sink into the yellow white fog.

When she wakes up on the floor her dress is wet underneath her.

She doesn't know where the wetness is coming from until she works out that it is coming from inside her. Somehow while she was drowning in the blackness she began to leak and the leak became a puddle and it all happened during those moments when she was not there. She pushes the shame down into an empty hole inside her but the next time she's on the floor and her dress is wet again and the shame swallows her all over again.

Nobody says anything about this thing that happens to her when she's not there. She worries and she wonders but she never asks. Who saw the puddle seep out of her?

In the early years their house overlooks a lush untamed valley. Then the brown green valley becomes eaten up by houses. She watches the ugliness

spread and she wishes those houses would stop gobbling up her valley. She has no control over the landscape of her world but she discovers a world that she can control a world of colours shapes lines and forms. She discovers the joy of making things that weren't there before. She makes elaborate multi-storey buildings with chimneys and windows and doors and gardens and trees. She is the architect of miniature worlds and she is oblivious to the passing of time. With coloured pencils she draws a picture of a sable antelope and a zebra in her school nature-study book. The book is covered neatly in brown paper and plastic and there are blue lined pages for writing and white blank pages for drawing. She copies the pictures from a book about the Kruger Park Game Reserve and her pictures look exactly like those in the Kruger Park book. She discovers that a zebra's black stripes are not really black they are sometimes a very dark shade of blue and other times almost brown and the white is greyish in some places and a bit yellow in others. And the stripes are not the same width on different parts of the body.

She has begun to process the world through her eyes. She has slipped through a hidden door into another world. The more she looks the more she sees.

Her books are model books and she is a model child. She always keeps between the lines. She speaks only when spoken to. On her report cards her teachers write 'She is a pleasure to have in the class'. *Pleasure*. The word has no backbone. A slushy mushy nothing word. She wishes she wasn't such a pleasure.

When her father tells bedtime stories she begs him to tell her the story about the 'naughtiest naughtiest NAUGHTIEST' girl in the world.

The smiling voices are coming through the walls they are calling her but she can't do this thing she can't walk into that room full of people. If she stays hidden too long they will say she's being *otherwise* they will say it's not the done thing to hide away when visitors come to tea. And so she forces herself to get up she walks down the passage and into the room where they sit and her heart is crashing against her ribs she keeps her eyes on the floor she marches right through them to the other side of the room but their words follow her they reach out and grab her and won't let her go.

When will she come out of her shell?

They talk about her as though she is not there as though her shyness has made her stupid.

She opens the caravan door. Her father covers himself quickly but the image is already frozen in her brain. She is twelve years old and she has seen the unspoken. She has no pictures or words in her head that match what she sees until one day she overhears her aunt mention *the family jewels* and her mother's faint blush and barely audible giggle alert her to the fact that this is no ordinary secret that they are sharing.

But the name puzzles her. They did not look like jewels.

Sometimes the stuff of her body gives her away. What *does* she do with bloodstained underwear? It can't be hidden it can't be stuffed into a cupboard it must be washed and hung out to dry. Somehow an unspoken decree determines that the small basin in the passage next to the toilet shall be the place of the silently soaking stains. And there are two three then four of them with monthly messy secrets seeping red leaking womenlife into the water on the way to the toilet. The silent soaking happens again and again and again for months for years as

unmentionable as it is inevitable and the stains never ever really go away they leak and they leak and they speak into the silence around them.

When she thinks of her father looking at her panties staining the water red - shame seeps into her soul.

She is in the passenger seat her mother is driving. She is reading a paperback book and the sentence jumps out at her providing the key to the essential mystery of her adolescent body. She reads it again and again and for years to come she will tease every drop of life out of it she will taste it on her tongue she will taste it in her head she will taste it between her legs.

He touched me down there.

Her body responds but her head has yet to find the reason why and all the while her mother sits next to her. Locked inside herself. Knowing nothing of the words sucking droplets of moisture out of some unspoken place between her daughter's legs.

But still. She knows. Her mother knows the secrets of her body but doesn't tell.

Puppy fat. That's what they call it when she starts overeating. They tell her she is a hungry growing girl. They don't see the speed with which she stuffs the peanut butter sandwiches into her mouth.

They don't know that food can do so much more than satisfy hunger it can dull the senses and obliterate the ache of the unsaid.

It is still light when she goes over to his caravan which is directly across the grass from theirs. Her mother is reading on her bed when she leaves

and her father has gone for a drink at the yacht club. The dress she is wearing is short and tight and white and the boy has golden curls. He is about her age around fourteen he is not a magic boy just a boy. When she gets back to the caravan it is dark and her mother is no longer interested in her book. Her voice sounds funny when she asks what they were doing. We were talking she says. Why were there no lights on in his caravan her mother asks. We didn't need to have the light on she replies.

Her mother says nothing.

The following year she discovers that it is indeed possible to rupture the layer of silence which insulates her home. This time the boy is much older he is nineteen they danced at his sister's party and when the Bee Gees were singing Massachusetts his hand on her breast shocked her out of childhood. Later in his car outside her house she is trapped not by his clumsy insistence but by the paralysis of her will. She wants to escape from his groping hands and his probing tongue but she is powerless to do so. But then her father's face is looming large and red and his voice is crashing into the car and sweeping them up the path up the stairs and into the house.

She is terrified.

She has never heard her father shout before.

Mother is not in the room. Shyness has swallowed her up and hidden her away in another part of the house. She must be terrified by the sounds of conflict staining the walls of our home.

Being alone in the dark with boys is dangerous. That much has been made clear to her. But the details of the dangers remain unspoken and she is drawn to unspoken danger like a moth to a flame. And so she finds herself

some months later on one of those seamless seaside holidays pinned on the grass in the dark with an eager hand pulling off her purple lace panties. She had followed him to his room where he and his friends were hanging out playing guitar and smoking a strange sweet substance and she'd sat and watched and listened and had been captivated by their otherness. Then he had walked her back to her caravan and instead of saying goodbye he'd pushed her into the grass and trapped her beneath him and the voices of protest were hammering against her skull but they couldn't find their way out and she was uncertain of where she began and where she ended and in the end she was less afraid of the strange body above her than of her father should he wake up and hear the young man's fervent whisperings in the dark.

Perhaps her passivity put him off. Perhaps he was as much a boy playing at being a man as she was a girl playing at being a woman.

Perhaps it was enough that he could leave with her lace panties in his pocket.

Her childhood aches with things unsaid and with tears unshed.

After her elder sister dies a dam of unwept grief silts up her house forever. Her father tries hard to stop his pain leaking out but one day she finds him outside the back door. She is fifteen she has never seen her father cry. He holds her briefly but she sinks back into the house she stumbles into the bathroom she is shamed by the messiness of her own pain. He follows her he tries to reach across the abyss between them he mumbles apologies he says he feels so sorry for her mother she says yes that's the way she feels but they can't share their tears they can't speak of

their own searing ache within so they wall up their hurts and they straighten their masks.

And their hearts continue to bleed in solitary confinement.

She is in matric. She wants to put her head on her maths teacher's lap. The desire is frequent and urgent. Mr Prinz is short and balding and around her father's age. Like the subject he teaches his boundaries are hard and steel-edged and his classroom is a fearful place. She spends feverishly long hours stretching her brain around equations logarithms theorems and the like - she is desperate to avoid his wrath and gain his praise. Her art teacher and her history teacher are both men but they arouse nothing in her. They are much too soft around the edges.

She has begun to spend her pocket money on diet pills.

The silver blade is edged with tiny serrations it moves up and down so fast no movement is visible only the high-pitched hum and her father's words warning her and the delicious smell of freshly flying sawdust.

Seducing her.

The cut would be so clean. The blood so red. The hurt so big.

A huge wave is propelling her towards the whirring silver thread. She fights the wave with all her strength she digs her feet into the cold concrete she knows that if she gets too close she will have no choice she will have to do it she will have to put her hand into the whirring blade of the electric saw.

Her thin granny lives in town in a flat on the third floor. She stands on the redbrick balcony and the desire surges through her body she wants to climb onto the narrow balcony wall she wants to walk the narrow path

between life and death and it is not the fall that she fears it is the compulsion to throw herself over.

When she enters her twenties she becomes a driver on the road and now it is the oncoming traffic which exerts the intoxicating pull and triggers the terrifying rush. It happens again and again. A sudden white hot jolt to her brain she is overwhelmed by the power of the machine in her hands and then the madness starts mutating in her head just a quick twist of the steering wheel it could happen so fast and when the bloody images start flooding her brain she increases her grip on the wheel her body tightens she fights this invisible thing this thing that tells her to smash headfirst into the oncoming car.

It is only in her fantasies that she bleeds. That she truly feels. It is only in her dreams that her body asserts itself. She frequently arrives at school or enters a crowded shopping centre having forgotten to clothe the lower half of her. But these are not ordinary nocturnal dramas they invade her days as well as her nights they weave their sticky threads around her night after night day after day. She can't shake them off and she panics because the body in her dreams has more substance than the one in her waking life and sometimes she wonders if this is how it feels to lose your mind.

When she is twenty-two she flies to India with her year's savings a pair of jeans a few T shirts and 'India on \$5 and \$10 a day'. Flying over the Indian Ocean into the exhilaration of the unknown she feels pure and unfettered and deliciously new. She has planned nothing beyond the flight itself. She knows no-one in that alien land. She has imposed no boundaries of time and place upon herself. For six weeks she stretches herself beyond herself

she drifts with the tide of young travellers she drinks in the kaleidoscope of colours sights smells and sounds she stays with locals rich and poor she sleeps on luggage racks on trains she eats rice cakes for breakfast she drinks tea out of disposable clay cups she marvels at cows and elephants roaming busy city streets and she is seduced by Indian men.

But then she is reeled in by a man from home and her journey begins to shrink. They drift around together and a veil falls over her eyes. She remembers the lessons her mother taught her she remembers that life without a man is no life at all and so they go home they marry they have children a boy and then a girl but they do not live happily ever after.

He is a good man but he has no power to unlock the doors within her. There are conversations that she needs to have but they are conversations that he does not welcome so she retreats into her cage she goes through the motions and remains unsatisfied.

TWO

Cascading from my neck is a sturdy rope of beaded strings. The turquoise beads are unexpectedly interspersed with red and black buttons that glitter shamelessly in the sun. Around my waist I wear a loosely knotted sarong which partially covers my ankle-swishing skirt. My toenails are the colour of ripe mulberries but my fingernails are clear and unpolished. In the grooves between the fleshy tips and the pink nailbeds stubborn traces of paint betray my occupation.

Despite my arty armour I can't make cleverspeak.

It is a spring day in Cape Town in 1992. I am thirty-eight years old and I am hovering on the edge of a conversation in a sunny suburban garden. Listening to the ebb and flow of people's lives. I envy the ease of others who simply talk seemingly without thought. How smoothly their outer layers roll off their tongues.

Now the talk is coming from someone who has been to China. Something to do with maths education. But I am bored with academics and intellectuals they are too eloquent their words are too many and too hollow and I allow the monologue to float past me as I slip back into my well of dragging discontent. I feel the pull of my empty house and my mind keeps wandering and my eyes keep wandering and I notice you slipping between the tangled conversations into an empty chair in the sun-soaked circle and I don't know yet that you are my destiny but I watch you.

Your hair is the shade of warm brown that I use most often in my paintings: Burnt umber. The colour of fertile earth and dark chocolate. It falls heavily below your collar and is suddenly rinsed with copper as you enter the pool of sunlight. I take in the perfected geometry of your face - the

fine balance between your sculpted cheekbones and broad forehead. Your athlete's body moving effortlessly in pale cotton shirt and uniform blue jeans. I see you shrug back a tumble of hair then eagerly adopt the standard survival strategy. Light a cigarette. Have a drink. Have another. And another. Cold beers taking the edge off some nameless discontent.

The man wants to get drunk.

Your first words to me around the buffet table are unremarkable: What do you do?

I keep my eyes on the food I am ladling onto my plate and for some reason my answer makes you smile.

I am the only one here who is not an academic.

You follow me back to my chair. We settle ourselves in the sun and suddenly it is easy to forget myself it is easy to talk as well as to listen and I am surprised at the effortlessness with which we dive into the things that matter. Children. Divorce. God. Art. And loneliness - that place of perpetual hovering and unbelonging. I sweep my hand in an arc across the buzzing crowd and say:

They're all lonely. All these rudderless children of the fifties and the sixties...

Lost souls. Like us.

And yet we're survivors aren't we? Survivors of failed marriages and shallow affairs...

Oh yes.

Propped up by therapists who reassure us that these things are the norm in the nineties?

You nod your head slowly and reach for another beer.

I am silent for a moment. Listening to the frenetic hum around us. Then I

say:

But you know what I HATE? When they try to hide the truth from us. How can they sit there and tell us that the homes that our children live in have not been *broken* but *reconstituted*? Our homes *were* broken. We broke them. We didn't mean to but we did and we carry the scars and we carry the guilt and we pass on the shit and we end up at parties like this where we drink too much and we eat too much..

And we wave our antennae in the wind looking for someone to save us from ourselves?

Suddenly our laughter splashes about us.

I look up at you and notice your eyes. Kind and curious with a sparkling clarity about the blue. Like the still luminosity of the ocean in a sleepy tropical bay.

The afternoon has shrunk. The sun is no longer warming my back and the thought occurs to me that perhaps I should be getting home because I'm expecting that call from Lisbon.

I glance at my watch and tell you about the exhibition.

A woman who's been collecting my paintings for years is organising a show in Lisbon. She fell in love with my work on a plane. She saw a pic of one of my paintings in an inflight magazine and bought the painting over the phone when she got home. Since then she's bought fourteen of my watercolours.

I smile at your next remark:

You're speaking about your success as though it belongs to someone else. You're using the right words. But...

I nod and complete your sentence in my head:

But my eyes. My darting eyes and my voice betray me.

Womanspeak comes naturally to her.

She talks as if she is smaller than she really is. Her voice is the voice of a creature caged she speaks softly she hears the faint shudder she hears the voice of woman tamed a woman trained not to speak out. Her voice is thin it does not come from deep within there is not enough substance in the sound there is not enough substance in her. Her voice tries to apologise for itself.

(Here lies she, soft spoken till eternity –)

It's not only the smallness of the sound it is the way the words sometimes seem to lose each other along the way and the thoughts that do escape are so often clad in something soft and sweet. And as soon as she see the eyes of her listener beginning to glaze over her voice shrinks further into itself. She lowers her lids and her eyes dart away they will not stay still they struggle to hold his gaze as she speaks. Because to look directly at him for more than a moment is too bold a thing to do so she flits from his face to the floor to the door to the dog to any thing other than the pools of piercing blue illuminating the face in front of her.

He thinks she is not really there with him that her mind has wandered off to other things to other people but he doesn't know that she can't add the weight of her gaze to her voice - he doesn't see that her body is too scared to own her thoughts.

And yes she hears it in her mother she hears it in her daughter she hears it in the voices of her woman friends she hears how quickly they all erase themselves with a smile or a giggle. They arrange their words in such a way that the thoughts that come out of their mouths can quickly be swallowed up again if they are not met with the approval of the one who listens.

Would you mind doing me a favour and making the tea?

She takes singing lessons. She longs for a world where song and dance are as essential to life as the oxygen in the air and she knows that her voice is waiting to be found. But how and where does she practise? She stands in a room in her empty house she closes the windows she closes the doors she closes the curtains but she is scared to launch her sound into the air around her. Someone must be listening surely the neighbours will hear don't raise your voice don't draw attention to yourself it's not the done thing to stand in a middle of your empty house and belt out a song. She tells the voices to fuck off but they won't so she turns on the radio she turns up the volume she goes outside she listens she can hardly hear a thing which means no-one can hear her when she sings. She goes back inside she seals off the room again she opens her mouth she waits for the sound to take flight but those voices are still clipping her wings strangling the sounds in her throat. She tells the voices to fuck off again but they refuse so she takes her dog to the deserted common down the road and they walk and walk and she fill her lungs with air and she sings into the wind and at last the voices have gone and she is tasting freedom on her tongue.

You are looking at me. Not at my paintings. You're sitting outside watching me through the large patio windows as I perform my well-practised ritual. Introducing myself and my work to an intermittent trickle of visitors touring the city's art studios. It's the last Sunday of the month and my art studio is open to the public and I was surprised when you arrived at my door.

When the last visitor leaves I join you outside.

You smile and say:

You paint mostly nude women.

Yes...

Why?

It's what artists do. We try to make sense of ourselves.

You look at me quizzically for a moment then gesture to a painting standing on an easel inside. It is one of a series of paintings simply titled 'Nina in my studio'. A naked woman reclines in a seagreen armchair with one leg casually draped across the right arm. The shamelessness of her pose is offset by the silky tones of her flesh against the cool green of the chair and the purple dahlias in the foreground. The splashes of magenta and violet spilling out of the glass bowl on the carved wooded table echo the undertones in her pale skin. Colour dances and shimmers across the textured white paper. The painting is seductive. But it is not the woman who seduces the viewer. It is the moist luminosity of the surface.

I shrug and say to the question mark on your face:

They say that works of art are more intelligent than the artists who create them. If artists fully understood what they were doing they probably wouldn't need to do it - would they?

Your expression tells me that my answer is not good enough so I steer the conversation onto safer ground. I tell you about my methods and my medium. I paint bodyscapes and landscapes and abstract poems of light and colour. I push the medium of watercolour to its limits until the colour sings and the white paper sparkles through the paint and people want to touch the glistening surfaces.

I don't tell you that I have begun to suspect the veil of aesthetic tranquillity which pervades my work. I don't mention the shadows which I cannot paint.

You're digging in your pockets looking for your cigarette lighter which is

not anywhere on your person but on the table next to you under your pack of Stuyvesant's. I lift the box up and reveal the lighter and you grin at me and light up slowly and the silence between us lengthens and I guess that the nude paintings have unsettled you. Finally you run your hand through your hair and ask:

Where are your children?

I tell you about my arrangement with their father: I'm lucky. He's a good dad. He has them every weekend and on Wednesday nights so I seldom need to worry about babysitters. And it's wonderful having the weekends to myself.

Well done. That sounds ideal. How old are they?

My son's eleven and my daughter nine. And you? You mentioned a seven year old daughter. How often do you see her?

You look at me sharply and close your eyes. When you open them I see a sudden blaze of pain. I wait for you to speak. Your voice is dull and devoid of life.

Our marriage died six years ago. We stayed together for another six because of our daughter. It didn't work. My wife left and took her away. They're living with her parents on the other side of the country - 1400 kilometres away. She'd threatened to leave so many times I didn't believe it would happen but then one day I came home to a garden empty of my little girl. I went into her room and sat on the bare mattress of her bed. The floor was empty and clean where her...her... toys should have been.

The long cylinder of ash at the end of your cigarette is poised to fall onto the grey patio stones. I want to find you an ashtray but am stopped by the ache in your voice so I stay at your side and I ask you how long has it been.

Six months. I'm too scared to think that I'll see her again. I'm trying to

forget.

There's an undercurrent of bitterness in your voice. A rejection of light and hope. I watch the tube of ash falling and dissolving and settling on your polished leather shoe and I search for an appropriate response but I can't find one. The undercurrent disturbs me. It is both explicable and inexplicable. It shocks me more than the story itself.

A few days later midday midweek paintbrush in hand I answer the knock on the door to a big bunch of sunflowers. Peering over their heads I find your eyes – their blue today more cerulean than slate behind the extravagant gold of the blooms.

Your unexpected presence causes a minor commotion in my head.

I try to take the flowers through the slatted bars of the security door. I'm not ready to let you in because the elastic waistband of my baggy green Indian trousers is too loose and I feel shapeless and ugly in my working clothes. If I turn around to fetch the key you will see me from behind. Shapeless. Ugly. But I can't get such a big bunch of flowers through the slatted bars and I feel guilty not letting you in. I stand there smiling at you behind sunflowers with heads as large as dinner plates and I feel foolish worrying about how I look in my beloved old green pants held up with elastic which threatens to perish from old age and overuse.

I consider sidling backwards into the kitchen to get the key but decide that might look absurd. Vanity and courtesy are pulling me in different directions with equal force freezing me in the middle. Courtesy wins. I hastily turn around and fetch the key from the little basket above the fridge. I unlock the door and take the flowers and thank you again but I don't ask you in.

When you are gone I stand in the hallway silently contemplating the flowers in my hands. They seem too large too bold to be confined by the four walls of my home. I see them dancing in their endless fields of gold their furry-eyed heads turned perennially towards the sun.

Sunflowers are my favourite flowers. How did you know?

She could divide the men in her past into two camps. Those who wanted her too much and those who wanted her too little.

When they came at her with their compliments and their gifts she recoiled. When they were too eager to possess her she fled. If they were reliable and responsible they unlocked nothing in her. She wanted men who were incomplete men whose edges were raw and sharp enough to cut through the shroud of her respectability. She wanted men who were other.

When she was sixteen she had the perfect boyfriend. He looked like a young Robert Redford he sent her outrageous bunches of red roses he phoned every day he drove a red sports car he opened doors for her he didn't smoke he didn't drink he always looked freshly ironed. He took her to the Rand Easter Show and won a teddy bear for her. She was flattered for the first week. She was bored for the next. By the third week his niceness had become faintly obscene.

She began to suspect men who gave her flowers. The more flowers they sent the more wary she became. And when their flowers had been stiffly subdued into shape in florist shops and insulted with shiny pink ribbons she thought of funeral parlours and she liked them even less. Four years after she divorced him her ex-husband was still sending her flowers on their wedding anniversary. Once a year she opened the door to find his floral offerings

staring mutely up at her from the doorstep. Like annual visitations from the dead.

The other men never gave her flowers. Men like Marc the musician. He had a voice that made her weep and a head that needed surgery. He insisted on calling her 'cunt' and he only fucked her from behind because looking into her eyes during sex was too intimate. Making love was something he only did with his guitar.

She wanted him too much. He didn't want her enough.

Her new man gives her flowers. Lots of them. At first she was wary. But ever since that day that he confessed that he had been separated from his daughter for six months she has felt that familiar pull.

She sees his incompleteness and she knows that he is other.

I am driving across town to visit you and I'm trying to make music with my voice inside the comfortable capsule of my car. I amplify my sound I expand the spaces in my head neck and chest I climb happily up and down the scales. My weekly lessons are satisfying yet arduous. I long to fly on the wings of my voice. I am out of breath when I arrive at your door.

The first thing I notice are those cassette tapes. Their flat plastic boxes are meticulously arranged in a row. Back to back corner to corner labels facing the ceiling the long slab of boxes forming a perfect right angle with the edge of the old wooden desk. And the cassette player forming a perfect right angle with the end of the row of tapes.

I am staring at them.

The thought sprouts unannounced in my head: I could never live with someone so orderly.

Was I really contemplating a shared future with this man? Could I *ever*

coexist with such well disciplined cassette tapes? Mine jostle merrily in a basket on the floor in my studio. Their boxes have been discarded and dumped in the bottom of the cupboard next to the blue fridge - the fridge that wears a sunny badge saying that a well ordered home is a sign of a misspent life.

Since walking in the door I have been enveloped by a wave of déjà vu. The musician who split my heart open had lived in the same drab part of town. Might have been the same street the same building looking out at the same washing drying in the concrete courtyard. He was a gypsy with little more than a guitar and a mattress on the floor a few poetry books and an antique dagga pipe. His bachelor pad reeked of the same melancholy. Like a refugee camp housing a solitary refugee. And it's more than the absence of furniture.

On the other side of the desk is an old bookcase housing a few books on Christianity and a few more on the theory of education and there's also a solidly bound tome which looks like a thesis of some sort.

A pile of Vietnam war magazines sits on the bottom shelf and a large hardcovered book about the South African bush war rests on top of the pile.

Your cassette tapes... I begin.

They're so...they're mostly Bob Dylan. He's the archetypal anti-war hero isn't he? How...how can he inhabit the same space as that pile of war magazines?

Your answer surprises me.

Oh quite easily. Bob Dylan makes art out of war and war is actually very creative.

This I can't believe. How can war be creative? Its primary aim is to destroy.

Perhaps. But war is also a positive expression of male energy. Amazing

inventions have come about as a result of war.

Well yes but.

I pick up one of the glossy magazines and page through it. Helmeted soldiers running around with guns. Bodies dead and mutilated. Stories about torture. More dead bodies. Nothing creative or positive anywhere.

You're pulling up a chair for me and handing me a glass of red wine. Noticing my frown you move the talk away from war and tell me that Dylan and Van Morrison are your flatmates. You get stoned together drunk together angry together you oppose the establishment you criticise corruption you mourn injustice together. But you add that you're not a fan of Van's romantic poetry and with this last admission you're grinning and your eyes hint at some hidden irony and your thigh is pressing attentively against mine and your voice has a deep woody texture like the bark of wet trees after rain.

I like the way your words follow one another faithfully and bodily into the air without the empty gaps and ums and ers that always attach themselves to mine. You have the air of a man of untroubled certainty and I wonder if you are.

I tell you I like the sarong. It's the one thing in the room that appeals to my aesthetic appetite – a colourful African cloth tacked on the wall. And who did the painting? Standing on the floor below the sarong is a large oil painting of a building seen from a back yard window.

My wife. My soon to be ex-wife. She's an artist.

Oh.

The painting has not been hung. Too large. No space in this place for a too-large painting by an ex-wife-to-be with a fine arts degree. Definitely not.

She didn't leave me with much. Apart from these few bits of furniture and

the painting I don't want and the books and cassettes she didn't want - I was left with a pot a pan two plates two knives two forks and two spoons.

The remains of an intimate war. My chest constricts as I relive the dull agony of it all. Dividing up the spoils. A shared life reduced to a few pots and pans.

I look around your ordered space again. Those cassette tapes on the table have become a silent accusation. I suspect that even the oranges in the fruit bowl on the table are all looking the same way.

Your place is so... *tidy*. There. I said it.

You shrug. There's not much else to do in an empty flat.

And then I get it. Your tidiness is a temporary aberration. Between drinking and smoking and cooking and washing dishes and going to work you dust and tidy and pack and stack because you have no one to do anything else for. Your problem is fixable. I am relieved. And you tell me that the sparse orderliness comforts you:

It reminds me of times when I was free from the women in my family. Playing rugby at an all-boys' school. Camping with buddies on the beach. And of course those army days when the only possessions we had were things we really needed.

Did you *enjoy* the army?

My army days were great. I loved the discipline and the boundaries and the masculine companionship. It felt safe and strong. Like a family should feel. I wish I could have stayed in that uncomplicated world forever.

Uncomplicated. You mean by women?

Well ... yes. The women in my family didn't like men. Particularly my granny who looked after us and my lesbian aunt and her lovers.

Your lesbian aunt and her lovers. The words roll around in my head

looking for a place to settle. Today I have friends who are lesbians but did I even know what the word meant when I was a child? I stare at you blankly then finally I punctuate the silence with a question:

Did you spend much time with your aunt and her...lovers?

Every holiday for most of my childhood.

There's an urgency in your voice. A brightness in your eyes that I haven't noticed before. Is it the wine? I am puzzled. I am fascinated. I am falling in love. With a man who was raised by women who hate men.

THREE

A whole week went by before you confessed that we didn't need them.

We'd been very grown up. We'd had AIDS tests just in case. We'd known each other for six weeks so we weren't rushing into anything. We'd even used that four-letter word. We'd tasted the veiled promise of LOVE on our tongues.

I softened the night with candles and incense and music to make love by and it was only when we were under the duvet fumbling out of our clothes that I remembered that they were in a brown paper packet behind my underwear at the top of my cupboard. I scrambled out of bed to dig them out of their hiding place but they were so well hidden that it took me a while to find them and after all that the candles and the incense and the music to make love didn't seem much help and you said you felt like an adolescent.

I said don't worry next time it will be better.

A week later the kids are with their father for the weekend and this time I have remembered to take the condoms out of the cupboard. We are sitting on the edge of the bed and our clothes lie together on the carpet the arm of my shirt across the leg of your jeans.

The shiny packet sits between us.

You clear your throat and you tell me that you hate them.

I tell you that I do too but I omit the rest I don't tell you that I find them repulsive. You confess that you never know when to put the damn thing on and that you felt awkward last time while I watched..

Watched? I didn't. I don't. Anyway I couldn't see anything under the duvet...

and didn't offer any assistance...

Assistance? Were women supposed to assist? I provide them in their

sealed packets when necessary. I don't touch them.

Now you're telling me they're always too tight they steal the bliss of those first delicious moments inside a woman and I close my eyes I let your voice slide over me and my hand wander over your thigh and then I hear you say:

I've had a vasectomy.

My eyes snap open.

I was too embarrassed to tell you before.

But why? Why this drastic thing? Your marriage wasn't working. You're only thirty three. You have only one child. Why destroy your ability to father another? Your answer is vague you mumble something about the man taking responsibility but I think these are not your words that you are mouthing they are incomplete they fade away into silence and the silence leaves me wondering.

Then I realise. I am blessed. With a condomless future.

Aah. Yes.

My frown evaporates under my smile. I turn to you and give you a long grateful kiss.

Lilies poppies chrysanthemums daisies so white they dazzle the eye roses with velvet petals you want to touch. The blooms never wilt in their vases. Before they even begin to contemplate such a thing you are there with another more radiant bunch. Your flowers are trying to colonise my house.

But I am not getting ready to flee.

Instead I paint my women surrounded by your forest of flowers their pale flesh growing paler and more luminous against the riot of colour. Sometimes one solitary bloom a white lily perhaps its purity stark and surprising on the landscape of her flesh.

You move in at the end of December. We have only known each other for three months you are not yet legally unyoked from your wife there is a hole inside you where your daughter should be and there are other more distant shadows which slip in with you unnoticed by both of us - veiled by love and by need.

I watch you unfold into my life and into the lives of my children. They are unsettled by your presence but you treat them kindly and you willingly share the day-to-day domestic drudge. When things need fixing I forget the handywoman skills I have been forced to learn over the recent years because now there is a man in the house and I have not forgotten what life taught me long ago. I learnt that men fix things because they know how things work and women don't fix things because they don't know how things work and that's just the way life is. These lessons are embedded deep within me while the more recent ones on how to unblock the drain and fix the lock and replace the window pane have barely settled in my head.

I watch you roll your clean socks into sockballs before putting them away and I am reminded of those well-disciplined cassette tapes marching across the table in your flat (Were you trying to impress me with your tidiness that night?). I expect you to be repelled by my piles of creative clutter which I sporadically recycle into fresh piles when the chaos becomes unbearable and something is lost that must be found. But you seem blissfully immune to my mess. When you say we can't go shopping for groceries without a shopping list I don't admit that I have never made a shopping list before or that my list floats untethered in my head as I meander down the aisles. Instead I listen to you. I go out and shop with a list and sometimes I even take a pen to cross off the items as I go along and I feel a little like stranger in my own

skin but then I buy a chocolate at the checkout and gobble it guiltily on the way home which makes me feel like myself again.

It is months before I find the courage to suggest to you that it is not necessary to wear your clothes only once before putting them in the wash because that makes for more washing and the clothes wear out more quickly. The next time the washpile has less clean clothes and more dirty clothes. When you go to the bathroom to blow your nose I ask you why do you need to do this? You say your ex-wife did not like you to blow your nose in front of her. This is not something which bothers me at all. I *am* bothered when you lie on the bed with your shoes on but I don't mention it.

The space you inhabit in my life grows bigger. You rest in my quiet voice while your invisible wounds draw me closer. Our moments apart are sweetened by contentment and by longing and our moments together are luminous yet paradoxically shrouded in a dream-like fog.

Our conversations are bottomless.

I'm climbing inside your skin you tell me. I don't want to fall asleep at night I say because to sleep is to leave you behind. A day without you becomes a lifetime so I drive into town and we meet for lunch near your office and part on the crowded city pavement with kisses that are indecent and oblivious. I wonder if it is possible to be both a bird in flight and a babe in the womb and I forget yes I even forget that I am a mother as well as a lover until I hear my little daughter say mommy mommy you don't *do* stuff with us anymore you're always with *him*.

I take you to meet my parents. On the way in the car I'm chatting to my son in the back and you say you like the way I talk to my children. Your comment puzzles me. I'm talking to them in the same way as I talk to

anyone else. Why does that surprise you?

We sit in the TV Lounge with predinner drinks. We don't sit in the Smart Lounge that spacious sunken room with the voluptuous chairs and the ornaments behind glass reserved for special occasions and special guests. I want to sink into one of those velvety chairs that swallow you up but the TV Lounge is where we always sit so I sit there and sip my drink. On the walls are framed photographs of my sisters and myself at various stages of our lives. The pictures are hanging slightly skew all at slightly different angles. I would like to straighten them but I make polite conversation instead. On the bookshelf there is a framed photograph of me holding my young daughter. We are both smiling hugely. You walk over to it and pick it up and say:

You look so lovely in this picture.

My mother laughs. She is embarrassed. It is not the done thing to be so bold.

I wish I could move like that.

Like what?

Like a dancer. You carve the air like a dancer.

I'm twisting a tendril of your hair round my fingers as I talk. My other hand resting on your chest. Your daughter is here at last for the holidays and we've all been playing volleyball in the garden. The game is over and we're lying on the grass with your head in my lap.

You say lazily: There was a time when I wanted to be a ballet dancer.

There's an edge of longing in your voice. Your confession does not surprise me. The way you move. The tightly honed shape of you.

You add: I had to choose between playing rugby and dancing. I chose

rugby.

And now you run marathons.

Yes. We used to run long distances in the army. I realised then that it was something I enjoyed. Running doesn't only keep me fit. It keeps me sane.

But if you wanted to be a dancer why don't you like dancing with me at parties? I love letting the music take over my body. Peeling me out of my skin.

Because I'm too much of a coward to just let go and dance the way I want to. People wouldn't like it. It's too wild.

You're scared of the wild man in you.

It's true. I am.

I'm not.

I speak to the sky mirrored in your eyes. I study the way the angles of your cheekbones complement the squareness of your jaw. And I'm convinced that the gods were celebrating when they sculpted your face.

I recall you telling me that when you were a child people said you were so beautiful you should have been a girl. You hated it when they said that. But I know that this kind of beauty can never go unnoticed. And that there are no adequate words to describe the beauty of a boy or a man because the world has given the best words to women. The labels 'good-looking' and 'handsome' are miserable substitutes in the face of such beauty. How better to praise the looks of a boychild than to say he should have been a girl?

I haven't been listening to you. I'm doing it again. I'm so wrapped up in the form I've lost the content.

But now you've caught me floundering in your eyes and I feel your heart rate increasing under my hand and the air between us thickening and the

silence so full of it too. We unfold ourselves off the grass and slip away into the house up the stairs and behind the locked bedroom door we feed off each other until we are drenched with sweat and sticky with our juices and the smell of sex is everywhere.

Daddy daddy daddy open the door I want to come in.

The shrill voice of your small daughter breaking the spell. Piercing that seamless space. We switch hastily into mopping up mode and scramble into our clothes. You unlock the door and she bounces in and plops onto the wet patch on the duvet.

Yuck. Smells like cat wee. Says she sniffing the duvet.

She doesn't ask about the cat which we don't own and we make no attempt to enlighten her. But then she is off the bed looking at books on the bookshelf and of all the hundreds of books she might choose she pulls out *The Joy of Sex*. Flips through the illustrated pages. Screws up her little button nose and says with the lofty contempt of her eight years:

Gross. Just like dogs.

She slams the book shut and prances out the door.

You raise your eyebrows at me. I shrug my shoulders. Laughter splashes about us. You give my toes an affectionate tweak and leave in search of a nicotine fix.

I'm looking at the wet patch on the duvet. Does it really smell like cat wee? I lower my nose to it warily and sniff.

Why do you talk about your success as though it belongs to someone else? You exhibit overseas. You have a virtual sell-out. They fly you over for the opening. You should be bubbling over like our pink champagne.

You're grinning and holding up your glass to me. The pale maroon liquid

shimmers in the candlelight.

I'm looking at your fingers and thinking that your hands were a surprise. Farmer's hands. Ruddy chunky fingers. I wouldn't have believed they'd be capable of extracting so much pleasure out of me. I sip my champagne then look up at you and smile.

But I *am* ecstatic. I guess I'm just not good at showing it. It's like the day when I was chosen to be head girl at primary school. I came home and my heart was doing somersaults I was so full and proud. I walked into the house into the room where my mother was. I remember she was sewing and the room was warm and orange with the sun filtering through the mustard curtains. And...I couldn't tell her.

Why not?

I didn't know how to. It was trapped inside me and I couldn't get it out. We had this unspoken contract in our house that said thou shall not dance with joy thou shall not explode with anger thou shalt not talk about anything that really stirs the heart. My sister ran in and blurted it out for me.

She didn't keep the contract?

It wasn't her heart that was bursting. I think that's why I became an artist. I swallowed everything that I couldn't express. Where was it supposed to go?

You're staring at me thoughtfully.

But your paintings are always joyful. As though all you ever see is beauty.

I am scraping off the soapy candle wax on the side of the candle and kneading and shaping it into a squat little figure while I mull over your question. I have asked myself the same thing many times but the answer

has always remained elusive and I wish you had not brought it up. Eventually I shake my head and confess into the silence.

I can't paint the other stuff.

Why not?

I don't know.

You're waiting for me to continue. I shrug my shoulders and skirt around the issue I tell you that I suspect the easy saleability of my art and I fear the word 'decorative' so now I'm starting to tear up old paintings and recreate from the torn fragments. I'm scribbling and dribbling with paint and pastels and charcoal and anything else that makes a mark. When we get home I take you into my studio and show you the painting I'm working on.

After a while you say: It is different. More chaotic. Angry?

Maybe.

I look over your shoulder at my latest work in progress. The brushstrokes are fast and furious and the colours are screaming fire and earth bloody crimsons golden ochres hot oranges and dark dark chocolate browns. The naked woman is constructed not only out of rapid brushwork but out of torn paper and bold charcoal lines. She stares straight out at the audience yet she remains aloof and somehow out of reach.

You're frowning. Walking towards the painting and then stepping back. Tilting your head to one side. Finally you look at me and shrug your shoulders and say: I think I prefer ...

You turn towards an earlier painting hanging on the wall.

I follow your gaze and shake my head vigorously. I'll never paint in pure watercolour again.

Why not? You're so good at it.

It's too clean. I tried to use more of everything. More colour. More water. I

wanted to get beyond the blinding luminosity of the medium but I never did.
I still ended up with all that light and beauty.

What's wrong with that?

Not enough substance. Can't you see? It's the darkness that gives beauty its mystery and its depth.

Coca cola is colonising my home. Coke in the fridge. Coke in the bedroom. Coke in your hand. Half empty glasses of Coke abandoned and fizzless somewhere in the house.

How do I tell my children its okay for you to drink it all day but not for them? Can I tell you not to bring it into the house or to drink it in secret? Do I let the kids drink it whenever they want and watch their teeth rot? I can't tell you to give it up. This is your home now. You should be allowed to drink whatever you like in your own home, shouldn't you?

But along with the Coke came the smoke.

I'd told you soon after you moved in that my house was a smoke free zone. I announced with unaccustomed boldness that I hated the idea of tobacco smoke getting into my food and my hair and my children's lungs. I didn't tell you that you had a 60% chance of dying of cancer before you were 55. I didn't ask how such a dirty habit could co-exist with all your squeaky clean ones. Twice daily showering. Disciplined teeth flossing. Dedicated mouthwashing. Crisp clean clothes at all times.

So I can't smoke anywhere in the house?

I'd rather you didn't...it's so...

You'd looked miserable.

Oh well perhaps we could have one room in the house where you can smoke.

Which is?

I suppose it should be the place where you feel most relaxed and private I'd said. My generosity sticking just a little in my throat.

Which is.. I guess... my...our bedroom.

My suggestion was appalling but I made it and now I'm trying to live with it because compromises are necessary in any relationship and anyway you are considerate you hold your cigarette out the window and you sweep the smoke away from me.

Late one evening I find myself alone in the bedroom and go looking for you. It's early March. The days are getting shorter and winter has begun to creep into the corners of the days biting softly into the nights. You are standing outside in the cold.

Smoking.

An aura of pale moonlight separating you from the night.

I ask you why you're out here.

You don't like the smoke in the bedroom. So here I am. A shadowy outsider puffing in the dark.

I put my arm around you and shut my eyes tightly. As if to shield myself from the hurt in your voice. Why do people do this? Why do we even try to mould ourselves into the shape of the other? Why is it that I love the smell of tobacco on your skin but not on your breath?

Burrowing my nose into your neck I breathe you in and wait for you to finish your cigarette. Letting my confusion and guilt evaporate in the warmth of your body and the scent of your skin.

The exquisite otherness of you. With my mouth brushing the valley between your chin and your shoulder blade I savour the magic and mystery of you. The way your energy swells around you your shoulders expanding

above and beyond mine the way your maleness envelops complements and affirms my femaleness. I am round where you are lean. Soft where you are hard. Smaller where you are taller. Wider where you are narrower. Smooth where you are hairy. Concealed where you are exposed.

I love the way our bodies differ.

When your cigarette hand is finally free I greedily pull your fingers to my face and rub them over my nose my mouth my cheeks my chin my eyelids I roll my head around like an exuberant puppy dog chasing smells in the grass.

Did I tell you I was weaned on Coke and cigarettes? You say with your mouth in my hair.

No...?

I don't remember a time when the adults in my home didn't smoke...I probably had nicotine in my blood even before I was born.

Your mom smoked when she was pregnant?

She must've. When my parents were still together my sister and I went with them to the cricket club twice a week and every weekend in summer. After the game he and my mother drank and smoked while we played in the smoky clubhouse and were fed an endless supply of coke and chips. After my father left we still went to the club with my granny my aunt and her lovers. We drank as much coke as they did alcohol... Of course I started smoking as soon as I could. Replaced the coke with alcohol. As a teenager I was drunk almost every weekend.

We're sitting on the redbrick steps leading down to the garden. The moonlight has spun an eerie glow over the flowering shrubs - turning the orange strelitzias into enormous predatory insects perched on the end of long stalks. I am pressing my cheek into your hand and shivering slightly

under my long cotton nightshirt. My frenetic puppy dog act of a few moments is over.

Your past scares me.

Curling my bare feet around yours I take your hand off my cheek and wrap your arm snugly around me. Waiting for your voice to take me back into your childhood.

I used to wake up in ditches at the side of the road or in strange girls' beds and wondered how I got there. My mother never knew where I was. She was too busy trying to make a living to worry about me. And my granny was very strict. She used to lock away all the food in the house.

It is clear by your tone that there is much more to tell but I know that such unburdenings have their own timetable. I am content to wait.

You clear your throat and sniff. I've noticed that you do this a lot. Your nasal passages seem to be permanently congested. You said you don't recall ever crying but I know that the tears have to go somewhere so I imagine them dripping down the back of your throat. I drop my head onto your shoulder. I want to comfort the boy whose childhood was so bleak but I sense something impenetrable between us. My childhood was too different. I need a window in mine to see yours through.

I tell you that I hitchhiked a few times when I was a teenager:

I never took any money with me. I wasn't going anywhere. I just needed to get away. I was suffocating at home. I had no space to breathe.

You smile at my confession while I ponder your past. Some pieces of the puzzle are beginning to fit. The decade of Christian fundamentalism that you told me about. You were baptised by your brothers in the army and saved from drugs drink and despair. You found a place to rest and a reason to exist.

And the perfect lid to put on a messy childhood.

You pick up the crumpled pack of Stuyvesant's from the step and stare at it as if it holds the key to all your unanswered questions.

Ten years. You say wearily. I stopped smoking and drinking for ten years when I became a Christian. I followed all the rules. I even waited to get married before having sex. Actually I did more than follow the rules. I became a fanatic.

You sound embarrassed and a bit startled by this other life that you used to inhabit so fervently. I am too. Religious fanatics make me want to reach for a can of repellent spray. I tell you it's a good thing we didn't meet a few years ago and you laugh and say:

Yes I was quite the evangelist - singing in tongues and going round trying to convert people. But then my marriage broke up and I lost my daughter and I thought what the hell I don't really give a fuck...

From the park across the road the long insistent wail of an Egyptian goose pierces the stillness. Then I feel your fingers trailing up my calf under my blue cotton nightshirt and see you smile.

A sudden white flash in the dark.

FOUR

I read too much. I gulp down printed words with the same urgency as I do chocolate and cheesecake.

It's Sunday afternoon and my mind is drifting in and out of the book I have just read and the smell of freshly ground coffee is teasing my nostrils.

What's on your mind?

You emerge out of the sliding door with the steaming coffee mugs.

You always do this. Try to get inside my head. But there's never one thing there's usually at least two juggling for my attention. I'm thinking about that book and I'm thinking about those little lemon flowers sprouting in the lawn. I'm supposed to call them weeds but they're sweet and delicate their heads tiny yellow stars dancing on the green. What's the definition of a weed?

I look up and answer you.

The Good Mother.

I take my purple mug from you. It's sudden heat piercing my fingers.

Is that the title of a movie?

A book I've just finished reading.

Tell me about it.

You settle yourself next to me and sip your coffee. Your sandalled left foot lazily nudging my bare toes. You always smell clean. Aftershave and mouthwash and fresh nicotine. Even your nicotine smells clean.

I take a deep breath and I tell you.

One of the best books I've ever read. It's about motherhood and loverhood and what happens when the two collide. A single mother has a liberating relationship with an artist. At first she's all closed up and schoolteacherish

but then she opens up under his touch...

My voice fades away. I fiddle with the tangled cascade of beads round my neck.

And then?

You're waiting for me to continue.

I decide this is not the time to be a prude. I focus my gaze on my toes and I dive in. The words tumble out of me.

At home she and her lover and her five year-old daughter walk around naked and the mother is pleased that her child is growing up uninhibited and at ease with her body but one day when the mother is out the little girl asks if she can touch his penis. She's curious and he's unsure about letting her but he does because they have agreed that their nudity is wholesome and healthy but when she touches him he has an erection..

I am breathing rapidly. I have never said that word out loud before.

...and then their whole world falls apart because somehow the child's father finds out and decides that the lover has molested his daughter and there is a harrowing court case and the father wins and the child is taken away from the mother and her relationship between her and her lover breaks down. It's a modern day tragedy and it's...

I am suddenly aware that your toes are no longer nudging mine. I look up at you and see beads of sweat on your forehead. Your body has rearranged itself into an oddly formal yet almost foetal pose. You're leaning forward slightly and your head is bent with both hands around your knees.

I ask are you okay? You mumble you say yeah I'm fine but you get up and walk away and I stay sitting on the step staring into the garden with your clean nicotine and aftershave still teasing the air beside me. Trying to decipher that picture of your body closing up like a clam. I notice that the

changing light has turned those little lemon flowers into a dull orange and now I can clearly see that they're weeds not flowers.

I thought you'd understand. Because you're my lover and I'm a mother. And I was so proud of myself. Saying that word out loud.

You tell me that there's a place inside you where my face fits perfectly. I smile and close my eyes. Freezing your words forever in my brain.

You have little girl's feet.

The little girl inside me laughs.

I think it was your feet that did it for me.

You have a foot fetish?

No. It was these little cracks on the back of your heels. You looked like you needed taken care of.

You are massaging my feet. Your fingers are sure and strong. You are making love to my feet. Stretched out on the sunwarmed bed my naked body growing limp under your gaze. Your words of praise for my beauty are like your offerings of flowers. Their abundance a continual surprise.

You say: I love being naked with you.

The ebb and flow of your voice. I have come to crave your voice as much as your touch. I will come to crave your eyes even more.

You *are* beautiful. You say it again.

I know it can't be true but your eyes challenge the authority of my knowing.

I love your breasts. So gentle and tender.

I bite my lip I feel the prick of tears behind my eyes. I see otherwomenbodies with voluptuously rounded breasts smooth flat stomachs narrow neat waists. Woman with the kind of bodies that men like. *They* have

beautiful breasts. Mine are small and shapeless. Insignificant. Unlovable. I lie on my back and they disappear. When I was pregnant I had them. I discovered them in a precious moment in a London high street when a man an astonishingly attractive man was staring and I didn't know what he was looking at until I looked down and there they were. Filling out my white Indian cotton blouse. Flooding my heart with gratitude. But that was merely a temporary reprieve - a gift from a benevolent angel. So that I would not have to go through life without knowing what it felt like to be a real woman with curves.

Your breasts are beautiful.

You're saying it again.

I study your face carefully but I see no sign of the lie that I know must be there.

I don't know where to put your praise.

Your fingertips trace the curve of my stomach drawing a soft shiver out of me fuelled not by my desire but by fear. I want to push your hand away. My stomach is too big. Too fat. Not flat enough. I want to curl up and hide I want to protect that part of me that is too tender to touch.

You whisper into the swirl of my hair:

I love the roundness of your womanbelly. Your warm breath brushing my cheek.

I remember that time when I lay in the bath marvelling at the saucer-shaped hollow between my hip bones where my stomach used to be. The temporary disappearance of that fleshy part of me was either due to illness or diet pills and I was delighted by its absence. At last my hip bones were sticking out instead of my belly.

You kiss my shivering belly and tell me that I am *so woman*.

Your tongue on my clitoris is my first time like this and I am stunned by the fierceness of my pleasure.

Slowly. Slowly. I am beginning. To believe.

You are handing me back to myself. In the well of your eyes. Beneath the balm of your voice. Under the miracle of your tongue.

I look again at the shape of otherwomanbodies. I walk on the beach and watch women. Women with girlish bodies. Women with womenish bodies. Women with teenage skinniness. Women with grownup plumpness. Women with flat bellies. Women with bellies like mine.

And it comes to me in a flood of knowing: Young women have hip bones and older women like me have bellies. And it is right that it should be that way.

Now I lie in the bath and see that plump part of me protruding out of the water and I hear your words echoing in my head.

You are so woman.

The next afternoon you arrive home with a full length mirror framed in embossed yellowwood. A sinuous plant-like design weaves its way around the carved frame and fragments of coloured glass are embedded like stars in the honeygold timber.

So that you can look at yourself you say. All of yourself.

Later you hold it up against the wall in our bedroom and make me stand in front of it so that you can attach it at just the right height.

I smile at the reflection of my body framed in starstudded yellowwood.

There is a mirror in the bathroom and another inside the wardrobe door but they are merely useful tools to check whether contact lenses have been properly inserted whether hemlines have been sewn straight and sometimes they tell me that I have been overdosing on chocolate and cheesecake.

They never tell me that I am a work of art.

Later in bed I confess that Judy Chicago was the first one to give me permission to look.

Judy Chicago? Who's she?

An American artist. It was her art work *The Dinner Party* that did it. I saw photographs of it in a book. I poured over them for days. She created this incredible banquet: A room-full of ceramic place settings on a triangular table and on each plate another voluptuous sculptural offering – gorgeous glistening butterflies in dusky pinks and purples and crimsons. And at first that's all I saw. It was like prizing open a buried treasure chest in a dark corner of my brain. But when I realised what I was looking at I cried. I felt so grateful to this woman. She gave me a priceless gift. Do you know what that was?

Your fingers are circling my belly with speechless tenderness. I suspect you know the answer but you want to hear me say it and you know that I need to tell you:

She persuaded me to look at my own vagina without condemning myself for daring to look. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have been able to place a mirror between my legs and look at those fleshy folds and into that life-giving tunnel *and not feel shame*. I'd lived with this damp mystery between my legs for thirty four years and never once looked at it. Can you believe that? The vague distaste was still there but there was something else. I felt ...

The words won't come. My cheeks are wet. You're holding me tightly.

...a kind of reverence.

You turn to me and cup my face in your hands and wipe away my tears with the pads of your thumbs and say you'll take photographs then I won't

need a mirror but I shake my head and whisper no no please don't. You're my mirror. You're the best mirror I've ever had.

It's full of explicit sex.

I can't speak.

Your poisonous tone unravels me.

How could you sit there and tell me that stuff? You were so fascinated by that... artist's erections...you couldn't wait to tell me... you hardly knew me.

I can't move. I take a deep breath. I speak slowly. As if there's a bomb in my hands that I might detonate if I make the slightest change in my tone or my posture. I tell you that the scene was a pivotal point in the story about a woman's struggle to be a good mother while exploring her sexuality within a loving relationship. It's about the fragility of human relationships and the problems of parenting. It is *not* pornography. I wasn't reading it for the...

BULLSHIT. THERE'S EXPLICIT SEX ON EVERY FUCKING PAGE. ERECTIONS EVERYWHERE.

This is not happening.

It is happening.

The shock of your rage.

My voice shrinks. You haven't even looked at the book.

I've glanced through it. Seen enough. It's *obvious* that's why you read it. That's *exactly* why women read books like that.

You throw the words over your shoulder at me and you're gone.

I sit frozen on the bed for an hour I am aware of nothing but the insistent tick tock of the alarm clock next to me. Then I get up I go to the bookshelf and fish out *The Good Mother*. The sturdy paperback feels hot in my hands. I

take it back to the bed I start flipping through the pages looking for the evidence through the obstinate blur of my tears. I am guilty. Uncertain. The book in my hands is no longer the love story which stirred me. The pages have become tainted by something else.

There are more descriptions of explicit sex than I remembered. The discovery makes me uneasy. Then I tell myself that the first time I read it I wasn't looking for sex so I didn't find any and now that I am looking for it I do find it and I shouldn't be surprised because people usually find what they're looking for don't they?

We're standing at the edge of the school sports field waiting for my son. I notice a man walking across the field in the far distance. I watch him for a moment I am vaguely curious. He lacks the pasty paunchy short-back-and-sides look of the few male teachers at the school and his red tracksuit is a welcome splash of colour against the grey green field and the white clad boys. A new coach maybe?

Days later the accusation comes hurtling out of nowhere hitting me in the pit of my stomach knocking air out of my lungs and words out of my mouth. I stare at you. My body recoiling from the naked hostility in your eyes my brain scrambling for an access key with which to decode your bizarre outburst. I find none. Only a question taking shape in my head. *Who are you?* I mumble incoherently I tell you the truth I say I have no idea what you're talking about then I rewind the past few days and I find the distant image of the man on the sports field coming back into focus.

Oh *oh*...okay yes we were fetching the kids from cricket practice there was a man on the sports field wearing a red tracksuit. So?

SO? It's its...fucking humiliating and degrading. You're supposed to be with me and you're drooling over other men. HOW CAN YOU DO SUCH A THING?'

It happens again when we're in the car on our way home from the shops.

I look at a man.

You say nothing but your nothing says everything. Days go by and the ice does not thaw and then without warning you spit it out. Remind me of my crime. We argue. I cry. I say I love you I love you I love *you*. You withdraw to the other side of the bed leaving a tunnel of air between your back and my cold yearning front.

On nights like these you sleep with your underpants on.

A voluptuous pre-Raphaelite angel floats above us in a rippling halo of sandy gold hair and flowing white skirts. We are sitting so close I could reach out and touch the waves of silk gathering around her creamy ankles. The theatre is small and fashionably shabby and she is arranging herself on the stage which is not a stage but simply a stool in front of the tightly packed audience. Then the music begins to pour out of her and her honeyed voice lilts and soars and her long fingers sculpt the air like a belly dancer. Her songs are meditations on childhood love and small-town dreams and their messages filter through my ears into my brain but it is the shimmering vision of her singing body and the delicious textures of her voice on which I feast.

But next to me I feel your body turning into stone.

When the show is over I am light and full and dreaming of my own debut as a singer on stage. I take your arm as we walk out and you shrug off my

hand and I know I have done it again but what is it that I have done? I replay the evening I fast forward I rewind perhaps I looked at a man in the audience but I can't find him I can't find the offending frames all I find is my surrender to the magic my swaying clapping foot-tapping flight on the angel's wings.

In the car on the way home as the late night city rushes past the silence lengthens and stiffens and then finally the thing erupts out of you and your tongue slices mercilessly through my still lingering delight and the stars fall from my eyes.

If you are so totally seduced by a female artist then what will you do if the artist is male?

She has always had predatory eyes.

But her gaze does not want to possess. It desires only to slide over and caress the peculiar edges of shapes. To dive slowly and luxuriously into spaces to settle on surfaces and to drink in colour. To tease out textures and follow paths to see where they lead. Her eye does not discriminate between the contours of face or flower of man or woman of child or chair. She marvels at the sunkissed rainbeads threaded through a spider's wheel. She watches the light play with a young girl's hair. She studies the recession of the mountains into space as they change from olive to moss to smoke to dusky purple to lavender before they slip away from her entirely - evaporating in the cool blue haze on the horizon.

It is not only beauty that compels me to look. One Sunday morning while you are running in the mountains I take the dog to the beach. From the top of the dunes a man is pointing across the milky sands towards the turquoise

ribbon on the horizon and his warning jolts me out of my Sunday dreaming. He says don't go there unless you want to be shocked. I go because I do. The voices go with me they murmur it's not the done thing to look at something so extreme so obscene but I skirt around the voices I skirt around the body and then I look.

The ocean has disgorged a monster. A mutation of a man spreadeagled on his back blown up and mauled by the ocean depths the skin salt-bleached and leathery a beached mammal belonging more to the sea than to the land. But it is the colour of death by drowning which intrigues me the most. The body is pale apple green blotched with seaweed grey.

The left hand is eaten off at the wrist the chewed sinews are alarmingly bloodless. One foot white and translucent the bones showing through the skin. The facial features are congealed and crumpled by the ballooning cheeks and a faint shell pink glistens on the squashed lips like a hint of a young girl's lipstick. There is no clothing covering the body there are no threads of evidence of a life lived before the sea swallowing.

The policeman eyes me warily. I give an apologetic shrug I say I'm an artist but he looks at me blankly so I try to enlighten him I say with a shrug:

An artist must never look away.

FIVE

You never talk about your father. What's he like?

We're soaking in the bath. Trying not to make waves because the bubbles are about to ooze over the edge and cascade down to the rainbow coloured floormat. Your toes are tickling my ears and mine are doing a careful underwater survey of the slope of your belly and you're frowning at me through the swirling fog of steam.

My father? He's an asshole. There's nothing more to say.

Oh *come on*. You can do better than that...

I can't. I hardly know the man. I lived with him for a year when I was very young but I don't remember much. He wrote occasionally when I was growing up. He made lots of promises. He promised to visit. He promised to send me presents on my birthday. He never kept his promises. Once my sister and I waited for him for a year. When he arrived he stayed for an hour then he was gone.

You sink further down into the bubbles and close your eyes. I'm watching the froth climb up your chest and wondering what the heart of a child does about the presents that never arrive and I'm mulling over the symmetry of us. I tap your ankle lightly and say:

The places we come from...do you realise that they're opposite extremes? You've had too little. I've had too much. My parents have been married forever. Yours have both been divorced several times. Your parents were always absent. Mine were always present – physically anyway. Your father was pathologically unreliable while mine was pathologically reliable.

Pathologically? You're telling me a person can be *too* reliable?

Absolutely. All that rock-like integrity is so *heavy*. If there'd been a few

cracks...if he'd made a few mistakes it would have been easier for me to...let a little madness out. It's so unhealthy and so utterly *boring* for an artist to always be responsible and conscientious and dependable and trustworthy and -

Punctual?

Mm. I'm working on that one. Yesterday I was FOUR minutes late for my appointment at the gallery.

You're chuckling. You flick a little cloud of bubbles onto my neck and watch it slide between my breasts and then the laughter stops and there's sadness silting up your voice:

But you're lucky. You do know that don't you?

Yes.

You continue in a low voice:

Two years before I finished school my father promised me a car. He said if I passed my matric with a university exemption and if I got my driver's licence he'd give me his wife's old car. It was a two tone Ford Apache 1700. I dreamed about that car for two years. I worked hard for it and my results were good enough. I got my licence and hitchhiked up to see him. I'd told all my friends I'd be coming back in my car. When I got there I noticed that the car wasn't in the garage but I didn't mention it for the first few days because I didn't want to seem too greedy. Then I couldn't wait any longer so I asked him and do you know what he said?

What?

He'd sold it to a friend.

Your mouth settles briefly into a tight smile. There's a shiver of bewilderment in your voice:

I worked so hard for that car. I really thought it was mine.

The thought of all that disappointment settling into your bones sends a faint shudder down my spine. My soapy fingers caress your curves then I stitch a smile onto my face and say:

Didn't you say your father was going to be in town next month? We could invite him for the weekend. I'd like to meet him.

You'll regret it. He's not a nice person.

I feel sorry for him. He must have a heart buried somewhere underneath all that shitty stuff.

Oh God. You're such an optimist.

Well you said it. I'm lucky. I was taught to always look on the bright side.

The air around the man is thick with tobacco and alcohol fumes he sits in his room all day smoking and drinking and sometimes sleeping in his chair. After he leaves I open all the windows I strip the bed I wash the curtains shampoo the carpets spray the air burn candles and incense and aromatic oils yet the toxic odours still cling to the furniture they linger on and on for days and days. And even when the last traces have gone the air in the room feels stale. As if the desperation and decay emanating from the man who filled the space was so heavy it has permanently altered the atmosphere in the room.

You walk in while I'm vacuuming the carpet for the umpteenth time. I switch off the machine. You come up behind me and put your arms around my waist and your hands under my T shirt. I lean back and sink into you wearily as you mumble into my ear:

I told you you'd regret it.

And you were right.

Did I tell you about the photograph on my bedroom wall when I was a

boy?

Yes you did. Tell me again.

I unwind your arms from my waist and lead you out of the room and into my studio next door and pull you down onto the couch beside me. Then I close my eyes and fill myself up with your voice:

The photograph was large. Almost larger than life. I looked at it every day and filled myself up with the image of the handsome uniformed man on a horse. I dreamt of climbing onto the horse and jumping out of the window and riding bareback into the night across the country to find the man behind the picture. The man who sat so strong and upright in the saddle. The man who was my father.

And then the day came when I discovered the lie. The blown up image of the big strong man on the horse was nothing more than flimsy paper tacked on my wall. I tore it down and threw away the pieces and looked at the empty space where my father should have been. And I decided that I couldn't stare at that empty space every day of my life.

So you buried it inside you?

You don't answer. You're staring out the window. Then you say slowly:

Yeah. Maybe...I don't know...I think something died inside me on that day.

You're doing it again you're making me feel shit. Why do you do it?

The wine bottle is empty and I want to catch the waiter's eye but I dare not try because he's a man and you're wearing your tight-lipped mask and I'm stretching my eyes wide open trying not to blink because if I blink the tears will spill and spill. I tell you it's not true I say I'm here with *you* and I...

WHY ARE YOU HERE WITH ME IF YOU WANT TO LUST AFTER OTHER MEN ALL NIGHT?

I *told* you I thought he was someone I knew. You're the only one I want to be with. Would I be here if I wanted to be someplace else?

I can't hold them in any longer. Fat teardrops ooze out of my eyes in the wake of a blink. I taste the salty rivulets of frustration on my tongue as I watch you tap tap another cigarette out of your crumpled Stuyvesant packet. You light up and through your twirling smoke cloud you tell me that now at least you know how it feels. Now you know how women feel when their men stare at other women.

Our waiter materializes like a genie conjured up in your smoke cloud. I lower my eyes and I wonder what his antennae have picked up. How much has he seen and heard of our intimate war? He uncorks another bottle of cabernet he fills our glasses and he dematerializes. I gulp mouthfuls of the dark red liquid too much too fast then I try again to explain. I speak slowly I struggle to straighten the woolly edges of my wine-soaked words:

I'm an artist. I like to look. I process the world... through my eyes...I...

Bullshit!

Desperation clears my head. I plead: *Please believe me.* Looking is *not* the same as lusting. Artists look at the world differently. Mostly when I look at your face I'm looking as a lover but sometimes I get lost in the harmony of the proportions...the angle of your cheekbones...the way the light plays with your hair and the way the colour of your eyes changes from slate grey to deep sea blue... I look at you as if I were about to paint your portrait. I do. I really do.

Suddenly your face softens and the mask lifts. You pull me out of my chair you hold me close we are dancing to the music just the two of us

dancing in between the supper tables and I am forgetting I have forgotten what we were fighting about. We stumble out of the restaurant into the warm night air I interrupt your fingers on their way to my breast I bury my face in your hand I breathe your earthy tobacco smell into my nostrils into my lungs I want to climb inside your skin. We reach the car I sink against the door waiting for you to unlock it but you have opened my blouse and my nipple is in your mouth.

In the early morning I find myself wrapped around the warm length of you my fingertips falling like soft warm raindrops up and down the landscape of you. I savour these dreamlike moments besides your slumbering body. In the languid silence that precedes the dawn the moments rise and fall like the rhythm of your breathing. They seem to stretch into infinity and beyond and my contentment is complete. Sometimes my hand comes to rest in the silky fur on your belly and I lie quite still dissolving all of me into all of you before my fingers begin their inevitable slide down to your penis. Finding it gloriously awake while the rest of you still slumbers. I caress you gently until the pleasure starts to penetrate the sleep-filled corridors of your mind you sigh and purr like a cat you roll over to me you open your legs to increase your pleasure and you give yourself to me.

Twenty years ago I sat at the feet of an Indian bride. The bride sat crosslegged next to the husband she had never met before and her feet and hands were decorated with intricate henna designs. She had rings on her fingers and rings on her toes and a flaming red and gold sari flowed from her head and pooled around her exquisitely decorated feet. She didn't speak she didn't smile she didn't lift up her head - she played her part like a well

trained pet. She kept her eyelids lowered while the blessings were bestowed and the rice was thrown and the children danced and played.

The groom was clad in pure white silk. He held his head high he chatted and smiled and shook hands with the guests.

I was so close I could almost touch her hennaed toes. But I came from another place. I was footloose and free. A traveller from afar. I could not enter the world of a bride who did not dare to look into the eyes of her beautiful new husband at her side.

Now something of her world has entered mine. My head is down and my eyes are lowered. We are walking in the park with the dog and I do not look at the game of rugby or soccer or cricket or whatever we happen to pass because those are men out there and I must not look at other men.

But how can I not look at what is in front of my eyes?

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you. I know how much I hurt you. It's the thought of losing you that makes me go crazy sometimes. Without you I am very little. You are my rock. You are my foundation.

You're standing at the kitchen door holding out a handsome bunch of cerise and orange chrysanthemums spiced with lanky stems of lavender. Showering me with sweet words. Why does my pulse not quicken with delight? Because a carapace has begun to grow over the soft centre of me. Because your offerings of flowers have lost their innocence they have taken on a different role they are bittersweet pills you feed them to me in an attempt to erase the latest bruises you have inflicted on my heart.

It's not your flowers I want it's your trust.

Then I notice the rest of you. Your sweaty running vest and the sheen of perspiration on your forehead and I recognize the flowers from the sellers

near the cemetery. You have run the last two kilometres alongside the frenzied late afternoon traffic carrying my peace offering yet the blooms seem blissfully unfazed by their bumpy ride. Not one petal appears fatigued or depressed.

How did you manage that?

I talked to them on the way. Told them they had an important mission to fulfil.

I laugh I take the flowers I put them in the sink I turn back to you I mould myself into your dripping body I burrow my face into your neck I close my eyes I let your sweat soak into my skin.

I navigate the minefield with increasing trepidation I monitor my every word and deed before letting them take root in the space between us. But still the explosions rip through the air around me and rearrange the ground beneath my feet.

Why do you have to wear lipstick when we go out?

'Whaat...? I turn away from the bathroom mirror towards the spat-out words. The small cylinder with its chocolate brown protruding tongue is suddenly burning my fingertips.

Don't *pretend* you don't know why you do it. It's an animal mating ritual. One of the things you do to attract other men. That's why all women do it. That's the *only* reason why you do it.

Fuck you oh FUCK YOU. Why do you always reduce everything to sex?

Because that's all there is.

Your voice is a low mumble directed at the patchwork pattern on the duvet cover.

I sit next to you I lift a hand to touch your arm but I recoil from the steeliness of your armour and soften my voice into a weary plea. Do you really think that every woman who puts a bit of colour on her lips is out to seduce a man? Do you *really* believe that? Don't you think that it might be frivolous feminine habit?

I look at your bent head and hunched shoulders and think of a grown man trying to crawl back into the womb and decide that there's no way I'm going to get through your contorted silence. I get up and go back to the bathroom mirror and contemplate the glistening Tawny Dew on my lips. *Make up*. This miserable little squabble is all about *make up*. Except that it doesn't wash over me like miserable little squabbles should.

A few days later it's my stretch pants.

I like the way the leggings streamline my shape. Of course I have not escaped the beauty trap sometimes in my head I manage to evade this thing but never in the mirror where my body says to be thin is to be beautiful and that's really all there is to it. But you understand nothing of this because you tell me I can't go out dressed like THAT. Why do I think so many women get raped? And I think did you really say that a man with a masters degree in education *did you really say that?* Yet I peel off my favourite thigh-hugging black pants and bury them at the bottom of my cupboard I pull on a pair of loose fitting jeans and wipe the lipstick off my lips.

Weeks go by and you are at ease with me and the world. You wrap me around you and I soak up your loving and then one day its back this thing that's eroding you from within and you mutate into that other person and your sarcasm slices into me with unexpected precision.

You tell me about a movie that you *know* I'll enjoy because it features all those Hollywood Hunks that I just *love* to drool over.

The ripples of your paranoia spread beyond me. You don't like feminists. Journalists are immoral. Women's magazines make fun of men. The art world is depraved. Art exhibitions all display images of male genitals and that's *precisely* why women frequent them.

We're having supper and my daughter asks what happened to my Chinese dressing gown. I tell her I gave it away to charity. She says she can't believe that I did such a thing. I tell her about the new green satin gown that I bought from Woolworths. I won't admit that its shiny newness depresses me and that I wish I'd kept the kimono that my mother brought back from China because it was lovely and luxurious and the silk sighed against my skin and the huge leaping dragon embroidered on the back made me feel brave. But it was old the threads kept on unravelling and I kept on sewing them up and then you said you don't like me to wear things that make me look as though I don't care about myself and so I gave it away and now my daughter watches and she learns about the things women do to please their men.

I look at her across the table and I ask her silently for forgiveness.

Books. Magazines. Movies. Art Exhibitions. Music concerts. Other men. The dangers are all out there. We stay at home. Our world shrinks to our bedroom.

Yet within these walls there is still much to explore and in each other's arms we are brave.

I ask you if you remember those lines from the musical 'Hair': *Sodomy, fellatio, cunnilingus, pederasty/ Father why do these words sound so nasty?/ Masturbation can be found...*

Sure I do.

I thought perhaps you were too young...I was about fourteen at the time. I played that LP over and over I knew all the songs by heart and when I wasn't singing them or listening to them they played on and on in my head. That song was my favourite. It was slow and haunting like a beautiful hymn. I had no idea what it was all about but I loved to roll my tongue around those long words - they sounded to me like exotic plants. One day I was singing when I walked into the kitchen and my mother was there and I remember her voice it sounded strangled she said what did you say what's that you're singing? So I sang *masturbation can be found...* and her face went pale and her silence told me that the words didn't belong in our home. And after that those words just grew and grew inside me. She gave them so much power.

Outside a soft rain washes the world clean. Inside the duvet my fingers are writing invisible messages on the skin below your collar-bone. It's past midnight and we're indulging in another bottomless conversation. Airing those big words. Divesting them of their power.

My wife caught me masturbating once. She exploded.

Oh that's so weird. The same thing happened to me. My husband was so freaked out he cut up my red nightie into millions of minute little pieces. I found them in the dustbin.

Why did he attack your nightie?

I used to wear it when I didn't want sex. Which was most of the time. The problem was he didn't want to talk about it.

About what? Masturbation?

Sex. He didn't want to discuss sex at all.

Like your mother.

Yes.

He said it wasn't something that you talked about. You just did it. I couldn't just do it. So over the years I slowly withdrew. I think he thought I was frigid. And he was right - in a way I was.

You didn't have orgasms?

Very few.

Wow. You've come a long way.

With you as my teacher how could I not?

The rain is still drumming lightly on the roof. You're quiet beside me. Perhaps it's the rain. You said that when you were a child you loved to lie in bed and listen to the rain. It was always the same when it came. Gentle but strong. The rain was a faithful friend. You told yourself it was falling just for you.

Your hand rests on mine. I turn my palm and thread my fingers through yours. Then I move your hand away and crawl on top of you because I have this sudden desire to hear your heartbeat. I want to sink into sleep with that rhythmic thump thumping in my ears but you're an uncomfortable mattress so after a few minutes I roll back down and tuck your arm snugly around my belly and I'm drifting away but you won't let me go you're whispering in my ear:

At least you learnt to pleasure yourself when you were younger.

I'm too tired to answer you but tomorrow we'll continue this conversation and I'll say yes that's true I did but do you think it's possible to *really* enjoy an unspeakable thing?

I've done it. I've finally done it.

I've created an ugly painting.

I'm standing in front of the easel with the chewed wooden handle of my

favourite paintbrush in my mouth and I'm wiping the bristles of another on my ancient painting smock while trying to make sense of my latest offspring.

I can't.

The painting has no equilibrium. It asks too many questions. The questions have no answers. What did my art teacher at school say about art that made no sense?

Go to it in silence and wait till it speaks to you.

Okay. Here I am.

I'm waiting.

My clothes feel too tight. I take my heavy smock off and toss it on the couch.

I go back to it in silence and wait.

Dominating the painting is the head and upper body of a woman. She is placed on the left of the landscape format and is constructed out of jagged pieces of flesh-toned paper. Her head resembles a large egg which has been shattered and crudely put together again. She has no eyes. Her mouth is a crimson gash. Her neck is long and rope-like and far too thin to withstand the weight of her broken head. Her pale right shoulder juts out and up into the centre of the painting into a blue black void. The shoulder resembles a separate limb and is the focal point in the composition. Behind it a grey green smudge floats in the void. On closer inspection the smudge becomes the featureless head and torso of another figure. This figure has a small rodent-like head and sinuous body and appears to be made out of a gaseous substance.

Did someone else paint this?

I turn the easel so that the painting faces the wall and leave the room. I grab my keys from the top of the fridge and go out in search of something to

obliterate the stutter in my stomach.

The wave begins to gather momentum in the shop in front of the display of chocolate bars or sometimes even before at home when the thought enters my head. The saliva wetting the inside of my mouth as my eyes race across the seductive display of rows and rows of assorted glossy wrappers concealing unlimited delights. Waiting to be consumed with lust or greed or simple enjoyment.

I don't bother with the regular-size bars. Those are for the ordinary person with an ordinary habit the one who tosses the bar in the bottom of the shopping bag and remembers it much later after supper then eats one or two squares with simple enjoyment and shares the rest with the family. Oh no. My relationship with chocolate exists on another level completely. Its obsessive edge kicked in during the dark days of puberty when I learnt that the ritual of eating had another purpose altogether.

I don't have a favourite I will eat almost anything sometimes the shiny green-wrapped peppermint crunch sometimes the almond nut sometimes the fruit or biscuit centred sometimes I will try something completely different sometimes I settle for the plainly delicious familiar slab of Dairy Milk. Walking out of the shop to the car with the solid block of comfort clutched in my hand I break off a fat chunk through the wrapping paper the dull crunch of cracking chocolate vibrating through my fingers drawing more anticipatory juices in my mouth. In the car the engine has not yet spluttered into life when the first velvety smooth squares are melting on my tongue bits of torn wrapping spilling onto my lap and onto the passenger seat. I am barely out of the car park I have started on the second mouthful a few minutes later I have stuffed down half the slab. I

drive with one hand on the wheel the other hand frantically unwrapping and breaking up and shovelling in. My mind is not on the road because the chocolate consumes all of me as I consume all of it.

Sometimes when I open my front door there may be one or two blocks left in my hand and by this time the pleasure of the taste has been replaced by a dull disgust at the mindless obscenity of my greed but there is nothing to do but to eat the rest. I will never leave any for later I will eat until the chocolate is finished or I will eat until I begin to feel ill whichever comes first. Then I drink water to wash away the sickly sweetness lingering in my mouth I try to cleanse myself of my gluttonous sin if I can feel clean inside I can pretend it never happened.

But the next morning a brown chocolate smear on the car seat tells me that it did.

My son asks me how much chocolate I eat. It is a question I would rather not consider but in the end I say on average an ordinary size bar every day. How long have you been doing this he asks? For a long time. But how long exactly? Oh...I guess since I was about fourteen. Okay he says the average bar is 100 grams that means 3 kilograms a month which is 36 kilograms a year which when multiplied by 35 years comes to 1260 kilograms which means you have eaten about twenty times your weight in chocolate in your lifetime.

Aah. How easy it is for the son to conjure up the mother's shadow. My stomach lurches at the image of myself as a mountainous brown glob with a bloated face that resembles mine. I try to stuff down the apparition as quickly as it comes up it doesn't want to stay down so finally I stuff it into that pocket of unexamined things. One day I will take it out and engage in a serious battle with the beast.

I look up the definition in the dictionary and find that you fit the description. Your consumption of alcohol is *excessive and compulsive*.

I saw the desperate edge again when we took the children to the theatre last night. We arrived with only five minutes to spare but you ordered not one but two beers at the bar and I said how can you drink all that so fast? You scowled and later you called me a supercilious wet blanket with a superiority complex. But it's not the drinking itself which scares me it's the grasping ugliness of your need. I see it so clearly.

And of course you're right. How dare I judge you. You at least binge in public.

I am painting in my studio when I hear the radio report about the woman who sliced off her husband's penis with a kitchen knife then drove into the country and threw it into a ditch.

When you walk in the front door I go to you I wait to be enveloped in the homecoming hug that anchors my day but you avoid my smile you turn your back on me you disappear down the passage and I hear the bedroom door slam shut. I follow you into the room and reach out my hand and your voice is a low growl.

Don't touch me.

I jerk my hand away from the sting of your words and step back. I notice the newspaper on the bed and then I know that to talk to you now is useless but I do it anyway I tell you that the woman did what she did because she was desperate because he beat her he raped her he abused her viciously for years and she's as much a victim as he is....

SHE'S NOT A VICTIM SHE'S A CALCULATING BITCH SHE SHOULD BE

KILLED SHE SHOULD BE JAILED FOR LIFE WHY IS THE WHOLE WORLD ON HER SIDE SHE CUT OFF HIS PENIS SHE CUT OFF HIS FUCKING PENIS THEY SHOULD CUT OFF HER CLITORIS AND DRIVE A STAKE THROUGH HER VAGINA.

Sometimes I think you are insane.

I leave the room and take the dog for a walk in the park. The little furry rocket shoots ahead to startle a low-flying flock of Egyptian geese. But my steps are sluggish and oblivious I walk simply because I walk. An hour later I return to the house. As I open the front door I feel the wave of sorrow before I hear it. I follow the sound to our bedroom and find you sitting on the floor with your head in your hands in the narrow tunnel of space between the bed and the window. I sit on the bed and gingerly touch your head. You don't resist. You do nothing to indicate that you are aware of my presence. I stroke your forehead until the sobbing subsides then I slide down onto the floor and sit beside you in silence. I look at those hands cradling your head and I feel even now the shivering pleasure of your fingers moulding my flesh like warm wax. I wait. You still do not acknowledge my presence but when you lift up your head and start to speak I sense that you are about to gift me with the key to your madness and your sadness and I put my hand over yours and I listen to your story.

You begin: Those holidays...

Those holidays were the best and the worst days of my life.

SIX

His shadow is behind him just like his aunt showed him. He's wading through the knee deep water his gaze fixed on the cloud of flickering silver beneath the surface his slender body causing barely a ripple. They're basking in the warmth of the sun their lazy movements echoing the patterns of the current.

Only a few more steps -

Now. The net shoots straight out from his shoulder. It swirls in a slow motion arc through the air before settling into a perfect spider web on top of its prey. The sparkling cloud of silver explodes and scatters towards him to where the net has landed a split second before the rest. Cutting them off and sealing their fate.

His angle was perfect. He's been practising every day since they arrived repeating his aunt's words to himself - Stay focussed never give up - not stopping even when his shoulders are burning and the net is so heavy that he thinks he can't possibly lift it one more time.

He drags his catch back to the shore he fills the bait bucket and trudges back up the beach to the umbrella where she waits with her girlfriend. For a moment he struggles to remember the other woman's name - Emma or is it Elsa? Every holiday there's a different one. They're always smaller and softer and sillier than she is. And now they're all blending into one another in his head. A little distance away from them near the water's edge his sister is poking the wet sand with a stick. He waves to her and holds up his bucket.

The fire is almost ready for the fish. A wash of vermilion is spreading upwards from the horizon heralding the last slice of the day and the mountains are turning purple. Inside the shack the women are cleaning and

filleting the fish and their aunt's deep voice is punctuated by her girlfriend's giggles. The voices float out to him and his sister where they sit perched on a log in the small gardenless garden. They are subdued by the day's activities and the leap of the flames and plastic mugs of coca-cola and a bowl of potato crisps are clamped between their narrow brown thighs.

After supper the wail of the mosquitoes sends the world indoors but he stays staring into the coals. He is drifting back to the river where he's king. A master mullet hunter casting perfect spider webs over millions and millions of startled fish. He knows he needs to hold onto the day so he sits there until all the light has bled out of the sky and red blotches are sprouting on his legs and there's no more day to hold onto. Slowly he uncurls himself from the warmth and heads for the door. On his way in he bumps the table and ash from the ashtray spills onto the linoleum floor and the room is soaked in a cloud of whisky and tobacco - the smells of summer holidays at night.

His aunt has the magazines in her lap and the other woman is refilling their glasses.

As he slips into his sleeping bag on the camp bed in the corner he tightens the muscles in his throat and chest and stomach. Turning himself into an iron shield.

The first time he remembers the first dreadful time was four years ago. Soon after his ninth birthday. He didn't know then how to turn himself into a shield.

He was reading a Superman comic. He and his hero had peeled off their Clark Kent skins and were soaring across the rooftops to save the world when he heard her whisky-coated voice saying we should cut off his prick and shove it up his arse and the words come at him and he couldn't fit them into his head and he didn't really hear her say those things and he stopped

breathing and when he began to gulp the air the tears choked in his throat and spilled out of his mouth and the comic book fell to the floor.

The other woman stopped giggling.

She looked up and found his face bleached and frozen in the corner of the room. Her voice was kind:

Its okay boy. We're not talking about you. It's that man we saw on the river...

His aunt laughed. She said: Don't worry about him. He's got fucking balls too. He'll be just the same.

Now they pass around the pictures. He sees things that boys should never see. He sees an elephant's huge balls in a wrinkled ball-bag pulled out behind him and placed on a sawn-off tree trunk and Superwoman ready with a huge mallet and Wonderwoman in a bikini kicking a little naked man in the balls his penis flapping against his belly and he's spitting his balls out of his mouth along with a couple of teeth and there's a funny frightened man shooting down a slide towards a crocodile infested pool his costume pulled aside from the force of the slide his penis and his balls hanging above crocodile jaws and women with knives wait at the end to slice it all off and there's another woman wearing boxing gloves about to punch a man in his face his nose a limp penis and his moustache a hairy ballbag.

They point and laugh and swear about pricks and dicks and tools and cocks and men who are all a bunch of dogs and he hates them.

He wants to cut their tits off. He wants to ram a sharp spear up their cunts till it comes out of their mouths so that they can't talk anymore and they can't laugh anymore. He wants to throw the net over them and throw them in the river so that the fish will eat them and nobody will know and he'll never see them again.

He hates his penis. He hates his balls. He wants to cut them off and throw them into the river for the fish so that nobody will ever be able to see them again.

I am humbled by your scars. Their shape and their depth. I long for a magic ointment that I might gently massage into them and watch them disappear. But I suspect that all I can do is soothe the surface of you.

I climb onto you my soft female flesh blanketing your hard muscular maleness. I like to lie like that with all of me on top of all of you while your fingertips travel up and down my spine and my whole body purrs under your touch. I feel as light as air but one day I ask am I too heavy? You're not heavy you're my lover you say rhyming the title of a silly song from our past and the laughter spills out of me it spills and spills.

I have learnt to initiate the games I like to lead as well as follow. You ask is it okay to just lie back and enjoy? I hear the echoes of your past in your voice and I say yes yes don't move until I say so. Slowly I release my gift through my fingertips and the warmth of my gaze. I see your face soften as you surge up towards me I feel you swell and throb under the rhythm of my oiled palms I see the muscles in your arms and your torso tighten I watch the storm rumbling and raging and breaking and I hope and I pray that you are drowning out those distant echoes in the flood of your pleasure.

Nestled into your back I am quiet now my arm resting in the curve of your hip I caress you gently I continue to feed off your pleasure. You lie quite still you say nothing. I know that your stillness hides a struggle and then I hear your question growing out of the silence. Tell me why you like to do this?

I tell you again. When I touch you like this I feel like I am touching the edge of your soul.

You close your hand over mine.

Now watch me carefully honey.

The nurse is smiling at him. He's five years old and the bath is full of bubbles. She is washing his penis. It's all soapy and she's washing it so much that it's growing bigger in her hands.

Now show me how you do it. Let's see if you know how to clean it properly.

He doesn't know why they need to wash it so much but he does what she says and she watches him to see if he's doing it right. If he doesn't do it right she shows him how to do it again.

Later when he goes to bed she reads him stories. She always strokes his penis while she reads and it feels good. Sometimes she kisses it for a long time before she says goodnight.

He likes the nurse. She looks after him when his father goes away and his father goes away a lot because he's an important person in the police force. He hasn't seen his mother for a long time and he is beginning to forget what his little sister looks like.

Don't look at my face. Look at my penis.

At first I can't obey. I am lost in the flush of arousal flooding and softening the contours of your face I am drenched in the waves of worship that rise up and bubble out of your mouth and splash about me as I caress you. But then you interrupt the flow and your voice drops to a whisper you say show me show me the hunger in your eyes and I lower my gaze I focus on the glistening crown sliding through the tunnel of my hands and my

fascination grows and it feeds the fire of your gaze and you watch me watching you and I understand this narcissistic duet oh yes I understand your need to be looked at because for me it is the same. The hungry gaze erasing the silence and the shame. This is the shape our love takes.

You seldom penetrate me and I prefer it this way. Perhaps the swallowing is too great. Perhaps there is not enough space in which to see and to be seen.

He's seven years old and he's back living with mommy but Granny is looking after him and his sister because mommy works all the time. He's scared of his granny because she's always shouting at him and smacking his hand she doesn't like boys and she doesn't like his penis she says there's something WRONG with him she says he's DIRTY she watches him while he bathes and she follows him when he goes to the toilet.

She shouts so loud that his ears hurt.

YOU ARE A HORRIBLE RUDE BOY. Only RUDE boys make horrible noises like that when they wee. WHY CAN'T YOU DO IT AGAINST THE SIDE OF THE TOILET SO THAT NO-ONE CAN HEAR?

He tries to do it like that so that she'll stop shouting at him but she grabs his penis and points it to the side of the toilet and she's hurting him and he can't wee when she holds it like that and he can't do anything right when she shouts so much.

YOU STUPID little boy. WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU? If you can't do it properly then SIT on the toilet and make a wee like a GIRL.

He can never wee when she's there. He can only do it when she's gone.

One day he learns how to lock the bathroom door and Granny sounds like she's going to explode. She's banging on the door and shouting WHY ARE YOU

TAKING SO LONG? WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THERE? But he doesn't unlock the door ever again.

The walls in our house are thin. When my twelve-year old son stumbles out of bed and into the bathroom in the morning to empty his bladder the continuous torrent crashing into the toilet bowl is long and thunderous and alarmingly male.

Your toilet sounds are discreet. You relieve yourself in short hesitant spurts.

One day you ask me to hold your penis when you urinate. You say hold it aim it do it so that you know what its like to be a man so that you know how easy it is to miss to spill on the rim and on the floor. I do as you say because it is what you want and when I think its finished I move it a bit and yes there it goes another spurt up and over the side it lands on the floor and you say you see that's what happens you see how easy it is to spill and I hear the voice of a small boy saying please show me it is okay to have a penis that doesn't always do what its supposed to. Afterwards you ask me what did it feel like and I struggle to find the words and then I lie I say it felt intimate and I see disappointment flash across your face you draw a quick breath you say is that all - it felt intimate?

It's Saturday afternoon and Mommy has taken them to the swimming baths. The water's lovely and he's feeling big and proud because Mommy is watching him swim. When he's had enough he runs across the grass to where she sits with Auntie Doreen and her friends and she wraps a big towel around him and rubs him dry. He lies on his back on the grass and the sun is warm and he's tired from all that swimming and then Auntie Doreen says let's see if

we can make it stand up and she's pulling his costume down and pulling his penis out and she's laughing and Mommy is laughing and all the women are laughing and looking at him and touching his penis and he jumps up and runs into the change room.

He stays in there for a long time. It's cold and dark in the change room and he can hear Mommy talking and laughing with her friends on the grass.

I no longer wonder why you see things that I don't.

The children on the beach. You always see the little boys and their mothers. I look at your face and I think of an invisible vice squeezing you from within. I see the festering madness in your eyes when you stare at those women. I hear it ambush your voice. You say look at that look at them why do they let their sons run around naked how can they do that to their little boys? But when I do as you say and follow your gaze I see children dancing in the sand mothers chatting and laughing in the sun and yes sometimes the little ones have shed their clothes but they are girls as well as boys and I see no reason why those lovely little bodies should be clothed.

I am also the mother of a boy child. I am one of your suspects. And so you interrogate me because you must:

When your son was a little boy what was it like for you...bathing him?

What do you mean?

Well... even little boys have erections.

Yes.

So you're a woman and he's a male. What did you do what did you think what did you feel when you saw his erection?

He's my son for God's sake!

I feel trapped. If I show interest I feed your fears. If I show disinterest I wound your ego. You are trying to trick me into saying the wrong thing but the right thing eludes me and I suspect that whatever answer I give it will be incorrect and if I hesitate too long that too will be a wrong answer. And so I select a quiet neutral tone I arrange my words cautiously I try to show both interest and disinterest and I avoid your eyes when I speak.

Oh - I guess when I first saw it I was surprised. Maybe a bit in awe of that part of him that had such a potent life of its own.

I don't want to look at you because I fear what I will find on your face. But I feel the silence stiffening and when I raise my eyes I see that familiar veil of distrust clouding your eyes. Separating you from me.

Separating you from us.

SEVEN

You've been stiff and monosyllabic for three days since I told you about Paris and now you're loosening and beginning to spew.

The brandy bottle is almost full you pour the golden brown liquid into two tall glasses your brandy takes up almost half the glass within minutes the glass is empty you are pouring another while I have barely begun my first. I am thirsty you say to the question mark on my face. I think to say if its thirst you are quenching why not drink only the coke?

You're telling me that two months is too long you don't want me to do it because you know *exactly* what will happen. Paris will seduce me you say I won't come back I'll get sucked into all that decadence I'll be drooling over

paintings of naked men I'll be surrounded by pony-tailed artists -

I am lining up three carrots. Starting at the one end I begin to chop them all into tiny orange discs each exactly the same thickness. I concentrate on the rhythmic sound of the knife hitting the chopping board willing your barbs to bounce off me but they don't I am getting tangled in them and I say please it's the centre of the art world and you say that's *precisely* the problem oh yes Paris is where it all happens. I plead with you I say can't you see it's a great opportunity for me? I'm going to work I'm going to learn I'm an artist I need to go. And all the time I am trying to ignore the perverse little whimpers inside my head: *Why don't you just abandon your dream? Turn down the invitation. Forget Paris. Listen to your man. Give up the fight. You've given up so much - why not give this up too?*

Later when we're in bed you say: Go. I know I can't stop you. Go to Paris. You turn your back on me and I wrap myself around you and run my fingers down your chest down your abdomen. I stop in the fur on your belly and you take my hand away.

Neither is it easy for me to leave my children. Abandoning them for two months is definitely not the done thing. During the next few weeks the accusation is a constant rumble beneath my breastbone but I try hard not to hear it I bury it under the list of things to do I sew up my days with frenetic preparations I arrange for them to stay here with you during the week and go to their father on the weekends and spend afternoons with friends. I distribute copies of timetables and contact numbers to everyone and I tell myself again and again that it will be good for all of us it will make us stronger.

I step off the plane and I am enthralled by the light. The light in the

southern hemisphere bleaches and flattens but here in the north it is full and deep it is an artist's light it softens the edges of things it enlivens colour it throws things into relief.

It is as if the world has been perpetually rained upon.

My studio apartment in the Cité des Artes overlooks the River Seine. The buildings house an array of artists from across the globe. English is rarely spoken and my few French words cannot bridge the great divide. I walk the long dark corridors in search of kindred tongues but I hear or perhaps I imagine I hear only the concentrated buzz of creativity behind closed doors.

Outside on the city streets I am alone but the city fills me up. I want to touch the warm stone buildings and let their stories seep through my skin. I walk and I walk and I look and I lose myself on the map. My walks always hug the water I am drawn to the old bridges they exert some kind of primal pull on my feet. After many days I go back to my studio and I paint the winding river with its shimmering mirror of autumn and the weathered bridges which embrace it and the work grows into an earthtoned collage of the heart of Paris seen from above.

I listen to a live symphony concert in the Notre Dame Cathedral and I peel back the centuries to find generations of workers architects artists craftspeople busily constructing this sacred place. I spend days in the department of Egyptian antiquities in the Louvre surrounded by ancient ivory carvings and decorated sarcophagi and I see that I am part of a river of creativity that has flowed ceaselessly since the beginning of time.

When at first I find your letter in my pigeonhole my heart does backflips I want to run down the corridor to my studio so that I can feast on your words in private but when I get there I am paralysed. I sit with the letter in my hands and stare out the window at the grey October sky remembering what I

left behind.

There is a childlike quality to your handwriting and it fills me with some unnamed dread. The letters tilt in different directions restlessly pulling against each other struggling to find their shape on the page. Sometimes the words hover on the edge of illegibility and somewhere in the untidiness of the script I see the chaos in your heart and the messiness of our lives. You write mostly of your longing and at first the poisonous barbs are few so I pretend they're not there and I soak myself in the sweet stuff. By the second letter the veiled sarcasm is less veiled and by the third letter the venom has increased and even the sweet stuff is starting to taste sour and I write a letter saying it's over.

I don't post it.

I walk around with the letter in my pocket savouring the power I have to alter the course of my life.

The day is grey and icy and I venture into a tiny coffee bar on *Ile de Cite*. The place oozes Parisian chic and I know that I am insulting the establishment with my faded jeans but I am too cold to care. I avoid the waiter's eye and I concentrate on the silver jugs of velvety chocolate and steaming milk which he brings. I pour the milk and the chocolate into the cup I watch the sumptuous dark brown swirling into the frothy white and I am mesmerised by the mandala-like pattern. I drink two cups of the creamy concoction and feel slightly ill but I thank the gods and goddesses as always for chocolate. Walking back I see lovers entangled on a bench on the river bank her legs wrapped around his waist. I see a woman unbuttoned on a busy lunchtime pavement his head buried inside her blouse. They get up smiling and unashamed and I walk past them with the letter in my pocket and my body aching for you.

There is a fat envelope from home in my pigeonhole. Inside is an audiocassette with a hand written label: *Songs of love, confusion and despair*. I put it into my portable machine and your voice explodes into my solitary studio space and echoes inside my chest. You say you decided to play disc jockey for me. I sit on the floor and listen to your offering.

The first song is U2... *I can't live with or without you, I can't live when living is without you...* and the words reverberate in my skull and dissolve the distance and break down the walls I have carefully constructed around myself since I left you four weeks ago. Then there is a song about not knowing and being wounded by fear and injured in doubt and holding on holding on because there's nothing no there's nothing left to hold onto and another about running on faith and then the last song is called *Old Love* and now you are repeating the opening line - *I can feel your body when I'm lying in my bed* - and your voice is tugging at my soul with a force of many lifetimes and I forget about the letter in my pocket I phone you and say please please come to Paris. A week later I get up in the dark and catch the metro and then a bus across the city to the airport.

You emerge into the arrival hall and a shock of desire moves like a giant wave through my body. You are wearing an old browngold leather jacket and your eyes are weary from lack of sleep and you enfold me in your arms and I am home and the moment freezes in my memory it will feed me in times to come. But on the bus going back I am silent I don't know how to touch you I look out the window seeing nothing I feel only the inevitability of your body beside me. Six weeks without you and I am afraid to reenter the other.

Cocooned in my cosy studio apartment my fear evaporates as I rediscover the contours of you but in between the laughter and the loving I watch and I wait for the signs.

I don't mention Paul down the hall. I borrowed his alarm clock to get to the airport on time. Now I should return the clock but how can I do this thing? He fits the identikit of your fears: Long sandy hair. Handsome enough. An artist. Appropriately bohemian. Usually attired in a hand-woven Mexican jacket. I search for an excuse to go out alone for a few minutes but you are always with me so I don't return the clock and I worry that Paul might come knocking at my door looking for it and then you will explode and our bubble will burst and I will wish I had sent the letter telling you it's all over.

But the knock doesn't come and the bubble doesn't burst and his clock remains sitting in my studio on the shelf behind the easel amongst the motley jars of paints and brushes.

After a few days you say you miss my children and you write post cards telling them so and I watch your untidy scrawl snaking across the back of the cards and I love you terribly.

You are new to Paris so we join the hungry hordes we climb the Eiffel Tower we sway on the top of the monstrous steel candlestick with the vast spread of the city pooling below us. We take a trip to the Palace of Versailles and wander through its obscenely opulent halls. We visit Chartres with its cobbled streets and the Cathedral from my art history book springs suddenly to life. We eat perfect crepe pancakes and weave fantasies of a fairytale wedding in the south of France far away from the rest of our lives. Our excursions are extended foreplay.

At night we drink Cassis and cheap white wine and you concoct chicken stirfries with lots of garlic and chillies and after all these weeks of living off baguette and cheese and muesli your food is as nourishing as our sex.

It is early in the morning of our second last day in Paris. I am suspended

somewhere between waking and sleeping with my body curled around you and the creeping awareness of something other. I take your hair out of my face and my ears out of the duvet and I listen to the newness of the silence and then I jump up and rush to the window. The low hum of the city below has been blanketed by the first winter snow. I shake you awake I say come come let's go out to meet the snow. You laugh you pull me back to bed you say noo its much too cold but we wrap up and take the train out to the old oak forest on the edge of the city.

We are alone in the forest and we are dwarfed by the vast white silence and the ancient trees with their dappled autumn cloaks. As we walk the snowflakes resume their ghostly dance they drift and settle with infinite grace on the burnt crimson and golden leaves and the colours acquire a blinding luminosity next to the pristine white of the flakes.

The world glistens.

I turn to you but you are not caught in the spell you are mumbling into my hair that the cold is biting through your jeans. I take a last long look and on the train going back into the city I am lulled by the motion and the hum and suddenly the thought occurs to me that I might be dreaming.

Because it *never* snows in Paris in October.

We return home with the world smiling at our feet and songs about happily ever after spilling lightly off our tongues. My children have survived my absence without undue trauma and are bubbling over with stories of their own. I look at them anew and see how much they have grown.

We learn that your ex-wife is struggling with the demands of single parenthood and wants your daughter to live with us for a year. I clear out my studio so that she can have her own bedroom and we paint the inside of

the garage and move my easels and assorted piles of creative clutter in there. Without enough natural light the space is not ideal but I will find a way I am determined to make this work I would rather she have a sunny room that she can call her own.

After the first few weeks the battle lines are being drawn and a cold war has begun between our daughters. Yours goes to you with complaints about mine and mine comes to me with complaints about yours and we make the fatal mistake of trying to treat them all the same. We hear that *she* ate the last of the banana yoghurt in the fridge and *she* used *her* towel and *she* is older than *her* so *she* should get more pocket money than *her*. Their escalating hostilities compel us to heed our instincts and rise to the defence of our own offspring. Your frequent accusation that I don't give your child enough attention is delivered with icy resentment. I grit my teeth and remind you that my daughter is no longer the youngest child or the only girl in the home and her world has been turned upside down by a stranger and how can I pay more attention to your child when mine already condemns me for loving her enemy more than I love her?

This thing is tearing us apart. Our vision of a big happy family was a magnificent delusion. We expected the two halves of our severed families to come together and make a whole without any ruptions from within. How did we get to be so naïve?

After three months she goes back to her mother. You blame me. You blame my children. You say we have driven her away.

The shock of your accusation.

You're sweeping the floor. The room is bare except for my old studio couch. There is nothing left of your daughter's presence and there are lines on your face that weren't there before. I search for a way through your frozen

anger I approach you slowly I put my arms around you but your body stiffens you put down the broom you move towards the door you tell me what I have been waiting for all day and your voice is barely audible.

I can't do it. I've lost her again. I can't do this anymore. I can't stay here with you and your kids.

I listen to your fading footsteps followed by the harsh clang of the front door. I stand in the middle of the empty room remembering the first time your daughter came to stay. She was glued to your side she wouldn't let you go but she said shyly that she'd always wanted a brother and a sister and later that evening when you put her to bed she gave me her stamp of approval she said daddy she is a very nice lady.

Now she's gone back to her mother because we couldn't make it work.

The room is cold.

I look across to the window and notice that the hibiscus bush outside has overgrown shutting out the afternoon sun. I could go and cut it down it will be something to do I need to bring some light and warmth back into this room. I am about to go in search of the hedge clippers when I see the family walking in the park. Their wobbly new puppy chases smells in the grass. The little girl is perched on her father's shoulders with a pink baseball cap on her blonde hair. Their parents are swinging her brother into the air between them until his body is horizontal and about to flip over. Whenever he comes back to earth he tugs at their arms and squeals for more.

My face is awash with tears.

Our separation lasts for four days.

You phone you say I miss you. I go and spend the night with you in your rented room. A few weeks later you move back into my house. We begin

step-family counselling. I say let's marry on your birthday - the day which your father crumpled with all his broken promises. Let's take the sadness out of the day let's make it a new day full of joy and laughter and unbroken promises.

Neither of us know why we are doing it.

We do it anyway.

I make invitation cards using photographs of one of my paintings. The painting is mysterious. Large flower forms in soft violets and magentas drift above and away from a misty green ground. The floating shapes hover in the foreground and almost spill out of the picture yet the eye is drawn inexplicably into the distant shadows. It is hardly the kind of invitation card that would enchant a Cosmo Bride but the truth is I have no desire to be a *bride* or a *wife* those slippery syllables gliding like gilded serpents over the truth of things. I don't feel like a fairy princess on my wedding day and I don't notice the barren pews where your family should be. I am far too anxious about my dress my hair my beauty parlour face there is too much fabric too many curls too much effort to fit into the fairytale.

But as the day unfolds the champagne begins to smooth my serrated edges and I am warmed by the sun and the smiles and the homegrown entertainment from my dancing daughter and her friends and the trickle of my sister's fingers on her guitar and your eyes are brimming with hope when you stand up and tell our guests that this is the best birthday party that you've ever had and I gave it to you.

Are you going to stay together like Granny and Grampa?

My son's question strips away the froth of the day. He stands at the bedroom door on the night of our wedding and his face is pale in the hall

light. At fourteen his body is beginning to assume the shape of the man he will become. He is tall for his age but he draws up his shoulders and lowers his head as he speaks as if to make himself smaller than he really is.

From across the room I feel the weight of his loss and his longing.

I can't answer him.

I owe him the truth and I want to be the solid ground on which he walks and I want him to forgive me for my sins but the truth is that I don't know.

I hope so my boy I hope so.

Marriage has mellowed you. Your jealous outbursts are fewer. You worry less about who I look at and what I wear and which books I read. Tentatively and courageously you are beginning to visit your fears. You no longer always refuse when I invite you to art exhibitions. Your body is less rigid when you sit beside me in the cinema and graphic sex and nudity flood the screen.

Our children are also beginning to bend towards each other. Your daughter and her mother are no longer living so far away so she can now spend every alternate weekend with us and it is easier this way. We are not one big happy family. We probably never will be but we are learning to have patience and not let their battles become ours.

Maybe.

Maybe you and I will grow old together.

The mellowing does little to dull the current which rages between us and friends are envious of the fire which we cannot hide. Sex is in everything we do. The current cannot be switched off - it fuels our conversation our tears our poetry and our rage. There is no beginning or end no if or but no yes or no. Only where and when. Risky sex is becoming our drug of choice. When I obey your command and undo my buttons and shyly expose my breast to

you in a crowded restaurant and when you climax in my mouth while you're driving at 120 kilometres an hour I feel both liberation and degradation shooting through my veins.

Money - that other potential minefield within marriage - is a necessary fuel and nothing more. We pool our earnings and draw out what we need when we need it with no concern about who made what and how much. You say you want to be able to earn enough for both of us so that I can paint from my soul without needing to sell it. My heart softens. I guess this has something to do with being a man. I say thank you but can't you see that that would make me less not more?

I am rushing into the supermarket to pick up some bread before fetching my daughter from netball practice with my son waiting in the car. I see the dress in the window of the thrift shop next to the supermarket. It plants itself in my head as I taxi the kids home give them their lunch and listen to the titbits of their day.

Shopping for clothes is a nightmare I try to avoid. My body glaring at me from all angles under those malicious change room lights is too much to contemplate. Women who glide in and out of those carpeted torture chambers with garments draped over their arms and little smiles on their faces belong to an alien breed which I regard with an uneasy mixture of awe and distaste. I prefer to make my own clothes or ferret them out of arty flea market stalls or dingy second-hand shops. Places which generally have no floor-to-ceiling mirrors waiting in the wings to assault me with a catalogue of my bodily imperfections.

The dress was red. A ripe tomato red with a hint of orange flame. The colour of a whore's lipstick. A colour that rushes at you and demands that

you look. Soft stretchy knit fabric waiting to embrace me. Ankle length with a slit up the back. No distracting details - no darts zips collar or pattern. Nothing to draw attention away from what lies beneath it.

It would slip over me like a second skin. There would be no space for underwear.

But of course I wouldn't. I couldn't. Wear something so - so *totally* lacking in shame.

I phone you at work and begin to describe it to you.

You interrupt me.

Buy it.

Later I put it on for you. I stand on the far side of the bedroom against the window of inky night and allow your gaze to wash over me until my nipples are taut and tingling against the soft redness and my knees are wanting to collapse under me. Then I close the gap between us and you slowly slide your hands down to the hem and peel off my new red dress.

You offered them to me bravely. Guilt and apprehension tugged at the corners of your mouth and hovered around your eyes. You said you don't want this to be your dirty secret you want us to do this together but I couldn't tell you what you wanted so desperately to hear. I couldn't say it's okay with me because when I saw the women in those magazines pushing their sex in your face the fear that squeezed my stomach was sudden and violent.

It's late in the evening. You're working in the study and I'm curled up on the couch in my studio peeling back the glossy pages and asking myself why. Why do you need the stuff that truck drivers and adolescent boys

ejaculate over?

I can't look at these pictures.

I let the magazine slide to the floor and listen to your keyboard clattering quietly to a halt in the next room.

You walk in and sit beside me and lift my bare feet into your lap and fiddle with my beaded ankle chain. You glance at the magazine on the floor and clear your throat as if you're about to speak but then you stop. I wiggle my toes in response to your touch and you say slowly:

I've told you before and I'll tell you again. These magazines can *never ever* replace you. You know that don't you?

Then why? Why do you need them?

Because they...make me feel less like a bad person...less like a bad man.

You're not a bad person. Or a bad man.

I'm telling you how I feel. How I've always felt.

Always?

Ever since I can remember.

You sigh and your body sinks a bit into the sofa. I feel the urge to pull your head into my lap and stroke your forehead but I won't allow myself to do this because those celluloid women are lying on the floor next to us and I hate them because they're everything that I'm not and I hate them because you love them. I gesture to the magazine and I say:

But how...*how* does this stuff make you feel better about yourself?

It helps ease my shame. It really does. I wish...oh fuck I wish you could understand this.

I'm trying to. I am. Tell me more.

It's just that pornography is one of the few things that makes me feel okay about myself...about my erection. When I look at those women willingly

opening their legs and displaying their glistening genitals to me I am...

Aroused. They arouse you.

Yes but..

But what?

It's more than that. Much more. They make me feel less of a...pervert. They show me that women can be as...as vulgarly sexual as men. That's one of the reasons why I love to watch you masturbate. Seeing you lose yourself so totally in your own pleasure must be one of the most exquisitely beautiful things I have ever seen.

But I'm not enough.

No baby. It's not like that. For the first time in my life I'm facing my fears. And I can only do it because of you.

I am the mould you made to pour yourself into. Your gaze breathes me into being. Under the shock of love I become a claywet soft sigh. The frontiers of my skin dissolve. You kneel in that sacred space between my legs and you embrace me with your eyes and a flood of words tumbles from your mouth. My body panics for your touch. You sing a praise song to every part of me. Your words soak into my skin. My clitoris arches and aches and screams for the warm wet miracle of your mouth but you wait you always wait until you hear the breathless plea spill out of me and only then will your tongue answer swiftly only then will you flick currents of liquid fire into the moist heart of my sex.

You tell me I am beautiful but what do the words mean?

We are sitting on the beach watching the waves arc and crash and spill. Perhaps the sea has drowned out my question because you don't answer.

Then you speak. Not to me but to the ocean:

It's the way you give yourself to me. It's the way your beauty unfolds when you surrender. When your nakedness is complete.

Tell me about it.

I see it first in your face. The way desire alters its contours. Your eyelids begin to close as if the forces exerted on you are so great that it is only by shutting your eyes that you can withstand their impact. Your jaw loosens and I see the tiny thumping of your pulse in the side of your neck. If you are standing and you shift your weight from one leg to the other the movement releases the scent of your desire and your body becomes a silent demand. An offering that must be taken. And then when I taste your hunger on my tongue your body gasps and everything else falls away.

Your gaze is still directed at the horizon. As if this question and the answer to the question holds some great mystery that you have yet to fathom and that maybe the sea in its infinite wisdom might reveal it to you.

Everything else falls away?

Yes.

Go on.

You quiver and you squirm and your moans seem to come from deep within your womb. Your belly swells like a creature giving birth. Your toes curl and the soles of your feet press into my sides. Your sounds increase in tempo and in pitch becoming more and more feral. You thrash your head from side to side your eyelids clamp shut you scream soundlessly you pull me towards you you push me away you erupt on my tongue and I breathe in every last tremor of you.

That's it. That's where your beauty finally settles. In the very last shudder that you spill on my tongue.

You turn to me at last your eyes glistening.

Now do you understand what it means when I say you are beautiful?

I whisper yes. I think no. I drop my head onto your shoulder squishing my toes into the cool sand. I feel that familiar wave of fusion washing over me. And with it the question pooling in its shadow: When love is so powerful can it be overcome by anything other than flight?

EIGHT

I see the end years before the end. I see it in the way you kiss the bride.

Your party mask seems too tight your smile too wide your eyes too bright as they scan the crowd for something more. Your dancing is manic. I am with you but you are not with me you are constantly melting into the throng in the direction of the bar and you don't come back and I wait and wait and get tired of waiting I go looking for you and I find you seated between two women one of them has her hand on your arm and her face close to yours and you are soaking up her party talk.

I look at those women and I see my future. I am not enough for you.

And when at last we leave you kiss the bride in a way that only a lover should and that confession that you made soon after we met comes rushing back at me. There was nothing to signal its coming. You sounded as surprised as I was when you said *I don't trust myself*. We were eating at a pavement café. The air was warm and full of promise and I struggled to fit the words into our cocoon but I couldn't find a place for them so I shut them out and I forgot. Until tonight I heard their echo. I saw them written on your face as you sat so snugly between those women and yes oh yes I saw them in your eyes when you kissed the blushing bride.

I lie awake listening to your absence. Dissecting the sounds of the night at two three four in the morning while melancholy pools in my soul. I am marooned in the emptiness of my bed and I think of running away. Get into my car and drive someplace. So that you will come home and find me gone. But I am not brave enough I am not irresponsible enough to do this thing.

To drive to nowhere on my own at this hour would be stupid because ugly things happen to people under the cover of night there is danger lurking in the world out there too.

I am frozen. Too frightened to act in grand defiance too miserable to sleep I wait and listen for the sound of you.

The purple dawn has begun to seep into the room when a wave of cigarette smoke precedes you through the bedroom door. I flinch as it assaults my nostrils but I lie still. I am trapped as much by your sudden presence as I was by the unforgiving bleakness of your absence. I consider the invisible cloud that envelops the smoker even when he is not smoking and I wonder if you wish that you did not have to walk past the bed to get to the bathroom before you can wash away the night.

When you crawl into bed the smoky cloud and the smoky clothes have been shed but the beer still lingers behind the toothpaste and mouthwash.

You are home. In bed with me where you are supposed to be. But your back is all that you offer me and when I reach for you with my leaden heart you are not there. I lie watching the curtains changing colour from dark purple to violet to creamy lilac and then I get up and write you a note. I cut white paper into the shape of a heart and I stick the heart on your side of the bathroom mirror in a place you can't escape. It will stare at you when you brush your teeth my red ink words will spill onto crisp white their silent plea:

You once said there is a place in your heart where my face fits perfectly.

What happened to that place?

But days go by and my heart stays there on the mirror - its unanswered question burning a hole in its middle.

Days as well as nights are full of your absences. You go straight to the running club from work. You eat at home maybe once a week and when I cry out in desperation YOU SPEND ALL YOUR TIME THERE YOU MAY AS WELL MOVE INTO THAT FUCKING PLACE but your only response is the flicker of guilt in your eyes. When you do come home during the day the mask you wear is pale and tight you are a caged animal scuttling down the passage disappearing into the bedroom the bathroom running away to wherever I am not.

The darkness leaks into everything it pollutes the air between us it swallows the light.

I comfort myself with the creativity in my fingertips. I am making a batik and bamboo screen. The batik panels will be laced together with jute onto the criss-cross bamboo structure. There will be gaps in between and the light pouring through the batik will make the red and green sing. The materials I am combining are very different. They might not be happy together but I have begun the process and I will let it carry me to wherever it needs to go. The hours of work are long they stretch into days there is so much stitching and lacing and threading and placing it is big it is complicated and from the start it is a struggle. The tiny jute fibres are irritating my fingers and my shoulders ache from holding up the bamboo poles. I am trying to grow a thing of beauty in my home to ward off the darkness but the magic is not there. The ingredients won't mix.

I can't make art in the dark.

It is three in the morning when you walk through the front door after another all-night escape. I am still awake. Struggling to weave harmony and order out of my chaotic assortment of batik panels bamboo sticks and

scratchy string. You look at my frustrated work in progress for a frozen moment. There are lines of weariness and despair carved into your extraordinary face and your voice echoes mournfully across the room between us:

You create and I destroy.

We go to the party in separate cars. I put on my bright party face and I make some attempt to be part of the scene. I wander through the house hovering on the edge of people's lives. Drift outside to the table of snacks where I shovel salty nuts into my mouth. If they were sugar-coated I would not notice the difference.

I find you outside in the centre of a circle of women. Basking in their drunken flirtations.

I find a half-empty bottle of cheap white wine amongst the motley selection of bottles and used glasses I pour myself a large tumbler full and I feel the blast of a morning headache in the speed at which I gulp. I drift back inside to find a woman dancing like a creature possessed lifting up her blouse exposing her breasts to her guests. I sink into an armchair in the corner and let the music drown me.

The next day when you arrive home from work the mask you wear is tighter than ever. I follow you down the passage I find you sitting on the bed I put my hand under your shirt above the belt of your pants.

You flinch.

Let's go out to eat. Please let's talk. I say softly.

I am turning the corner towards the nameless thing. I need to hear its name I need to see its face so that I can fight it. My need to know has become greater than my fear of knowing.

At the restaurant I make random stabs at the silence between us.

You're becoming like your father. *He* was an absent husband and an absent father. Do you know how much I *hate* having to tell your daughter I have no idea when you will be home?

You don't answer. Your eyes dart around looking for a place to hide. You light another cigarette and swat the smoke clouds away from the table.

Finally you look at me and say:

About me being like my father. I suppose there might be some truth in that. But there's more to this. There's much more to this.

What is it?

I can't tell you. Not here.

Why not?

I can't handle your tears in public.

NINE

The lights of the town are dancing below us and the silver moon slices through the sea. The view from our garden at night is perfect. I wait for you to speak.

When at last you do a shudder of knowing rips through me. A knowing that at this precise moment the landscape of my life is undergoing a profound and permanent shift. And with the shock of knowing and the lethal imprint of your words a numbness begins to seep into my heart and my world starts to spiral out of reach and I am a soundless scream I am stop please stop I wish you would stop why won't you stop STOP saying these terrible things they're not true they can't be true this is not happening to me this is not happening to us but you won't stop you don't stop your words keep coming they keep coming at me

I've been living a lie I don't love you anymore I don't want to be with you I don't want to live with your children if I can't live with mine I want to leave you surely you knew you must have known wasn't it obvious? All those nights when I never came home all those weekends away without you why didn't you tell me to fuck off?

I didn't I don't want to lose you I thought you needed the space.

And then you spit out the unforgettable:

I feel so tolerated.

At the end of it all I fall onto the bed hoping that I am too drunk to think too drunk to feel. But the brandy has not completely dulled the pain the incision is far too deep and my moans are more animal than human. I feel your hands through the fog gently taking off my clothes covering me with the duvet and then your body next to me your arms around me holding me

holding me so tightly tighter than you have ever held me before trying to hold me together to stop me from falling apart. And then a strangled voice which could only be my own asking you is it okay to cry?

I lie awake in the blue dark staring at the moon through the open curtains. The moon is too full. Too bright. It shimmers and pulsates as if it wants to explode.

The first day of aftershock I am a zombie. I seek refuge in friends. I talk and I talk and I search for the answers in my talking in their listening and there is a restless urgency in my need to be heard. I go from one to another they share their stories they listen they advice I gulp down their cups of compassion I pour them into the cracks in my heart. To talk is to do something with the pain to talk is to try to escape the pain but in the spaces between the talking and the listening I feel the monstrous weight of fear.

Don't let him move out. If he does he will break the ties and never come back.

I can't stop him. He has already broken them.

If he had died it would be easier.

Yes.

There is dignity in death. If he was dead my grief would be clean.

Do whatever it takes. Settle for less.

No.

Did you not see how I let my light fade in his shadow? Being less than what I am has not enabled me to keep my man.

Tell him to go. Shift the balance of power. Act rather than react.

Yes.

I am learning that heartache is more than a word. My heart aches and

my heart breaks and the pain throb in the centre of my chest and something thick and poisonous is congealing in the broken cavities of me. Dragging me down. Infecting every cell. Leeching my body dry. My eyes burn from sleep unslept and from tears unshed. I long for oblivion but I can't escape I can't escape the weight of it. I drink glass after glass of water. I am impossibly tired. It is too soon to cry. There will be too many tears. I am spinning in a whirlpool of pain.

And yet the pain reminds me. I feel. Therefore I am.

This evening a friend arrived at the door with concern in her eyes and a seafood supper for two. The crayfish was freshly caught by her husband and perfectly prepared by her and the wine was the Cape's best Merlot. She said something important when she presented her gift. I thanked her I closed the door and I forgot the thing that she said.

I have longed for crayfish for years and now this unexpected extravagance lies on my plate. My well-trained artist's eye is seduced by the contours the contrasts the tones and the textures of this ancient sea creature with its juicy pink flesh waiting to be dug out of its crusted earthenware shell. But my body remains unmoved. I have no appetite for this alien animal. Its foreignness reminds me that my world has shifted on its axis and that nothing is where it was before. And my tongue has turned to leather I can't taste I can't eat but you say I must. To eat is to believe that life goes on. To eat is to trust in tomorrow. There is no reason to feed a body that has no hope.

I push my plate over to you. I watch you dig out the delicate flesh I have dreamt about. How can you eat when I am dying inside? Doesn't your heart

bleed just a little bit? I pour far too much wine into my empty stomach. I listen to the words echoing between us. I hear the hysteria beneath them.

Later I lie again in the endless dark in a wine-drenched fog listening to those tapes from the night before. They rewind and replay themselves in my head and the torture is unrelenting it continues until dawn. Then I drag myself to the kitchen to make coffee and I encounter the crusty remains of my friend's best intentions on your plate. I recall her words at my door.

Good food and wine can work miracles. That's it. That's what she said.

Aftershock. Day two:

I have placed our marriage in the jaws of a therapist. I suspect this is a mistake she is too young too blonde too pretty but I had to do something and a fruitless something feels better than a helpless nothing.

Tell me why you're here says she.

I ask her for a glass of water I gulp it down and ask for another. How do I explain this tangled tapestry. So many threads so many layers so many pieces of us. Where did we begin. Where did we end. Words too small to say it all. Seven years. Dancing on the edge of our destiny. Loving. Fucking. Hurting. Seven years so complete so inexplicably incomplete. The words are stumbling out of my mouth into the ears of a stranger but they are thin they are devoid of life and I begin to doubt my own story. Maybe I was bewitched maybe it was all a magnificent delusion.

Then you speak you who have been my best friend my lover my husband and when you speak you are a stranger beside me. You say you did not want to come it is too late it is all over you are so distant so cold so strange.

So final.

The therapist listens she affirms she empathises in the way only trained listeners do and when both our stories are out there I see my pain reflected on her pretty face. I feel her pity and I hate her and I wonder why I am exposing my soul to a stranger trained in the questionable art of professional compassion.

I watch her choose her words carefully and when at last she finds the right ones she tells us that marriage counselling can only work if we both want it to.

On the way home we stop for breakfast we get out of the car you fold me in your arms you say you are so so sorry. I sink into your familiar warmth and for a moment my heart leaps.

Only this is real. All the rest is a bad dream.

I limp through the day and I dread the coming of the night because my body has lost the ability to sleep. Demons stalk me throughout the endless dark and when the dawn finally slips into the room I am dull and drained and sick with fatigue. Yet beneath the numbness my heart is feverish and the questions continue to writhe and slither.

How will I live without you? Where did I go wrong? Do you really despise me because I am too tolerant? Did I give you wings to fly away? Why did you say I was too good for you? Is it because your soul is so attuned to discomfort that the comfort I brought was impossible for you to endure? And what of our desire - that current that raged between us which neither of us could switch off? What happened to that?

What the fuck happened to *that*?

*****_

I open the door for my sister. Lead her down the passage into the bedroom and sink back onto the bed. Try to speak but find that the pain has robbed

my voice of life my words are parched they dry up as soon as they reach the air. I don't want to talk. I want to sleep. I can't sleep. I need sleep. I try to lift up my head. I abandon the effort and let it fall back onto the pillows. I see the anxiety engraved on her face. Hear the incredulity in her voice

I envied you. I always thought you were the perfect couple.

We were. I thought we were.

What happened?

I don't know. I don't know.

I struggle through the telling of it. The shame and the shock of it.

What do you really fear?

I dig deep. I dredge up my worst fear:

My children. I'm afraid for my children. I don't want to destroy their dreams I want them to believe in happy endings. How can they do this with my life as their teacher?

Twelve years ago I bought them ice-creams to sweeten the blow. I told them that their father would not be living with us anymore and my daughter's little face instantly crumpled her sorrow was loud and inconsolable. Her big brother's eyes were dry he had already learnt to swallow his pain he knew how to paper over the cracks with words. He said that it was better this way now there would be no more talking fights in our house.

This time his words come via email from London they are sprinkled with capital letters and exclamation marks he says his heart is with me one hundred percent he reassures me that this will not have a significant impact on his life because you are not his dad and anyway he was annoyed that you could never really relax and oh yes he could definitely see that you have a dark side.

I am lighter. My son's words free me. I need no longer pretend to be the solid earth out of which he grows.

Through my studio window I study the astonishing collection of ceramic candle masks which he produced during his art classes a few years ago and which now peer out from behind the fleshy leaves of my verandah plants. Candle holders are built into their bases and when the candles are lit the light shines through the carved out facial features. Their expressions are quirky – ranging from sombre to bemused to ecstatic. A few months ago they all leapt magnificently into life and lit up the garden for his eighteenth birthday bash which deafened the neighbourhood and caused us to flee in a parental fog of relief and reluctance.

Now he has left home and has begun to carve his own place in the world. Soon she will do the same. I helped them grow wings. I managed that part of my job well.

But what am I doing to their roots?

My family my friends please leave me alone. Let me edit myself out of it. Allow me to stay at home and anaesthetise the day with cheesecake and chocolate. Let the season of goodwill happen without me. Do not ask me to surround myself with cosy couples and frolicking families when my heart has been freshly amputated.

Do you know how it feels to be pitied?

And then.

You are here. You ask me if I would like to spend Christmas day with you. You are quick to add that you are not wanting to reconcile but the truth is you don't have anywhere to go on that day. Your daughter will be with her

mother and after all you think it would be appropriate for us to spend the day together.

Appropriate.

You have decided it is appropriate to spend the day with your discarded wife. Like a once-beloved garment which you no longer fit you tossed her into the garbage bin of your life and now you plan to dig her out and wear her one last time. You have found some use for her. She is to cover the looming hole in your Christmas day.

Of course I agree. How can I not? I am too needy too greedy for any crumbs you care to throw at me and maybe we can talk maybe you can help me understand maybe you will hold me close and warm me with your words.

Maybe the angels will smile on me because it's Christmas.

The day arrives and here you are even earlier than planned. I am wearing one of my daughter's dresses it is tight and white and short this is not my style at all but then nothing is the way it used to be. Years ago you would have not allowed me to go out with you dressed like this. I let you tame me. I *wanted* you to possess me. I soaked up your desperation and your fears and in the end you couldn't live with your creation you couldn't look into the mirror anymore. Now I am no longer yours to possess. I will provoke you with the body you no longer want the body you once wanted so.

Yesterday I made a present for you. Or did I make it for me?

I covered a large blank book with ochre-coloured fabric and painted earth-toned lovers on the cover. Beneath their tangled bodies I wrote: *Karmic threads are hard to break*. You unwrap the present and you thank me but your eyes are filled with such an ancient sadness that I look away so that you won't see my own sorrow leaking out of me. We are sitting on the beach the sun is too hot the air is too heavy with things broken and unspoken you

are so near and you are so far and around us the world celebrates the day. I see them all - families and friends cocooned in each other and I wonder why we are spending this day together when we are mourning the death of us.

I want to pierce through your wall so in desperation I ask is there another woman and you say *there have been* and the words slither across the sand towards me in the midday heat.

Three little words.

There have been.

Something sacred is being ripped out of me. I lift my hands up to my face with my palms outwards as if to fight off the words I am gasping for air and then I hear you say if it's any consolation you had safe sex.

Safe sex. How can you sit there and tell me you had safe sex you fuck other women you lie you cheat you betray me you destroy my world how safe how fucking safe do you think that makes me feel?

The champagne bottle is quarter full. I put it to my mouth and empty it in one long gulp. Then I walk down to the spilling waves with your eyes burning into me and I am walking back through the years to that earlier time when you watched me striding like this into the sea. I was naked in the pale moonlight and when I emerged you couldn't resist with your hands cradling my cold buttocks you fucked me from behind in the sand.

The sea is deliciously warm. I yearn to dissolve into the salty womb of the ocean I wish the waves could embrace me and take me with them I don't want to go back to you I don't want to go back to those three small words slithering towards me in the sand.

I am invited to a floor wetting party. There are candles and champagne and special people to bless the space. I am soaking up the sweetness of it all but

there is something threatening to catapult me out of this place I try not to let it in I tell myself this is not the time or the place I won't let my sadness leak into this sacred space but as I watch my friend shining in the midst of her dream coming true I see another home the one that you and I planned to grow on that untamed misty mountainside and my grief is spilling out of my eyes and I am wetting my friend's new floor with my tears.

And when I am awarded a commission to produce twenty-five large paintings for a luxury hotel in Mauritius my heart does not race.

You should be here you believed in my work you helped me to believe in it too you should be here to mirror my joy if I can't see it through you I can't see it at all.

I spend the evening with friends. They try to lift me up they remind me that I have much to celebrate but my sorrow is too heavy and I still struggle to eat. Misery has drained the excess fat from my body and there is nothing else to do but to pour more alcohol into my bloodstream. I know I should stop because I need to drive home but home is not home since you left. Home is the ache of your absence.

I get up to go and the ground sways beneath my feet and the car journey home is a slow underwater swim.

Six weeks have passed since your untimely goodbye. I continue to search for new bandages for my leaking wounds. My search is relentless I fill myself with knowledge I devour self-help books I repeat mantras I look in the mirror I tell myself I am wonderful I am beautiful I am talented I remind myself that in the infinity of life where I am all is perfect whole and complete.

And then your quasi-legal divorce letter arrives.

You are setting out reasons for divorce you begin by saying we are incompatible this is bullshit I won't read any further you are sending me crap couched in legalese. I ask to see you we meet in a cosy cave of a restaurant but there is nothing cosy about you. Your face is a tight mask you won't even order a drink you are definitely not going to let the mask slip while your divorce letter is burning a hole in the table between us. I ask you to please help me understand this unravelling tell me what I have done tell me what it is that you don't like about me.

You say other people are more interesting.

No.

I refuse to let this insult settle in my heart. I wrestle with it in my head.

You look at me with ice in your eyes. You get up and you leave.

I sit there alone. I order another drink. I cup my hands around my glass and stare into the honey brown liquid. I take your divorce letter and tear it up into tiny pieces and drop them into the ashtray. I remove the candle from its holder and watch the flame devour your lies.

The manageress comes over. She looks like a bad painting done by an impatient child. She says are you okay? I shrug I wipe my eyes with a serviette I tell her I'm going through a divorce.

Oh she says with a luminous pink smile. Don't worry. You'll get through it. We all do.

TEN

I see it for the first time when you come to collect your post. You stand there longer than you need to. I see the dance beginning in your eyes lingering in the spaces between your words hovering in the ease of your smile settling in the way your body flows into the space around you.

Towards me.

I don't invite you in. Later I replay the dance many times. The next time you come to collect your post there is no hint of promise in your words but the promise is there again in your body on the doorstep asking to be invited in.

Dislodging my tender shield.

No.

I won't invite you in. But perhaps I will take back some power perhaps I can show you that I will survive this thing I suggest we have dinner and I dress to impress. We go to a restaurant near the beach I tell you the separation is good for me I need the space I respect the journey you're on and I can see you need to fuck around. You're surprised and of course you're pleased with my brave declaration because it liberates you from your guilt. You smile and say yes it's true I do need to fuck other women. The wine flows freely and so do the words and then I see that slow burn in your eyes and I feel the frontiers of my skin dissolving and I am suddenly aware that never once in all the days and nights since you left have I allowed the thought to enter my head.

That which I could not consider before is teasing the air between us and I grab it bravely I give it voice.

We will make love again.

Perhaps.

Your words are cautious but your eyes are not.

Back in my bedroom you make conditions you want us to look and not touch I protest I say that's not enough but I lie there naked and you stand there naked and you look and you sing a praise song to every part of me. You caress yourself slowly as you fill me with your voice and my skin is hungry but you stick to your rules you allow me to feed only off your eyes and your words and then you ejaculate over my breasts and you are turning away you are mumbling that this should never have happened and you are spilling it out pulling on your clothes heading for the door you are gone almost before your confession has time to take root in my head.

You said *is not was*.

There *is* another woman.

This time you admitted that it's her. The woman from the running club the one you denied with your words but not with your voice. I can no longer give you the benefit of the doubt. You are sharing your body with someone else and my status in the world has changed. I am no longer merely the abandoned wife I am the wife whose husband has gone off with another woman.

I curl up on my side and hug my knees tightly I pull the duvet over my head I lie there buried in the dark with a storm raging inside my skull and a monstrous pounding in my chest.

The next morning you phone and your apologies are profuse and desperate and I tell you what I plan to do.

I write her a letter I say you were with me last night I tell her that she is caught in the middle of us and that she will get hurt. I phone her home I get

no reply I drive down the road to where you are renting a room and I see her car parked next to yours and I sit there and I sit there with the shame of it.

I can't go in.

I drive home and phone her house again. Her husband says she is at work.

Her husband.

The triangle has become a square. But the boundaries are not clean it does not feel like a square it is more like foul-smelling soup than a unit of geometry and I have little experience of this underworld of dangerous liaisons. How do you tell a man that his wife is fucking your husband? Should you tell a man that his wife is fucking your husband?

I don't know.

I can't.

I don't.

The next morning I deliver the letter.

Later your email spews venom onto my screen you accuse me of being manipulative seductive malicious vindictive you swear never to make love to me ever again and you want a divorce NOW. Your words are like razorblades twisting in my flesh and when you arrive I ask for peace I say wherever we go from here can we please not fight over who gets what please can we stay out of that wretched place and the mask drops from your face you hug me you say you love me you will always love me and I whisper into your shoulder I say no no please don't say those words please don't try to kill me softly.

People whisper things. They say things they think I want to hear. They say we always wondered why he only wanted to run with women. We used to like him but now we wonder.

They don't understand.

I don't want to see you diminished. I feel contaminated by your lies I feel shame I feel pain yet I am humbled and made small by it all. I have peeled back the onion skin of your soul. I have crawled into the hole in your heart. I have known you. I know you still.

How can I condemn you?

You have to give me the car. *You have to.*

But why? It's mine. You contributed nothing towards it.

I bought food for you and your children for seven years. You're telling me that my contribution is worth nothing?

But we agreed that if we ever split up you'll leave with nothing. I provided the house and the cars and you bought the weekly groceries. And there was the maintenance from their father and money coming in from my paintings. I don't owe you anything. Why *should* I give you the car?

The dispute simmers for months. You are insistent you are angry you hold onto your truth fiercely I cling to mine defiantly you take yours to a lawyer and the lawyer tells you what you want to hear. I am reluctant to let some predatory stranger make sense of our lives but in the end I make the call I spill my story into the jaws of the law. I will the man to tell me that you are right even if you are wrong because your anger crumples me and the logic of my heart bears no relation to the logic of my head but he tells me that there is *no way* you are entitled to any of my assets.

I am lost. I want to give you the car but I can't find the reason why. I have given you so much of me now I must fight to keep the rest of me. The car was a gift from my parents and I don't need a second vehicle. Is that a good enough reason to give it to you? Did you consider my needs before you

betrayed me with otherwomenflesh? You have a stable income and I don't. I could sell the car and live off the money for months. But your insistence gnaws at me and one night I drift off to sleep with your words *you have to give me the car you have to give me the car* pouring like a mantra into my dreams. I wake up triumphant at two in the morning with the missing piece of the puzzle falling into place in my head.

Ah yes.

Why didn't I see it before? I am trampling on your wounded masculinity. By claiming that I don't owe you anything I am dismissing your role as provider in my life.

The hook goes in. My defiance evaporates.

The car is yours.

I dip my brush into a well of invisible ink and I paint over all those unwelcome truths. The dark stain of your betrayal fades too easily beneath my brush.

I tell myself that I am embarking on this precarious adventure with you because I am an artist. Surely it is my destiny to push myself beyond myself? Yet in fact I am powerless to resist the spell of you so I put my heart on hold and I say yes yes take me wherever you want to go and then I dive head first into your movie and I laughingly suggest that we divorce on a serviette. And after we have done this unlikely thing we come together on the shores of a moonlit lake and make fleeting moments soar.

I choose not to see the scorch marks on my soul. It is so much easier to believe that they are not there.

A pattern is fast emerging. My electronic mail box is sporadically filled with your erotic outpourings and I give as good as I get. You are careful to keep

your words focussed on our bodies and I play the game with reckless abandon because your desire for me is a drug I cannot live without.

We are children playing an adult game we are adults playing like children we are dancing on a tightrope of lust.

When the pressure becomes unbearable when the messages are flowing so fast and furiously that the constant sending and receiving becomes obsessive when nothing matters more than keeping the game hot when the feast becomes so frenzied that the words are arriving misspelt and mismatched and misplaced on the screen only then do we find other ways only then do we start to take the lid off. We switch to the telephone in the middle of the night in the early hours of the morning in the middle of the day we tantalise we tease we spill out our most outrageous fantasies we invent new ways of keeping the receiver in position without having to use our hands we devour every word breathed into our ears into our bodies we experiment with vibrators mirrors cushions and oils.

But all the fun on the phone and the steam on my screen cannot compare to the times when you come to me in the flesh your sweat on my skin your body warm and surrendered in my hands.

Yes please.

A night in my bed means bending your rules but one evening you're too tired to leave and then your steadily breathing presence flung across my sheets after all these months dislodges the shell around my heart.

I don't sleep. I must guard the soft centre of me.

I watch you as the blue-black night lengthens and enfolds us. You lie on your side with your hand cupped over your mouth and I think of my daughter when she was a baby. She slept with her hands folded on her chest as if in prayer.

I watch you. While I guard my heart and consider the power of beauty.

That telltale pause as I lift the receiver to my ear. Your velvety undressed voice spilling into me. My heart doing its usual thing.

You have just read my email telling you what I did when you left. You wish I had done it in front of you.

I play the game I feed the thing that surges through the telephone cables I can almost see them heat up and pulsate I say I will do it for you next time I see you.

And then I remember your lie a few days ago in the car. I am committed to her you said.

I wonder how you do this thing.

You leave me. You go home to coupled domesticity. It is early evening - is she cooking supper while you escape to fuel your fantasies? Would you be doing this if she was in the next room? Is flying so close to the flame part of the game?

The thing is this. Your fantasy woman is real. You have breathed and touched and tasted and loved me long and deep I spill out of your fantasies into your life yet you tell yourself you tell me that watching me pleasure myself is no different from watching an erotic movie that reading my steamy emails with your growing erection in your hands is no different from reading an erotic book that listening to me describe my anal orgasm over the phone is simply satisfying your academic interest in the subject.

Aah yes. Subterfuge has been an easy art for you to master. You are comfortable with secrets and lies - their roots have been planted deep within you. How can you not believe your own stories? You weave them into a

second skin which you slip into and out of with ease. You are a skilled survivor. You do whatever it takes to keep the lid on the box.

A few days later you tell me that you have dangerously high blood pressure and are under doctor's orders to avoid stress. I am not surprised. I say your stress is women related and you say bullshit it's work related. But I have heard this story before I know that work is your most convenient alibi it is always there to hide behind and to trot out when necessary.

Last week the lid was lifted off the box and you were blissfully unaware. The lid was lifted by a friend of one of the fuckdollies of your not so recent past - in the event of her becoming past tense she had begun to ooze her humiliation all over the place. The poor plump creature was sobbing because you went home with another the one with whom you were having that relationship that you said wasn't a relationship the one you later called the spiderwoman. And the plump one was sobbing because she thought *she* was the one you *really* loved because you had been fucking *her* and *she* was in love with *you*.

And I was there within range of the fuckdolly fallout I was there with another of your grisly revelations thrown up in my face.

Neither of them knew about me.

I am one of three.

Why does the knowledge of one more make me feel even more of a whore?

You will say that we weren't fucking most of the time we were indulging in telephone sex and email sex and other liberating explorations and I will say don't bullshit yourself with all these warped boundaries and then you will probably admit that the plump one was nothing more than a few drunken after-party fucks in the dark. Which she no doubt was. But which is not likely to quell the queasiness in my gut as I remember my dream and

the pea soup sludge in the bright red bucket next to my bed the sludge that you became after I chopped you up with the axe and I am wondering if you remember to use a condom when you are drunk and stoned and fuck women mindlessly because you are so angry with them and I wonder if I would believe you if you said yes.

What difference does it make you said. What difference does it make if I fuck ten women.

This town is fast filling up with his fuckdollies. Those he has fucked and those he still will.

Two years have gone by since he walked out on her. Three since he started playing with fuckdollies. His wife should have seen it coming oh yes she would have seen it coming if it wasn't for those rose-tinted contact lenses that she wore which showed her a world where lies and betrayal simply did not exist. Fortunately or unfortunately (depending on where one stood) she believed in lasting love. The fact that she was not very good at finding it did little to change her belief in its existence because the notion had been implanted deep within her and she had no reason to believe that the world was not fundamentally good. She had no reason to believe that a man who could love her and make her feel beautiful could go off and start a fuckdolly collection.

Sometimes she tries to picture him on one of his fuckdolly hunting sprees. A smoky bar party pub yes they are all there those needy greedy creatures waiting for his baby blue eyes to linger just long enough for them to know that tonight might be their night with the fabled fuckdolly king. She doesn't have to try too hard to imagine what its like because he used to drop hints he needed her to know that the dollies were out there. Ready and willing to open wide.

Strangely enough he also wanted her to be part of his fuckdolly collection he didn't want her as a wife anymore but she had always been good in the fuckdolly department one of the best in fact so why not? He tried to convince her that this was all about healthy sexual liberation pushing boundaries shifting paradigms and all that shit. Which was all well and good. But he couldn't see the wood for the fuckdollies. He couldn't see the slow deep pain of a real woman.

I suggest to you that there might be better ways to spew out all this anger against women and your face is hard you say you don't give a shit you're finding your own way and *nobody* is going to tell you how to live your life *especially* not a woman.

Fine. Carry on doing your thing.

I will.

Have you thought of writing it down?

I just *told* you I don't want your advice and anyway what good will that do?

I shrug and tell you that I'm not sure if it *will* do any good but you're an English language consultant you know how to put things into words so maybe it will help maybe you'll even enjoy it and you answer yeah maybe you won't and I say if you do ever get round to writing it down maybe I'll get to see it. Your laugh is mirthless you tell me I won't like it and I suspect you might be right but I say well show me anyway.

A few weeks later it is here on my computer screen and I'm about it read it for the third time but before I do I get up and close the window because even though it's the middle of summer there's a sudden chill in the air.

There is anger, fear, and numbness inside of me in relation to women.

There is also immense shame. When I think about women, and myself in relation to them, I feel fundamentally alienated, distant and careless.

The closer she gets to me, the less I trust her or myself.

My external behaviour towards women is tightly managed. I am polite, caring and considerate. I am exactly the kind of man that every woman has ever told me – consciously or unconsciously – that she wants me to be. I am the opposite of the typically selfish, offensive, violent, perverse, sexcrazed oaf who pollutes her world and taints her feminine divinity. I am an empathetic man, moulded in the image of dissatisfied women's interpretations of masculinity. I have made myself acceptable to women. I became a good boy, a good man.

But I am not acceptable to myself.

There is a wild, powerful, naked male beast that rages secretly within me. Its energy is boundless, potent, irrepressible, unruly. Its power immense. Its manner tough and irreverent. It tears, batters, bruises, shatters, stabs and cuts me invisibly from within as it bucks, heaves, charges, thrusts and flails wildly in its eternal battle to untangle itself and break free of the suffocating, strangling, castrating strands of women-woven webs of guilt and shame. Then it collapses, too exhausted to even try to cover its shameful naked maleness from their deceitful, voyeuristic, seductive eyes; their mocking, belittling, all-seeing eyes. And I am numb. I keep a safe distance from her and her kind - approaching only briefly when lust burns in her eyes, she removes her halo, she opens herself like an animal and begs me to mount her like the beastman she hates. Then I behave as wild male creatures do when females entice them with mating scents in the wind. I am wild, strong, free, unashamed and truly happy for every passionate, uninhibited, coarse moment of total masculine expression she demands from my unlocked male beast - until she is satisfied

and remembers the power men have to distract her from her divine mission. Then she remembers her shame at being so vulgarly carnal, and she heaps it upon my head with renewed vengeance.

At the door you smile you say why are you wearing underwear tonight and your body folds itself around me your fingers teasing the crevice of my buttocks through my thin cotton panties. Following me into the bedroom you say take it off and I obey I take them off and over my shoulder I see your penis unleashed and engorged its glistening purple pink shaft almost shocking against the rough blue denim of your jeans. I am leaning over a chair reaching back to spread open my lips and you are sinking into me while you watch our reflection in the long mirror. But you are thrusting too hard and I can't tense my muscles against the hammering and the position is wrong and you are hurting me and I want it to end but I have lost my voice I am shutting down I am back in the cage I have become a voiceless thing.

Oh fatherless man. I feel your empty spaces. I watch you try to push me into one of them but I am the wrong shape and you are angry with me when you discover that I do not fit. You feel nothing for your father. How can you be angry with someone you don't know? You feel nothing for him and everything for me because I am the one who is here. You ache to know yourself as man to be part of the world of men to break out of that sticky woman-centred web. But to leave me is to drift without anchor and to stay is to remain tormented by what I cannot give. So you learn to live with the holes in your soul you fill them with alcohol with drugs with work with sport with sex. But still. You can't live with me. You can't live without me. You

can't keep the pieces together and you fall apart before my eyes. You hate me for entrapping you and revealing the void within you so you spew out your rage you humiliate you hurt you betray you refuse to commit because you fear I will swallow you. But you need me as much as you fear me so you love me and you dive deep within me and then you leave me.

Because even though I have given you my everything I cannot fill the holes in your soul.

ITS OVER I'M SICK OF YOUR HEARTLESS GAMES GO FIND ANOTHER ONE OF YOUR BRAINLESS BIMBOS TO FUCK UP THE ARSE AND DON'T YOU DARE TELL ME I AM UNCOMPROMISING MY WHOLE LIFE HAS BEEN A FUCKING COMPROMISE.

ELEVEN

There is a photo of you in the paper today.

I am derailed.

Your body is loosely folded into a dark tracksuit and your hair hangs in sweaty ropes around your face and you grin out at me. You've won that race again and you're basking in the afterglow. I search for evidence of the exhaustion I know you must feel after running for two days and a night over the mountains and I see it in your eyes. There is a cloudiness about the blue and the whites are tinged with red.

I stare at you and you stare back at me. You demand that I surrender to the spell which you have woven around me and it is impossible for me not to because I taste your salty sweat on my tongue I hear your weary voice in my ear.

You are here on the page in my hand and I don't know what to do with you. I don't know whether to cut you out and keep you or throw you away or burn you. I want to throw you away I don't want to throw you away I want to keep you I don't want to burn you I could not watch your face curl up in flames in front of my eyes it would be like setting fire to my own flesh. But if I keep you am I telling myself that you are mine to keep?

It won't make any difference. You are tattooed on my soul. You are engraved on the inside of my skull.

Oh fuck it.

I crumple up the page and throw it away. Of course the gesture does nothing to erase you. You lie there amongst the fruit peels and the sweet papers and the discarded bills and you mock me for pretending that it could.

Three years after you leave me I tell you to really leave me I will sign the dreaded document the dance is finally over I want a divorce I don't want to see you again but the words are not really mine they have no place in my heart. I am going through the motions I only want to get out of this dark place because perhaps to move in some direction is better than not to move at all. I stand on the edge of nowhere I need time to peel your soul off me you were never really my security blanket it was all a fantasy it was easier to pretend. Oh yes this dance on the edge of our destiny has been bittersweet but right now I can only taste the bitterness of betrayal I can no longer pretend that my soul has not been scorched by your lies. And a voice screaming in my gut telling me I need to take back some power to grow to let go to walk tall to say no. To put an end to the game to tell you leave me alone I will not be your erotic plaything while you indulge in the flesh of other women I will not be your ever ready fuckdolly.

So let me out of your sordid movie. Let me sign the dreaded document.

My head therapist says the ritual is important for me to move on to let go my body therapist gives me the same story only dressed in different words I say I am not so sure I think that's bullshit the piece of paper means fuck all how do they know what's right for me anyway? Do they really believe that the signing of some dumb document is going to change anything in my life?

You say it will be easy I just have to sign the agreement and that's all you will do the rest. You come to the door you offer me a smile I let it drown in the ocean between us I leave you standing there I sign the paper without speaking without looking at you without looking at what I am signing I say don't ever send me a copy of anything I don't want it goodbye. A week or two later you say you need another copy you want me to sign the same document again I say fuck you why can't you get it right first time. Then

some days later another call another email you need another document this time our marriage certificate why don't you have it why must I spend time looking for papers so that you can divorce me why can't you just do this thing and leave me alone?

And when I think it is all done you tell me there is one more thing this is the last thing another paper I must sign I need to go to the magistrate's court you say you will fetch me and take me there. In the car I sink into myself I wrap a blanket of misery around me there is so much to say there is nothing to say you try to talk to me to lift the blanket I will not let you in you have put me in this desolate place I will not give you the pleasure of comforting me to ease your guilt. We get out the car a pool of silence bleeding into the space between us following us into the cold building we stand in a queue we wait and wait arrive at a counter I don't look I don't listen I am not part of this process my body is there but I am not. I hear words spoken a woman telling us to wait some more then I am in a small office with a fat man dressed in faded brown the same colour as his face the same colour as the walls he is not a real person he is a giant cockroach in disguise. He has a file in front of him he dissects my life with his stupid questions I consider telling the truth I want to slice through this travesty I want to tell him that this man who is divorcing me has been my lover on and off for three years I want to tell him I have a file bursting with his erotic letters but I am too weary to fight this thing he is the law he is the system I am simply woman unhinged.

And so I hear myself answer yes the marriage is over yes I agree to whatever yes we are no longer living as man and wife *yes yes yes write whatever the fuck you like* my voice is dead dying disembodied just let me out of here please. Then another journey another long corridor another wait

standing around the document needs to be taken from one official to another more signing to be done more waiting. Through it all I hold on to myself tightly I won't look at you because you are my enemy because I don't want to know you because I hate you for arranging our funeral for making it happen for making me agree to this for dragging me through this desolate place.

TWELVE

The legal unyoking is done.

The ink has barely dried on the dreaded document before the rollercoaster swoops me up again and the adrenalin shoots through my veins and I lose sight of the downward plunge into the dirt that must surely follow and I lose count of the number of times I have tried to cut the chord and after a while you don't believe that I have any intention of ending this thing and after a while neither do I.

When did you last have an AIDS test?

I am sitting on top of you lazily teasing your penis with my slippery ripe lips. There is no right time to ask this question so I have abandoned all thoughts of timing and simply thrown it straight at you.

Just before I met her.

And what about her? Did she take the test?

She didn't? Why not?

Your laugh is contemptuous. A dismissive little snort.

She didn't need to. She's so meek and mild she'd never do anything.

But she had a husband. What about him? Don't you know that most women are infected precisely because they *are* so meek and mild? Because they have never learned to say NO? Because they are too trusting. Because they are too timid to demand that their men wear condoms. Because they refuse to believe that men are basically promiscuous.

And anyway what *are* you doing with such a meek and mild creature?

I am doing a kind of figure of eight fucking dance with my pelvis and I know how much you like it when I move like this and I think maybe you're not even listening to me because you are enjoying this too much. But you did take it in because your eyes are darting away as you reply:

I don't know. Maybe it's what I need. For now.

This is how I do it.

I don't allow her into the same sentence or onto the same page. I cut off her oxygen. I give her no light. I give her no name. I am a coward.

I delete her.

It was different in the beginning. I said why don't you tell her? Why don't you tell her what you've just told me? Tell her how you think men and women should live. Tell her there can be no moral justification for monogamy. You said she wouldn't understand. I listened for signs of irony in your voice I looked for it on your face but there was none there was only something resembling melancholy in the curve of your mouth and the tilt of your head. And then the melancholy gave way to a kind of fervour you sat up tall your eyes shone you said you need to be true to yourself to all of yourself you said even if you had the willpower you would not starve the other side of your nature.

At that moment I could not decide whether you were a wise man or a rebellious child and then it came to me that you didn't really want her to understand and I said I think you need this secret because it protects you from her. You looked puzzled so I said can't you see that as long as you're hiding this enormous part of yourself she will never know who *you really are?*

You looked at me intensely then you sank back into your chair and I watched the light fade in your eyes and the muscles of your throat move as you swallowed and then I told myself I must stop this I must stop trying to be your fucking therapist.

After that I chose the line of least resistance. I decided to delete her.

THIRTEEN

The penises are large and loud and so is their creator and I am here only so that I can report back to you later.

I gulp down the wine and munch my way through the snacks and smile at the familiar faces hovering around the display of bloated phalluses and I leave as soon as I can. When I get home I phone you and your reaction is precisely what I expect it to be. You want to see them and of course you want to meet the woman who loves penises. I suspect that a sculpture of a penis made by a female connoisseur of cocks might be impossible for you to resist so I say don't waste your money I can do it much better it will be your birthday present and you say okay but it must be more than just a penis it must be a work of art that celebrates both male and female arousal and it must be shameless the genitals must be swollen and glistening and visible.

Um. I don't do pornography. Go back to those magazines. Surf the Net.

Well then what *do* you want to make?

I want to show the invisible. The mysterious thing that lives and breathes between lovers. The slow burn of desire rather than the explicit swellings of lust.

And so I sink my fingers into the cool wet clay I am seduced by the squelch and the rich earthy red and the smell of fresh mud in my nostrils. I sculpt in secret I don't want my daughter to see so when I hear the front door I cover it up and hide it behind the bed. I begin with plasticine models I ask you to come and pose I struggle with the angle of your back and the way the legs fold under you and sometimes life and art get tangled up and we are both naked on the floor and the man's body keeps sinking into itself the shoulders are too wide the head too heavy the clay has a life of its own. I

work a little every day and slowly I begin to tame the slippery substance in my hands. You come to view the progress you pull out the clitoris you poke out the anus you say where are her nipples and what about the shape of the penis head? Okay okay I say I'll do it I push you away I add the details you are so eager to see. I tell myself this is for you so I'll do it your way but in the end I see that I have not entirely obliterated myself I am there in the silhouette of the whole and the way the bodies arc and strain towards each other.

It is back from the kiln. I place it on the cupboard in the mirrored alcove in the bedroom and surround it with candles. The flames dance back and forth between the mirror and the baked flesh. The bodies seem to glow and melt into each other in that sacred space between them. I look at you and say:

Do you really want this sculpture?

Yes.

Why?

I think it is the most beautiful work of art I have ever seen.

I wrap it up and pack it in my old Indian leather bag. I give it to you and say happy birthday.

Soon after their arrival in the world the sculpted lovers are threatened by the wrath of their creator. Why? You confess to beginning another affair and I demand that you return the sculpture so that I can smash it.

You beg me to let you keep it. You declare that it is extraordinary beautiful and part of your life. I relent. I have never heard you speak with such passion about an inanimate object and I am doubtful anyway that I could destroy my own offspring.

Your budding affair behind this drama never blossoms. Meanwhile I embark on an email intrigue with an old friend whose attentions are more flattering than arousing and I finally confess to you that I am seriously considering seducing the man. Whereupon you become petulant. You declare that you no longer want the sculpture because it is part of our erotic life which is now over. I tell you you're wrong I know it's not over I persuade you to keep it and I abandon my email lover without seducing him. (Did I ever consider such a thing?)

I don't ask for the sculpture back when you embark on your next affair. Why not? Because by this time I know. Other women will come and go but the couple caught in the clay will endure. They have been baptised by fire and baked solid in the kiln.

Arriving in my inbox alongside a crudely animated office joke and other instantly deletable items your email describes the unexpected break up of the clay couple: According to your report it happened as you tried to take the sculpture out of its leather hiding place - the man's torso suddenly breaking off in your hand. Soundlessly without reason or sign of struggle as if some invisible force had sliced through it. Leaving the rest in the bag and your masturbatory plans in ruins.

I imagine you digging into the bag. Pulling the sculpture out with mindless irreverence - your focus on masturbation rather than art appreciation. I am irritated by such lack of respect for my creation. Yet despite its iconic nature it is after all an inanimate object and broken objects can be fixed or replaced or rebuilt. Did my father not teach me this? And I am warmed by the knowledge that I have the power to arouse you through my art and that my sculpture has successfully displaced those brazen babes

in your magazine collection. How could it be otherwise? So much of our story went into that gloriously squelchy mud in my hands. So much so that after all those hours of shaping and smoothing and coaxing the clay I stood back and looked and saw that I had done it. I had achieved the impossible: I had achieved the impossible: In the spaces between the bodies and in the places where they met and merged - I had crafted a ceramic portrait of our desire.

Now I see you masturbating over the mutilated remains of your terracotta self and I am struck again by the irony of the sculpture's secret life in the closet. The couple who I captured in the clay have been celebrating erotic freedom in some dark place in a corner of your home and what kind of freedom is that?

I type out my reply I tell you to please get some quick-set glue I want us to fix it I don't like to think of it in pieces.

The dance begins the moment you walk through the door. I am naked when I greet you but my nakedness is not an invitation or a demand this is simply the way we prefer to be. You dump the bag unceremoniously on the dining-room table as you scan my body and say with a smile that is not a quite a smile but somewhere between a sigh and a shrug:

Those magazines are in the bag as well. My bag of secrets - from everyone but you.

You peel off your clothes and step over the pile then you close the gap between us and your fingers continue the journey that your eyes begun. I lean into you for a while I breathe in your desire I fill myself up with it then I laugh and pull away to make the coffee because today there is no need to hurry it is Saturday and we have stolen the whole morning. We have time to

pretend that the dance is not happening we can savour the pretence alongside the easy rituals of grinding the beans and boiling the water and setting out the milk and the mugs and waiting for the coffee to brew.

But by midday that which was simmering has bubbled over onto my sunny sofa and your mouth is wet against my thigh and my eyes are still clamped shut and you are mumbling that we'd better get on with it we should fix the sculpture because that is after all why you came. You untangle your sweaty limbs from mine you lean over me to find the tissues and gently wipe your sticky semen off my breasts and my chin. As always your gesture taps into some primal well within me - I am a little girl again I am cherished simply because I am and I don't want to leave that safe place. But already the safe place is no longer mine because you are up and about and ready to do this thing we have put on the agenda you are burrowing in the bag you are scooping out the broken pieces and laying them out on the table. I groan from behind your shoulder.

Oh... shit. You didn't tell me it was that bad.

I am horrified at the scene of carnage you have laid before me. There are not two but several body parts strewn across my old teak dining-room table. An assemblage of broken earthenware which bears little resemblance to the object of erotic beauty which they were previously part of.

How did it get that way? It's strange...a sculpture breaking up like that all by itself. This is going to be harder than I thought.

Well. I guess it just gradually fell apart.

Your boyish grin is barely apologetic and your explanation is somewhat superfluous but I am not listening I have lost myself in the curve of your naked back and the mix of ochre and sienna in your tanned skin. I watch you bending over the table attacking the plastic cover of the tube of glue.

Unscrewing the top and letting the sticky stuff ooze out in readiness for the task ahead.

We begin with her orgasmic curly-toed foot. The operation is delicate and painstaking but we gradually glue the shattered bits of the clay couple together again. Last but very definitely not least is the erect penis which is about two centimetres in length and not an easy appendage to reinstate. Afterwards a tiny droplet of transparent glue stays glistening on its tip - an appropriate testimony to the delicacy of the procedure. It looks like a perfect drop of desire. So much so that I can't help but think of those believe-it-or-not stories of Virgin Mary statues weeping real tears or is it milk from her breasts? I try to wipe the tiny tear off with a tissue but it's already hard I have spent too much time looking at it and wondering.

Now you are scanning the information on the glue tube. Looking for something else. You find it. More relief than regret echoes in your voice when you finally address the question hanging in the air:

I can't take it with me - it shouldn't be moved for several hours - I think it should stay with you. For now.

I nod at the rush of your words. I guess that arriving home will be easier with one less secret to carry. But there is another part of the question hovering between us which I need to settle so I grab it out of the air and challenge you: Do you still want it?

I do. But I don't want it to live in prison.

Your answer satisfies me. When you are gone I sit thinking about this web that we have spun around ourselves. I am light from your loving and the ease of our nakedness yet I see you driving home heavy with guilt and I remember the confession you made when you were kneeling between my legs in that triangle of space you call sacred. You spoke with reverence and

reluctance as if compelled to share this thing against your will. You said you always think of me like this on my back my legs wide apart my cunt dripping crimson for you. Even when you are with other women. *Always* when you are with other women. You said you've tried you've really tried to get the image out of your head but you can't. And then I asked you why would you want to do this and you shifted your gaze from me to the floor and before you spoke I saw the answer scurrying across your face:

Because it controls me.

The puzzle is too big. I give up trying to find the matching pieces and dip my hand into the bag of magazines. And pull out a gruesome little surprise: A badly illustrated and uninspiring sex manual called *Better Sex* by Doctor Paul. The surprise is not the book itself but the handwritten message inside from a recently discarded lover - the one who metamorphosed into the spiderwoman. She embellishes her spidery script with a rash of exclamation marks and girlish crosses and little pink hearts as she feverishly declares her love for you the man who only a few hours ago tenderly wiped his semen off my chin.

I wonder at your timing. Could such a grisly find be an accident? Is it a subliminal stab of defiance from the man whose dreams and fantasies I dominate? Are you telling me that even while the bodies of other women fail to obliterate my image in your head the image of *your* body continues to live in *their* heads?

And if I am the one who dominates your dreams - who am I really? Am I the woman or am I the other woman?

A week later I find you in my studio staring at the sculpture. I ask you if you want to take it home.

You shake your head.

Okay...so.. you don't want the sculpture now but what about your pile of porn in the bag?

You shrug. Don't need them anymore. Dump them. Burn them.

You sound adamant. I am impressed. I check out your face. Looking for question marks. I find none. I say:

Okay...We could watch all that engorged flesh sizzle and curl in the flames you could solemnly swear never to keep secrets from me ever again we could dance naked round the fire we could devour each other in the firelight -

We could. I suppose.

Now you are on guard. Your move is predictable: You think I am trying to control you. It's okay for *you* to tell me that you have no secrets from me but if *I* ask for such a thing you start to squirm.

Our dance of intimacy twists and turns and circles back to the magazines in the bag. Why can't I see what you see in them? Hauling them out I discover that your porn pile is still fat. A significant collection reflecting a not insignificant interest. Neither is the stuff between the covers lightweight I conclude as I flip through glossy pages awash with a variety of digitally and silicone-enhanced sexually aroused flesh. Oh yes. Hard-core porn is a very *very* serious business. I am fascinated by this theatre of the obscene where the medium is so much a part of the message. All that desperate gloss all that expensive packaging all that earnest dripping and swelling and straining all those endless close-ups of engorged genitals and orifices primed for penetration all those gleaming bodies engaged in solos duets multiples with whoever wherever whatever all that limitless perversion. Sodomy. Fellatio. Cunnilingus. Pederasty. Father why do these words sound so

nasty?

I'm sure you can find something in there to amuse you.

You toss the comment at me and head for the door to have a smoke. This is my cue to mention Dr. Paul and the fluffy red hearts but I decide they're hardly worth the trouble so I tell you instead that I am not amused. Or aroused. By any of it. But neither am I completely indifferent. You watch me from the verandah door while you light up and inhale and then you tell me again that pornography explores the wild animal in us and I say that's bullshit. Animals in the wild have grace and beauty and dignity they don't do group fucks in all orifices at the same time and how long have we been having this debate anyway?

Oh..about ten years.

Mm. So I thought.

But those things happen in your fantasies don't they?

Maybe. Maybe. But I'm not made of plastic and silicone. I don't wear stiletto heels and bright red lips and three inch fingernails and shave my pubic hair. I am not a blown-up doll waiting to be penetrated. My fantasies are like poems I write on my skin.

Now you're using your halo as a fucking fig leaf.

My halo?

You're covering your animal instincts with poetry.

Oh shit...perhaps I am. But you know how much I *hate* it when you strip the poetry from my fantasies. When you feed them back to me through that hard male filter. You steal the feminine you take the magic you pare it down until there's nothing left but aroused genitalia. You push me somewhere I don't want to go.

But my delicious dilemma you do want to go there. You know you do.

No I don't.

Oh yes you do.

On winter afternoons the sun floods my studio. Sometimes when I am alone at home I peel off all my clothes and luxuriate in the warmth on my bare skin as I work. Sometimes when the work is slow I indulge myself further I abandon my brush and pleasure myself on the sunny couch.

You know that my naked body responds to the sun in the same way as it does to the warmth of your gaze. You know all my intimate rhythms. I know when you are most likely to call.

The phone rings at precisely 3 p.m. I let it ring. I imagine you frowning as my answering machine clicks into gear. Hear you clearing your throat. Composing your message and delivering it coolly. Careful not to let any trace of frustration sour your tone.

A year ago I would have had the phone in my ear before the second ring. Listening for the pause that always precipitated your *hello*. Panting at the honey in your voice. Oh yes I was quite content to be your everready fuckdolly. On the phone. In the mountains. In the carpark. On the beach. Wherever. Whenever. Whatever you suggested. I seldom failed to oblige.

No.

I'll wait for a few hours before replying. Maybe even a few days if I can. I should wait a few weeks. Or not respond at all. Ever again. Let you agonize let you fantasize. I owe you nothing. Less than nothing. What am I to you really? I'm hardly your lover. Lovers find more time to be with each other. Lovers do things for each other. Lovers spoil each other. Lovers are so-called because they love each other. They don't just fuck and fiddle and fantasize.

Lovers are expensive. Fuckdollies are cheap. They cost nothing more than the price of a phone call. Actually less. You're phoning from work. Your fix costs you nothing.

You are everything and nothing to me you once said. The words sounded grand. I wanted to ask what they meant but something prevented me from disturbing their grandness. Instead I wondered. Everything in the heat of the moment - nothing in all the days and weeks inbetween?

We've stolen moments from the mundane and are gulping them greedily walking down the path from the car park to the beach. I am drawn to the graffiti galloping across the toilet wall I read it to you: *Rainbow coloured vowels and consonants polished from early till now*. The words jump around in my head until they meet a giant rock on the beach. I stand before it silently breathing in its contented completeness. Delighted by the play of colours clay ochre earth and sand. And you wait. Understanding my reverence for such things.

We find a sheltered spot behind the dunes and sit on the warm sand facing the ocean. You lift the hair out of my face and say to my profile: That cock-centred fantasy you sent me last week. Tell it to me again. Please.

I watch the sand dribble through my fingers onto your overdressed feet. Your new black leather work shoes are faintly absurd on the bright white beach.

I don't know. It's ...kind of embarrassing.

You are looking at me with awe. You say: It's so fucking erotic to know that you still think of yourself as such a good girl. That you're amazed at the raw sexiness of your own fantasies.

Yes. Well. Girls are made of sugar and spice and all things nice. Nobody gave us permission to cross the floor and eat snails and puppy dog tails.

What about Erica Jong and Nancy Friday?

I guess I discovered them a bit late. The rules were laid down long before.

The rules. We drowned in those rules. And then I tell you about those little candyfloss princesses parading down the path:

When I was about four my fat granny made us all matching dresses. Mine was yellow my big sister's pink and my little sister's was blue. These were no ordinary anywhere anytime dresses. These were fancy frilly creamcake concoctions made up of cascading layers of crêpe like froth. Oh yes. My fat granny was a fine needlewoman. She didn't only dress *us* up as fairy princesses she did the same for our dolls. And one day my father filmed us all marching down the path towards the dolls house. Three little women and their babies showing off Granny's glorious candyfloss concoctions. Matching pink yellow and blue satin ribbons bobbing in six carefully coifed heads of hair we marched along the road into the house that daddy built. And you know what? In the movie I'm scowling. I couldn't wait to take off that dress.

You laugh a huge belly laugh. Well my delicious dilemma you say wiping your eyes you have no idea how glad I am that you've learnt how to break the rules and take off the dress. You lift my skirt up over my knees and fold it back across my thighs like a researcher about to survey the territory he has uncovered and you say: So now that you're all grown up and no longer starring in your daddy's movie you can tell me the cock-centred fantasy again.

Shit. You don't give up do you? You can go back and read it on your computer screen.

I can't. I deleted it.

I'll send it again. You can read it tomorrow.

The next day I resend.

Ten minutes later the phone rings. You sound breathless.

Tell me. I need to know.

What?

Is this a fantasy that *really* turns you on - all those unleashed cocks filling your hands mouth and anus and all the dripping and throbbing and *all* of that? It's... *so fucking raw and delicious*. Is this written for me for what you think I want to hear or is it really *your* fantasy that you are sharing with me?

This isn't a game. You really need to know.

I answer slowly. Truthfully. I know it's what you want. But it is my fantasy. Makes me crazy. Turns me inside out and upside down.

The line goes quiet.

Then: Oh fuck. I can't..describe...how good that makes me feel.

We pass through the airport security check. You collect your bag from the conveyor belt while I wait for mine to be coughed up through the small black curtain. The official chats easily to you. I suspect that like many others he is embarrassed by your beauty yet he can't ignore it and he feels compelled to engage with it so he laughs and he says don't leave your wife behind.

Your smile is effortless and glorious you don't miss a beat you say she's not my wife she's my partner and I long to enlighten the man I want to say but I *was* his wife and yes he *did* leave her behind and do you know what he

did? He did more than that he burned her and out of her ashes he created something else.

A playmate to skip across the border with.

I slide behind the wheel. Kick off my sandals and extend my bare leg into your lap. Settling into my favourite position of demand and surrender. An offering you can't refuse. Black velvet skirt riding up milk-white thighs and the smell of my naked sex teasing your nostrils. Your hand resting lightly on my foot. Teasing my toes. A hot tide of inevitability filling the confined space. Desire bursting the boundaries of language.

We slip away from the everyday we hum down the highway and the busy work week spills easily off our tongues. The houses thin out until finally the iridescent mauve of the sea bursts into view and we are cradled between ocean and mountain and the silence in the car is soft and warm and the dusk washes the world in possibility.

When you speak your words are almost weightless. They float above the softness.

It's like being in a cocoon.

Yes.

And two days is just right. More than that and the cocoon will be endangered. Fragments of that other world will want to intrude.

Yes.

It's late when we pull into the wooded campsite. Away from the city the night sings in a different key. The trees are blue-black smudges on a purple canvas the secluded sites are leafy chambers in a shadowy theatre the dark

is so much more than the absence of light. You sit me down in your camping chair and pour my wine into the plastic yellow and blue striped glass we bought at the convenience store on the way and the ocean roars its presence on the other side of the dunes. I watch you nurse the fire into life in the stone alcove at my feet and then carry the bulky bag out of the car and transform its contents into our humble shelter for the night. As you work you talk about the industry you are in you are so tired of the endless pressure to produce you want to get away from it all start something new something that will not punish you so. You confess your need to talk to me to listen to me you tell me I'm the only one you can say everything to and that its not just sex that you want. Then you feed me crunchy chicken wings from the fire and you call me your woman.

Aah yes.

Do we play these games to find ourselves or to lose ourselves? Does it matter as long as we are content?

I baked it in the sculpture I coaxed out of clay. We buried it in the movie we spun out of ourselves. We hid it in each erotic frame. We lost it in every enchanted game. We were too scared to call it by its given name.

The word was unsaid for nearly seven years. Until now without warning the confession spills out of you and the air between us is startled by its innocence.

But of course I love you.

The rhythmic crunch of your footfall on the gravel signals your arrival before your green and blue running jacket bobs suddenly into view against the curves and bulges of the ancient mountains. The landscape suits you.

You flow though it with ease.

I'm smiling.

I wait for you in the car park. It's Saturday morning and you're training for another of those ultra marathon endurance feats which stretch the body to its limits and beyond. All that relentless pounding across the mountains. Running through the night. Punishing yourself for 160 gruelling kilometres. A few days ago I asked you how do you do it? Now you're easing your backpack off your shoulders and you're giving me the answer as if you've just plucked it out of the clean mountain air.

I learnt how to do this when I was a child.

What do you mean?

There was nowhere else to go. Don't you see? My life was a constant struggle. I had to carry on. It's what I know best.

You learnt how to push through the pain. To be comfortable in a place of perpetual discomfort.

Yes.

But these mountains. They give you more don't they?

You stare out at the thickly folded hills. I watch the reflection of the clouds moving across your eyes. I notice that the years are finally beginning to show in your face and that your voice is light but your words are not.

Sometimes I think I have no other home.

Memories cling to the walls. They jump out at me without warning. They gather dust in the empty spaces that have remained shut since the day you moved out of my home.

I open the drawer that once housed your neatly rolled up sockballs and a growing bed of copper coins and find that you emptied out the socks but

didn't bother with the coins that your daughter loved to ferret out. You used to shake the loose change out of your wallet into the drawer and in time she would bounce in and scoop out her loot so that her next collection would have space to multiply. Now the forgotten coins are coated in grime.

I stare at those grimy coins. I am unable to decide what to do with them so I close the drawer and walk down the passage and out into the sunshine. I am greeted by the garden that we made together and the creeper that you planted the creeper that I love and fear because it grows so furiously. It creeps up and up the wooden fence nothing can stop it spreading and sprouting and the more it spreads and the further it creeps the more I ache and the more I yearn for the cocoon of your homecoming hug and the future that was stolen from us.

Oh you were restless you were rootless you said it was as if you never had a home but you put down roots in my garden and the growth that has sprung from those roots is unstoppable.

My friends say I should move. Start again. Go someplace else. Go where your scent no longer lingers.

Where would I go? This coastal city breathes our lovemaking from every pore. I could drive for hours in all directions and your scent would still linger.

I don't want to go. I want to stay where I can still smell you. I want to build monuments to our madness. Shrines at every sacred site. Swollen vaginas carved out of sunny rock and river clay. Proud stone phalluses growing out of each and every forest floor mountain ledge and ivory beach and I will not forget all those car parks restaurants highways and byways where we laughed and played and spilled our lust. And alongside each one I will place a large sign with the words:

WE ARE MEANT TO MAKE POETRY OUT OF OUR PATHOLOGIES.

FOURTEEN

The legs are protruding out of the bushes onto the gravel path.

I have been walking for an hour with the stillness of the mountains cradling my soul when I come across the alien limbs. They wrench me out of tranquillity and demand that I stop and look. I look and I look and my heart skips a beat and the memory of the bloated apparition on the beach leaps into my head and my eyes send messages to my brain which it cannot decipher. I bend down and cautiously give the left foot a sharp tug.

A life-size plastic doll bounces awkwardly into the path.

Her skin is a delicate rose-pink colour and she is shamelessly bald and somewhat grubby. Her most prominent features are her two hungry mouths - one on her face and another between her legs. They are both blood red and shaped like perfect Os. Her permanently erect nipples are the same startling crimson and are perched like frozen cherries on the tips of her breasts. But her synthetic beauty has one tragic flaw. She appears to have been punched in the stomach. Her middle goes in rather than out - unlike the rest of her.

I locate the plugs on the back of her neck and inside her thigh and deflate her as much as I can. I stuff her into my backpack and resume my walk up the mountain.

Later I lay her out on my bed and begin to reinflate her but her belly remains stubbornly concave. I examine her carefully and discover a few punctures in her neck. I patch up her wounds with band aid and try again but still her stomach refuses to swell up like the rest of her. I examine her more carefully and find another tiny cut in her lower back and apply another patch. Now I am convinced there are no more leaks but after another futile attempt her lower torso is still deformed and I am light-headed from all the

air I am forcing out of my lungs and I know I am crazy trying to salvage a plastic fuckslut for you.

What is that? What are you doing?

I remove my head from between her legs and confront my daughter at the door. I tell her it's a blow-up doll for an art project. She frowns and wrinkles her nose and contemplates her mother's strangeness. Then she says: I hope you washed it.

Oh of course. Of course I washed it.

She disappears down the passage and into her room. Shame clogs up my throat and congeals in my gut. Did I wash it? I found it in the dirt so I must have done but I don't remember washing it and the dirt streaks are still there and what *am* I doing with a used blow-up doll and can you get AIDS from a plastic toy? I take her into the bathroom and give her a wash. I wrap an avocado green scarf around her hairless head and tie a tassled sarong around her sagging middle and then prop her up inside the wardrobe where your clothes used to live.

As I close the door I notice a pile of newspaper cuttings on the cluttered table next to the cupboard. The article on top of the pile shows a photograph of a woman who looks like me standing next to a large mixed-media collage and the headline reads: *Woman of Substance*. I look into the eyes of the stranger in the photograph and seek in vain for her substance then I open the cupboard door and confront the woman wearing my clothes. The muted light has softened her garish features and the synthetic sheen of her contours. She looks real.

I phone you and tell you that I have found a new toy for you. My voice is creamy. Seductive.

She's waiting for you in your wardrobe.

Describe her to me. I want to know everything.

I tell you everything.

Expect me sometime in the next few days. I can't wait to meet her.

Five days have gone by. The lump of self-loathing in my stomach hardens with every day that you don't come. I am your pimp as well as your whore. I procure whatever you need to satisfy your obsessions and I do it willingly. I have lost myself in your movie. I am nothing. My nothingness increases with your absence.

I hate her.

I hate that plastic fuckslut in the wardrobe.

The lump in my stomach rises into my chest and bursts out of me in a long piercing howl. I lean against the wall and sink to the floor. The despair spills out of me in a huge shuddering wave.

Afterwards I am lighter. Cleaner.

I drag her out of the cupboard and take her into the garden to the patch of bare ground beneath the loquat tree. I place a pile of kindling on the ground and surround it with four of the ceramic garden masks that my son made all those years ago and then fetch the bag of firewood from the garage and stack the logs loosely on top of the earthenware masks. I know that the charcoal smudges will only add to their peculiar charm.

On the other side of the valley the sea is swallowing the sun. The mountains have taken on that luscious magenta glow and the wind that has been screeching through the trees for too many days and too many nights has finally surrendered to an uneasy calm. I pour myself a glass of red and fetch my fat meditation cushion and place it against the garden wall. I light a few firelighters and toss them into the mesh of kindling. By the time the

wood has begun to smoke I am on my second glass and when the flames are beginning to dance and hiss I am pouring myself a third.

Her time has come.

She lies stiffly on the grass at my side. Firelight does not flatter her. The frozen crimson O on her face has become a grotesquely animated grin. Her skin has acquired a greasy sheen. I unwrap the scarf from her hairless head and unknot the sarong from her middle then fold her into a lumpy V shape and lower her onto her pyre in a half sitting position with her back towards me.

I sit back on my cushion and watch.

She takes on a translucent glow and rises in sudden protest as the encroaching blaze laps at her buttocks and a coal black stain spreads instantly across her pink posterior. She appears to levitate for a fraction of a second before the flames leap up and devour her in a triumphant whoosh and the smell of burning plastic assaults my nostrils.

When the flames recede she is a black lace shroud congealing over the smouldering logs. Beneath her bubbling remains the embers glow and flicker through the carved out eyes of the faces guarding the sacrificial pyre. I stare into the unblinking eyes nearest me and see that my son has captured something of his own face in this mask. Full lips. Wide set eyes. Slightly flaring nostrils. The wise face of an old soul. My first born. For the past year he has been living on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean but here he is staring at me serenely through the eyes of his creation - silently blessing the ritual unfolding in his presence.

The next morning I take my mug of coffee out to the burnt out funeral pyre and poke around in the ash with a stick to unearth the hidden embers.

I plop myself down on the cushion I forgot to bring in the night before and sip my steaming coffee.

The click of the garden gate.

It's you. Strolling down the path. Lowering yourself easily onto my cushion you greet my thigh with yours and my flesh is alive and eager and hopeful as always. But my son's eyes still glow faintly before me and they hold me and they still me and I don't look at you when I speak.

You're too late.

What's that smell? What are you doing out here?

You missed her funeral.

Whose funeral?

Your plastic fuckslut.

The doll?

She had to die.

I thought you wanted me to see her.

I did.

But?

Her existence became pointless. She was a demented dream. She was *your* demented dream. Not mine.

So why did you bring her home?

To get your attention.

I'm here.

You're too late. Your fuckslut's gone. Burnt to a crisp. She got tired of feeding your dreams.

Next to me I sense the confusion brewing in your silence. Oh how I love to unravel you. To shake your certainties even just a bit. I lean back against the wall and close my eyes and listen to the wind starting up again in the

trees and when you finally toss your reply into the air I hear the woundedness biting into your voice.

So one day we're making poetry and the next day I'm demented?

Yes. That's *exactly* how it is. That's the whole fucking problem. I'm tired of being in this perpetual state of emergency. Of not knowing which story is real. So go. Let me go. Give me time to work it out. Lots of time. Give me a year at least.

A *year*. You want to cut me out of your life for a whole year?

Yes.

For the first time since you sat down beside me I dare to look at you. My cheeks are wet. You brush away my tears with the gentlest fingers then you cup my face in your hands and embrace me with your voice.

I'll always desire you. You know that don't you?

No. No I don't. There's no such thing as always.

I am shaking my head vigorously as if to halt the flow of sadness. I remove your hands from my chin and put them back in your lap and return my gaze to the ash speckled mask in front of me. Despite my tears I am strangely lucid but once again I do not look at you when I speak.

You desire me because I feed your desire. Because my desire for you makes you more of a man. A man whose body is adored and not despised. But if I stop feeding your desire it will fade away and eventually die of starvation. And then you'll go looking for someone else to feed that insatiable need.

There's nobody like you.

You're right. *I* am irreplaceable. But it's not really me that you want is it? It's me cloaked in your fantasy. You'll find someone. You'll easily find someone to wear the cloak for you.

What will you do?

Oh...For the first few weeks maybe for the first few months I'll be miserable I'll be restless I'll be dislocated and my skin will cry out for yours and I'll probably have a relapse and maybe even another and another because withdrawal from you is the hardest fucking thing in the world but I'll keep trying I'll keep trying and I'll pray to God every night to take this longing from me...and then one day I'll wake up and it'll be over.

Is that what you want?

I want to be able to choose. To be with you or without you.

FIFTEEN

You walk in and wrap yourself around me as if all those months without us were an illusion and then you sink into my ochre couch and your eyes are scanning my soul and I tell you it's good yes it's *really* good to see you. Nine months without the touch of your skin or the rise and fall of your voice and time has muted the edge of my longing. Relieving it of its need to be fed. Slowly changing from a song into its echo. Settling into a mystery that no longer needs to be solved.

Or such are the stories that I tell myself.

A gulf of silence between us now. Fourteen years distilled into a few wordless minutes and then your effortless smile lighting up your face and your oh so familiar voice reaching out to me across the gulf.

I read about the Burning Doll exhibition.

Did you? I hoped you would. Only one painting sold. But the reviews were great - the art world seems to be taking me seriously at last. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. I spilled so much of my blood and guts onto those canvases - how could they *not* take me seriously? Never been so fucking serious in my life. But do you know what the very best thing of all was....?

Tell me.

I sang. I *sang* at the opening.

You sang? Really? You used to be scared of singing in your own house. Now you're telling me that you sang to a gallery full of people?

I did. It was *magic*.

What did you sing?

Two songs. The first one was a kind of haunting sound journey - a wordless song. Something I've been working on for a while -weaving pure

sounds into melody using only my voice...one of the *most* exciting things I've ever done. The human voice is such...an incredible instrument...did you know that?

Your boyish grin spreads across your face and there's something resembling awe in your eyes when you tell me that I'm definitely *not* the quiet little creature that I was when we met. And I'm laughing and nodding and the silence is pooling again between us and across the pool the familiar tug of your flesh and your eyes so warm and intelligent and my heart remembering too much and I'm looking away and then you're asking about the other song. Was it also a melody of sounds and no words?

What? Oh no. That one had *lots* of words. It was all about a crazy couple who divorced on a serviette and then ran down to the lake and danced naked in the moonlight.

Laughter in your eyes. And more.

Sing it. Sing it for me.

Maybe...another day...Right now I want to know about you. I hear you finally got your trail running business going? More time in the mountains and less time in the office.

Yes.

I always knew you'd make your dream happen...bringing all the pieces of you together...Soon you'll be telling me you're getting married...

Oh no I won't.

Or giving up beer...

Won't be doing that either.

Good.

Good?

Mm. Being too clean doesn't suit you. Or me.

True. We'd be thoroughly miserable.

I laugh at your glum face and think how easy this is. I wipe my eyes and the laughter continues to bubble behind my words as I reply:

We certainly would. I've come to realise that people without any vices don't have any virtues either...have you noticed that? I'm also beginning to think that all these obsessions of ours might be nothing more than passionate bits of life trying to break through. And if that is the case then perhaps we should respect them. Perhaps we

You were wrong you know.

About what?

About my desire for you. It hasn't changed. It's still there.

Still...?

Across from me your body inhabits my sofa with ease but your eyes deny the languidness of your limbs and now I see it there I see it all on your face as you speak:

Yes. Yes. Most of the time I'm not even *thinking* of you. You're just there. You're...what happened to the sculpture?

Go and look. It's still there. At the bottom of the garden. Under the purple bougainvillea.

I follow you outside. You squat on your haunches below the splash of magenta leaves and study it silently.

I bend down beside you and follow your gaze. After its reconstruction I painted it with oils and applied tan shoe polish to hide the hairline cracks where the pieces joined and now the surface has weathered to look like old stone. Shades of ochre and copper and rust meet and merge across the baked clay flesh. A fine moss covers some of the woman's belly and dry leaves curl in the furrows between their limbs.

You brush away the swirls of leaves with your fingertip and murmur:

It's become more beautiful.

Yes it has. Sometimes I wonder if I had anything to do with its creation.

It's as if those lovers carved themselves out of rock billions of years ago.

You nod slowly. You turn to me as if you're about to speak but you don't. You look again at the clay couple while I rest my hand lightly on your arm and watch the rise and fall of your shoulders and say softly: In case you've forgotten – it's yours. It was your birthday present remember? I made it for you all those years ago. You could still take it home.

No...I think it belongs here with you. I can see it when I visit you - can't I? Perhaps one day....

Yes?

Perhaps one day I'll take it home. Perhaps one day I'll find a place for it in my garden.

Acknowledgement:

The phrase on page 3 'lust is awful and holy like thunder and lightning and the wind' is based on words by Joanna Field, quoted in 'Passion', edited by Helen Exley, 1996, Exley Publications, United Kingdom.