



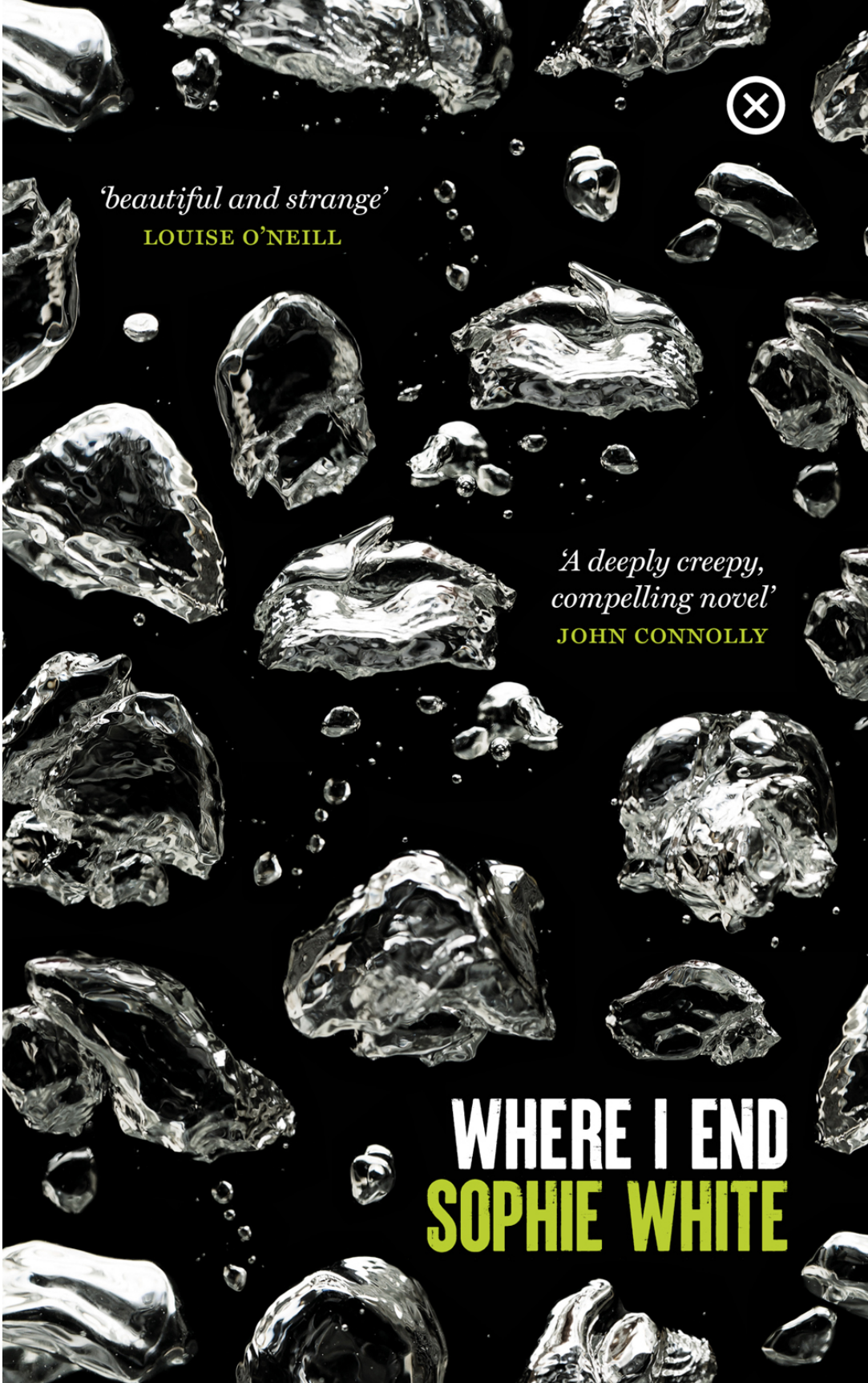
'beautiful and strange'

LOUISE O'NEILL

*'A deeply creepy,
compelling novel'*

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WHERE I END
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WHERE I END SOPHIE WHITE



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*For Jen ... who has been listening to
my stories for more than thirty years and
pretty much told me to write this book.
Thank you for everything, my pal.*

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My mother.

At night, my mother creaks. The house creaks along with her. Through our thin shared wall, I can hear the makings of my mother gurgle through her body, just like the water in the walls of the house. I hate the sound. In the daytime, it is covered, wrapped up in the radio and the wind and the low hum of the electricity. But at night, in the silence, her insides gush and she seems alive in a way that, during daylight, she does not. The gush forces thoughts of her effluent, her needs; of the things my grandmother takes care of but that I will have to do someday soon. I don't want to, which makes me feel bad. I hate her body – it's an awful thing.

Sometimes in the morning we find her in places. We never see her move. We just come upon her. Maybe she is coiled on the rug in the hall. That rug leads to the old front door – the front door that is never used. Its handle was gone from before I can remember. Without the handle, it is just a smooth rectangle of wood. The door doesn't need to be boarded up. When you reach for a handle and your hand swipes through nothing, it's as effective as any deadbolt. Just as final. My mother, heaped before the front door that is not a door, looks like a thwarted escapee.

My home.

The island is a treasure, the brochures say. Untouched. A wild place. Unspoiled. But when you live here, which hardly anybody does, it doesn't seem wild; it seems the very opposite. It seems resigned. The island slices up from the ocean, thrusting skyward like the prow of a sunken ship. At the high end, the island runs out at sheer cliffs. At the low end of the island is a broad sandy beach. The sand is grey, like iron filings. The wind pushes patterns across the surface and, if you sit for a while, it will stain you grey

and your hair and mouth will fill with shards of the beach. I've been to beaches on the Mórthír and they're not like our beach. On those beaches the sand is settled, bright and clean. It doesn't invade. It lies docile, succumbing to the sea.

I can never decide which part of the island I hate most. The cliffs are devious, they could draw you over. The beach feels less perilous, but there's a murky feeling in my stomach when I stand and look out from there. I think I can see the hidden part of the island, the part that is submerged. Under the water's surface, it runs away from me, granite slabs falling back into the black. I don't like that what I can see of the island is only a sliver of its full awful self. I don't like that the rest of the island is lurking beneath us. On the beach, I feel like I have to keep watch. I must stay vigilant. I must keep the submerged part of the island in sight. I'm looking for danger. Just like when I was little and would slip down the hall at night to the bathroom, my back pressed to the wall so that there could be nothing unseen behind me.

On the steel beach, if I'm facing the water, the rest of the island rears up behind me, poised like a dense wave. 'Behind you, behind you!' like they shrieked at the play Dada brought me to in the theatre on the Mórthír when I was little. Balding velvet seats and plastic cups of ice cream with sweet green-and-red gel. We went to the matinee so that he could put me back on the boat straight after. The island man on deck reluctantly said he'd mind me and make sure I got home. He spat at my feet all the way to keep me from getting too close. I got home.

The fishermen use the old dock, the Seancéibh, on the island's south side, but the ferry lands at the new dock just down from the beach. The new dock was built in the seventies when they still thought they could save the Old Knitting Factory. The factory wallows about a mile up from this by the side of the only real road on the island. The factory is the sole two-storey structure on the island built with the same trickle of government funding that had brought electricity to the island in the fifties. The outsiders were oddly fixated on 'preserving' the island's ways – the realities they clearly didn't know the half of. The Knitting Factory was foisted on the community

to, as they said, ‘create employment and protect the island’s crafting traditions and way of life’. ‘Gobshites,’ my grandmother belched out roughly whenever the subject came up. The project, like the building, sagged – its stucco walls are stamped with mingy windows topped with a roof half-gnawed by the elements, giving it a defeated expression. The new dock was supposed to make transport of the famous blankets and geansaís easier. Still, the factory died anyway. Producing the island exports was too arduous to justify. No one could pay island hands enough to keep them from turning to other things. Fishing is the main work now. And passing the hours till these boats come in and the heads are counted.

If I stand on the steel-sand beach for a while, eventually an easterly wind will probably rush me back up our sawtooth island towards the high ledge where the land ends. In between is two miles of stone walls, punched into the island rock like rivets. The walls run in every direction, but there’s no pattern or logic to them. They’re built from shards of the limestone that breaks off the island, wedged upright like teeth. The walls have no cement but never topple despite the steep angle of our island or the unrelenting wind and sheet rain that bombards us.

Among the walls are houses dotted and, in one spot at the island’s halfway mark, several small buildings have clumped at the end of the island road: the pub, the shop that doubles as the post office, the church – a simple structure. Inside, the small room is scattered with fold-up chairs. The tentative priest comes from the mainland once a month to do little more than rearrange his collapsed chairs. The islanders are tolerant of him, but both sides know his visits are for box-ticking alone. The bishop dispatches him to sell their stories, but the islanders know the sea is God. They know that religion is a pathetic performance, a plea for clemency by lost people. The sea laughs at such pleading. The Seancéibh is just a little way down from here. Wherever you are on the island, the water is always close.

From the little rash of dwellings, the island starts to thrust up more steeply. The vertical rock sides of the north and south edges drip water at low tide as though, instead of the ocean only receding, the island’s underside is rising. The long, pale grasses that reach up between the island’s

cracks grow in the direction of the back of the island, as though combed through. They remind me of her hair. The back edge of the island is so high above the rest that the edge cannot be seen until you climb all the way up there. No one does though. The islanders prefer to look the other way, eastward toward the Mórthír. They prefer to pretend that the edge doesn't exist, in case a fixation takes hold of them and they are drawn up there – it's happened before. The last house before the edge is our house.

My house.

I don't understand my house. It's never been explained to me. From the outside it is backwards. Circle it and you'll see. It once faced the rest of the island. At some point, the front door and front windows looked down at the walls and the far beach, at the Seancéibh and our neighbours. Faint traces of old decoration can be found. The relic of a hanging basket sways up to the right of where the door was. A barrel to the left held plants. Now the hollow of the flaking door frame and the squares of the windows are stacked with the same blades of serrated limestone that make up the island walls. They are pressed and slotted in so tightly that the work of forcing each fragment into place must've been gruelling. Who did it? Did their hands bloody and bruise at the task? The gaze of the house is now unnerving. It has been gagged, the eyes and mouth stuffed shut with the stacked splintered rock. The straight-edged lines are steely stitches that have sewn our house closed. Inside is worse.

1.

The decision to end this thing comes on slowly, like light filling a room after a fathomless night. It began like this:

In my bed, the first sound of the morning tears the silence and finds me. It's the hinges of her bed, they pierce the bare rooms of the house with a quiet but sustained whine. High pitched, insistent, it's the opening of another blank day. Even from the next room, the creaking breaches my body. It slices through my chest and down my upper arms, disturbing me and bringing me back from the pleasant nothing of sleep. The creak scrapes and cries and I am returned to myself, fully (unfortunately)

alive again.

After the freedom of sleep, I am once more confined to my life. The hideous animal squealing is the hoisting of her bed. On the other side of the wall, the ropes falter, agonising inch by inch along the timber beam just under the ceiling in her room next door. The hinges bawl.

When my grandmother pauses in her work to regrip the rope, the creak quiets and I can hear her panting. Pulling the thing in the bed up into position and winding her back down at night bookends our every day.

I know I must help my grandmother but walking to the next room every morning feels like a descent. I slide into my hole, a hole I will spend the day trying to emerge from. Still, it has to be done. The consequences of neglect are as bad for us as they are for her. Neglect only piles more jobs on.

‘Tamallín,’ I call to my grandmother. ‘I’m coming.’ Feet on floor and I’m up. I hurry to the hall, frigid in the morning, and then into its room. Móraí, as I call my grandmother, is standing hunched at the head of the bed, straining to hold the rope down against the pull of gravity. I join her there and grip high on the rope. With two hands, I pull down hard so that she can secure the loop, tied at the end many years ago, around a hook driven into the floor – presumably around the same time. I’ve always been very careful of the rope ever since the day when I was eight and I loosened my grip just the teensiest bit. The tough old rope shot through my hands, the head of the bed slammed down and her head banged directly onto the hard timber. At the time we used to take the pillows off while hoisting as they sometimes became wedged in the angle of the bed as it rose. We don’t anymore. That time, a rivulet of blood had run from under her head and over the edge of the bedframe. Móraí had cursed and stepped around the blood to twist the bed-thing’s head and check the wound. It wasn’t until I had reached for the rope to get back into position that I noticed my own blood wetting my hands. My palms were shredded. I don’t remember any pain, just a shock at seeing it. I was used to her blood by then but had never seen my own. For a few weeks after that, I had bandages on my hands and was cautious with the hoisting. We scrubbed her blood away from the floor though my blood is still on one small stretch of the rope, aged brown and slight. It would only be noticeable to us.

For me, the rope, the loop and the hook have been there my whole life, but I suppose they haven’t been there forever. I suppose Móraí and Dada, one day, took stock of where things were going with the bed-thing and had decided permanent fixtures were needed for a permanent problem.

With the rope secured in position, I must now look at her. I busy myself adjusting the pillows on the top half of the bed, the half we have just raised. I can see the top of her head. Her scabby hair, her teeth and her toenails are all the same uncolour: leached of pigment. From this angle, I cannot see the worst of her face – only a jut of cheekbone and the stretched cheek falling away below. Her mouth always hangs a bit open unless we tie it closed, which we often do to make her more tolerable. I smooth the edge of the

pillow, careful to skirt the strands of hair that have strayed across it. I'll look at her in a minute, I resolve. It takes effort, some days more than others.

Móraí is already at the foot of the bed rearranging the blankets and nodding up at her daughter-in-law in her worn-in ritual of morning greeting. 'Lá breá atá ann inniú.' Móraí does the weather first as if today is the day the thing might be coaxed from the bed with this news that the morning is good outside. 'Agus bhí oíche cúin agat aréir.'

Móraí tells her that she's had a quiet night every day regardless of what has gone on. The nights are not always uneventful but they are quiet; we never hear the bed-thing move.

I inch back out of the bedroom towards the hall.

'I'll do the kettle,' I say as Móraí lifts the legs and checks the nappy. In the daytime we bring her to the toilet, but at night, lesson learned long ago before I remember, we use a nappy. I hate it. Changing her was always Móraí's job, but now that I am older, nearly twenty, it is becoming obscene to just stand and watch my grandmother grapple with the heavy dead limbs.

Now most days, I bend the bed-thing's knees up and watch Móraí crouch and fiddle below. Móraí has crouched between the legs of half the women on the island. Before I was born, she was the midwife and the first to handle each new baby to join the island. I know I was the last slippery baby she caught and set loose with a clamp and scissors, but I don't know why I was the last. She says she wasn't needed anymore but there's been mishaps since then. A baby was born out in a skiff halfway to the Mórthír and was nearly dead from the cold when they got there. Other women took up the job on the island after that, but more accidents followed like a run of cursed luck, meaning now mothers leave for the mainland far in advance of their due dates and stay there until the baby comes.

'Why won't they call you?' I persist each time a young woman whose baby has ripened leaves, hitching a ride with the fishermen.

'They don't need me anymore,' she repeats. They don't want me anymore, is what I know she really means. They don't want any of us.

(They've never wanted me)

I didn't know it for a long time, but it is a bizarre thing to only ever be ignored or stared at. When I go about the island, the children stare with wide eyes and black gormless mouths. The adults do the opposite; they don't look at all. They glimpse me coming, sometimes just in the corner of their eyes and they turn away with great force. Once it was raining hard down by the Seancéibh and I was under the hood of the green wax jacket Dada keeps on the island. I could see Reeney Roche coming towards me. It was rare that islanders would come as close, and I was able to see the bread and tins she was carrying through the plastic carrier bag hanging by her side. Getting up so close meant I could examine her in detail.

The islanders all share a similar look, the result of genetic material passed back and forth for so many generations – it has distilled into a distinct, unpleasant appearance. Móraí has it too. Me, less so as my mother is from the outside; Dada is the same as me – a little watered down because his father was also a mainlander.

The island people are all cowed and crumbling, as though parts of the island have become dislodged and are moving about the place. Their heads are lumpen. At the front, eyes, nose and mouth are clustered together, huddled in the centre of the face. The chin and jaw reaches forward, jutting like the rocky outcrops that stretch into the water at the lower end of the island. Their chalky grey surface suggests no rush of life within. If I chipped at one, I imagine the organs would hang inside the hollow, fossilised. Even the children of the island are calcified. Their cries and laughter die in their throats.

Reeney Roche's eyes were fixed on the ground in front of her, so it wasn't till we each reached either end of a large puddle and our eyes met in the water that she realised who was standing six feet in front of her. She reeled back, spitting. Her eyes bulged and snapped away from me so fast that I wondered if she felt a queasy pull at the back of her eyeballs.

I tried on the smile Móraí had me practise from time to time but it was pointless. Reeney had already turned around and was streaking back the way she'd come. I stomped back up the shale road that eventually leads to our house. I didn't mind that Reeney had fled. I was in a black mood because my lips were stinging where my sudden smile had split the papery skin.

When I was younger, I didn't realise that there was any other way people might respond to the sight of me. Then I went to the mainland for the first time. I was going to see the special doctor and we had to walk to his office from the port. I was feeling sick and my guts stirred every time I thought of what was going to happen. I was eight and I thought from the snippets I'd heard between Móraí and Dada that this doctor was going to look inside my head and would be able to read my mind. I churned with the idea. Would he know what I'd done with the cats? Would he sense how much I'd liked it? The weight of their bodies leaving my hands. The helpless creatures flung up, their dark bodies splayed against the grey sky. Would he know how I felt about what was in the bed? I resolved to try and empty my mind. I imagined cleaving my head open, hunching forward and tipping the whole awful soup out and into the street before he could reach in and feel blindly, combing out strings of grim things tangled in his fingers like viscera.

In the end, the doctor learned nothing on that trip. I barely spoke to him. But *I* learned something.

I learned that not everyone stares and not everyone flees. Out on the streets after the appointment was over, I felt calmer and began to notice what was around me. The town was ordered. On the island, there's one road of tarmac for the handful of cars. This road runs up the middle of the low half of the island. The rest of the roads spider out from this smooth black artery. All the other roads are unpaved and unruly, they rise up and fall off in duet with the contours of the island. They've been worn in by feet over many years. Some lead to cottages and livestock, fields and allotments. Some lead straight off the sides of the island. The roads have a streak of grass down the centre and smashed shaly rock on either side. The oldest

ones are gouged so deep in the land that you can't see over the high sides. It's easy to get confused and be spat out at the end to an unexpected drop.

The road up to our house is the last one on the island and our house is the last outpost before the land ends. Our little road is barely distinguishable from the wind-blown fields on either side – no one but us walks it, so no track is worn. The route remains scabbed over with scrub and stubborn boulders parked here and there. Because the ground is starting to tilt upwards here, the fields are scoured with wind and no one puts their animals up here. We don't have any animals to look after, except of course for the obvious one. Though it's funny: we do sometimes find her out in the fields, sprawled in the damp of grey mornings.

In the town on the mainland, the roads ran parallel and perpendicular with a compelling uniformity. The buildings looked too precise to have been made by humans. The way the people moved was different too. They were assured and focused.

To move from place to place, the islanders don't take steps as such, instead a foot, curled and tensed, will slide forward from under them and then the second will follow. Their feet cling to the earth as though relinquishing their grip on the land is dangerous. On the mainland, the people's eyes glanced off me with indifference. Sweet, incredible, hitherto unimaginable indifference. It made my return harder. It made my exclusion harder to deny. The contrast meant that over time, my long-held hurt began to be replaced with something altogether more uncomfortable. The Something frightened me. I didn't learn the word for it for a long time.

2.

In the kitchen, I fill the kettle and put it on the glowing coil of the hob. On the ring behind goes the pot with oats and milk. The room is freezing despite the clear May day declaring itself outside. It's always cold in here because the wall where the sink, counters and bins are lined up is the stone wall of the cottage. All the other walls of the house are covered with scrappy insulation and timber boards and this one was too but when they had to put the thing to bed forever, this wall was plundered for timber to make the opposable bed and adjustable railings. 'We couldn't just get a handyman to come and build it,' Móraí explained tersely when I asked one day. No one can come up here.

Now without any cladding the wall is a conductor of cold. It is made of a jumble of stones, the smallest ones are like fists and the largest are the size of heads. Like all the stone walls that crisscross the island, they were stacked many hundreds of years ago and have never budged. There's no cement or supporting structure. The wind wheezes through the wall non-stop. In the morning, this room is so dark that the individual stones recede, overtaken by the light coming around them. Instead of my eyes latching to the stones, I see the huge, erratic web of their absence glowing, filling the whole wall. The rest of the room is normal, the floor is curling tile-effect lino and there's laundry on a rickety drying rack flanked by two electric heaters. In the sink, plates are slicked with grey from last night's stew. Tucked between two rocks in the wall above the sink is a small key. It's such a tiny crack that, whenever Dada is here, he has to ask me or Móraí to get it.

I slip a finger in between the dry gap and coax the key out. Above the toaster to the right of the hob there is just one hint of the thing next door. A small press I must stretch to reach. It is locked at all times and I must get up on my tiptoes to carefully insert the key and unlatch the little door. I swing it open. Inside is every sharp thing. The knives, the scissors, Dada's razor, the screwdriver, the corkscrew, even the pencils and pens. More things are added every time she finds a novel, dangerous use for something. I was tiny when this cupboard was instated. I don't know precisely what went on with the knives but I know what she did with the screwdriver. I select the serrated knife and I saw slices off the soda loaf, propping them carefully in the toaster – it can be crumbly.

Every day we make a loaf. The less we must visit the shop, the better. Móraí usually weighs out the dry ingredients last thing at night and I bake it in the morning. The heavy blue bowl with wholemeal flour, ground oats, baking soda and salt rests beside the toaster. My hands are so practised, I've poured in soured milk and cream without conscious thought. I bring the new loaf together, slop it into its tin and lash it in the oven in the time it takes for the toast to pop.

Móraí is sighing next door. Maybe the nappy. I shudder. I pause to listen. I can hear shoving and her grunt of exertion. I should go in. I'm nineteen now and, as they keep saying, in another few days, it's going to be me alone in this. Móraí is going to be working at the new museum all summer and I will be on my own here Wednesday to Sunday. The new museum is part of the mainland's big plan for the island. 'You're a time warp!' they boom. 'A slice of old island life perfectly preserved.' It's quite a condescending plan.

They came to the Old Knitting Factory last spring and held an open meeting there. The islanders shuffled wearily along. Móraí was there because she used to work a few hours at the factory each week before it shut. The idea was the usual. The island, if it were to persist in being so useless to the mainland, must earn its keep in tourism. When the perky team learned that Móraí was one of the oldest islanders, that she'd delivered half

the people in the room and that her English was good, they were beside themselves. She was to be their go-between.

Móraí laughed about it later. The English she speaks is because of the outsiders she brought into the island: my dead grandfather and then, through my father, my silent mother. Those outsiders are why the island people avoid us, and our foreign words give them further evidence of our treachery. The museum is a cog in a bigger machine. The ferry – really no more than a small boat – has run for the past ten years. Tourists have come to the island and found nothing to do here. If the ferry is to keep bringing people with their money, they will need something to spend it on. In the summers, the ferry always runs morning and evening, depositing uncertain tourists on the rock and collecting the ones who've passed the day, smiling into the wind and wondering at the dread blooming inside them.

This dread and the wind and salt will eat their tourist machine eventually, Móraí predicts.

The kettle boils and I make the tea; I'm glad to be too busy to check if I'm needed. On the table, the oilcloth is permanently tacky to the touch and resists all cleaning. I put out plates and knives and jam and butter. I hurry back to the stove to stir the porridge. It's ready and I scrape it into a bowl. It will cool while we eat. We can't give it to the bed-thing too hot because we won't know that it's too hot.

'It's ready,' I call, sliding into my seat with my back to the wheezing wall. Móraí joins me, also sitting with her back to the wall. 'She was a bit wet,' Móraí tells me as if I asked or gave any hint that I wanted to know. We'll change her after we eat.

Dada is coming in tomorrow. It's the last Friday of the month, which is his customary visit. He stays precisely twenty-four hours. He eats three meals with us – dinner, breakfast, lunch – he sits inside with the thing for a bit, counts out cash to leave in the little dresser drawer, and then he goes. I hate the meals during his visits because on these days we have to haul her out of

her room and prop her in her chair. We pretend we always keep her there in the corner of the kitchen at lunch and dinner. But the truth is we don't. We don't let Dada know this. After apple tart we tilt her back from the table, take the chair by the back and legs and wearily stretch her to the sitting room – a mausoleum of a place we only sit in with Dada once a month. We drape a finely knit shawl of cotton and mohair over the torso so the straps tying it to the chair aren't visible. Preparations for Dada's visit begin the day before: today. We will wash the thing and dry the thing. New clothes, fresh sheets. We'll brush its hair and brush its teeth. We do the bath every Thursday but on a Thursday before Dada comes, we take extra time.

I butter my toast and spread it with jam. The salt and sweet and fat is delicious. On the back of my neck the wheezing of the wall combs through the tiny hairs, coaxing them up. I put my ear to the wind, trying to discern anything murmuring beneath the drone but nothing today.

3.

After breakfast, I bring the porridge in to her. I'll feed her upright in the bed and then she'll go into her chair. The bed hinges at her waist and tilts her so upright that you'd maybe think for a moment that she might speak. She doesn't speak; I've never heard her voice. I stand to her right at the bedside. The rail that runs alongside her legs can drop down. I could sit on the bed's edge but I don't bother. Sitting would be loving and this is transactional – a chore.

When I was little this bed was my domain as much as hers. I'd clamber up and sit on the edge, little legs dangling in space just like over the cliffs at the back. Back then I willed her to move or speak. I rubbed my face in her hair and put my arms around her stiff, intractable body. I pulled her unwilling arms around me. She was an island and I was trying to claim her. Eventually the trying started to hurt me. The trying made my chest cramp and my heart dreary. After a while, the trying hurt more than not trying and so I stopped. I don't know what I was looking for exactly. I was trying to feed a need I couldn't name. It was a hunger in my arms. It was something I'd never seen close-up. The glimpses I'd seen of other mothers on the island hinted at the existence of an entire language I didn't know. A dialect of unthinking, throwaway touch: hands glancing off cheeks and lips pressing skin, stamping a message. Island mothers outside the shop reached for their children and their children shook them off with impatience, sure in the knowledge that the mother was always at their back ready to lay loving hands.

Nothing ever reaches for me. Móraí's hands are practical. They carry out tasks. Even when I'm sick, she tests my forehead with the back of her

arm. When I sit in the bed-thing's room, I sometimes imagine that the little girl is still here in the room with us, forever pressing her cheek to the bed-thing, curling against it, placing its hands on her face. And nothing.

So no, I don't sit on the bed. Her head is turned fully away from me, so I pull it around by the jaw to face me. Its eyes are open but they're trained downwards, skittering. It never looks directly at me. I give the porridge a stir to loosen it and begin to feed. It eats neatly. I never need a bib or napkin for the bed-thing. We give it things that are easy to swallow. Porridge for breakfast and a slurry of boiled meat and vegetables for lunch and dinner. Powder pudding with milk for dessert.

Feeding it is the most dangerous thing we do, says Móraí because bed-people can choke easily. Or if any food or water goes down the wrong way they can get pneumonia. The worst thing, Móraí says, is if we had to get her to a hospital. I'm not sure I understand why, though I sense it has more to do with protecting ourselves than for the good of the bed-thing. Something about the eyes of others penetrating our house and cataloguing the decay here awakens a deep shame in me. I don't really know what other houses are like, but I can tell from the little show we perform for Dada each month that things are not right here.

Her bites slow when she'd had enough. The bowl is rarely finished. I check her for mess. I keep my eyes confined to small stretches of her face at a time, taking it in piece by piece – this is a lot easier than encountering it as a whole. My micro-examination spares me the full sordid picture. Despite the corruption of the mouth that her food must contend with, not so much as a smear of porridge has been left.

4.

To wash the thing I must get it off the bed. I drop the side rail. Two leather belts hang on a nail, driven into the wall by the bed. I run one under her to loop around her upper chest and the other I shuffle under her to strap round her upper thighs. While I'm at it I unbutton her bed-dress. All the dresses have the opening at the back, running from neck to hem. I pull over the chair we use to shift it around. There's not much finesse to it. I position the chair to the side of the bed, in line with the angled end of the bed and then I reach across, grab the belts like handles and pull her towards me and onto the chair. I unbuckle and rebuckle the belts a second time, so that now they are fixing her to the chair. I tilt the chair onto its hindlegs and drag it backwards from the room. The legs have worn routes around the house. The floors are gouged with gutters made from the chair, they're the map of her world – the deepest ruts lead from her bedroom to the toilet and from her bedroom to the kitchen. The lines from the kitchen to the sitting room, on the other hand, are no more than faint claws on wood.

Through the passage we shuffle and drag. Her heels find the ruts too and are pulled in the chair's wake. I could make this journey blind; I know every notch and knot that requires a yank to pass. The smooth stretch is where tracks to kitchen and toilet merge to head straight down the hall. Then a brief adjustment at the dividing point to curve left to the kitchen or carry on straight to the toilet. The adjustment means I must lower the chair back to all four legs then get low to grip the back legs and reef them into the right divots.

Lowering the chair always causes her legs to catch awkwardly between the seat and floor. They fold in a jumble and need to be rearranged. I come

round to face her and stoop to grab each leg, my hand closes right around them, they're barely distinguishable from the wooden limbs of the chair. I pull them straight again and return to the position at the back of the chair. As I tilt the chair her legs will hinge and swing anyway, but I have to fix them because once when I didn't, her foot caught on a splinter of jutting wood and the skin tore like paper. I didn't see the blood tracking us until I had her in the bath. Móraí roared at me that time. Injuries of any type are dangerous for bed-people.

I have her in the bathroom now. The room is tiled in a queasy green, but rubber mats almost completely cover the floor. The bath is to the left and the toilet is straight ahead. The chill in the room is biting. The rimy ceramic surfaces are so cold that when I touch them I can't tell immediately if my fingers are encountering a blazing heat or ice. The ceiling of this room was dragged down years ago to expose the beams and the roof above is eaten away in parts – making this less a room and more a shaft that tunnels straight upwards to the brutal skies above the island. The thick beams overhead are how we get her washed and toileted. Hanging from the one above the bath is a pulley with a rope fed through. One end of this rope leads to a cleat that was once a part of a boat but is now fixed to the wall. The other end dangles above the edge of the bath; two woven straps attach at the end from which two sizable hooks hang. I get busy unbuckling and rebuckling her belts so that they are unfastened from the chair and looped only around her body. I coax the cotton shoulders of her dress down, bending arms and wrists where needed so I can pull the top of the bed-dress free. I feed it under her chest strap and then pull it clear of the leg strap.

Just like I only take her face in piece-by-piece, I try to regard her body only in small morsels. I scan the surface for new bruises or sores, I check the healing of older ulcers made by pressure. It all must be watched closely. While her body is really only a relic of a human, the corrosion still must be monitored. As Móraí reminds me constantly, a tiny problem untended can be fatal to us. Her folds of skin are a nuisance. Despite her seemingly lifeless petrification, opportunistic bacteria and fungi find life enough in her to breed in places where her skin pleats and gathers. I lift her breasts one at

a time to remove the small squares of cotton we've been placing there to ease the friction of skin on skin. The skin beneath is red and weeping. I'll douse it with more antiseptic after she's washed.

I uncoil the rope from the cleat on the wall. With the rope now slack, I can lead the hooks to her belts. I lay a freezing hook on the skin of her breast. Surely it must feel like being branded, but she remains slack. Eyes skitter-skittering. I relent, hook the belts and pull the rope straight up. She rises and I carefully lead the rope back around the lower arm of the cleat. I face the cleat and step back, pushing the chair to the side with my foot, so that I can stand with my back against her and guide her body backwards over the bath as I steadily lower her in. Once she's down, I unhook her, reel the hooks up and out of the way.

I tear the sticky strips off the side of the nappy that Móraí had put on and pull the front down. Even though it hasn't been on long, the smell rises. Unused bodies reek. They reek worse than the rest of us because the reek ferments in the crevasses. She is putrid. She is decaying. Between baths we swab her but we're battling a rancid tide. We push back but it comes in again. And over and over. She persists in smelling. She smells like shit and ripe fruit.

I run the taps and the bath slowly starts to fill around her. I grab a blue cloth from the stack on the shelf above the sink: blue for body, white for face. I soap the cloth and sweep it along the corrugated ridges of her chest and ribs. I scoop the cloth into the deep depressions of her clavicles. I run it over her shoulders and twist it into the hollows of her underarms. Her hands are a problem. They are worn down to nearly nothing. Through the cloth, I poke my right index finger in between what remains of her fingers. I am used to her. I am indifferent to her and yet every time I see the hands, revulsion lurches inside me. They are ragged. Only the nails on her thumbs remain. The fingers mostly end just past the knuckles. The pad of her right index finger has worn away entirely and the bone extends like a tiny pick from the flesh.

The hands are healed – if you could call it that – but every few months old wounds open like a fire reignited. Today they are OK and I move on

quickly. With the cloth, I curl my fingers round her toes, rub her shins, knees and thighs, then I pass it between her legs. I dump the cloth into a basin by the door and pull a white cloth from the stack. I kneel above the face. Deep in her sockets, her eyes dart like the nervy fish that get caught in rock pools at the shore.

Móraí has always said that the face is our biggest problem. Even if we wanted to bring her out, we can't. Maybe back at the very start they could have, but as the years have gone by and the look of her became ever more unsettling, the possibility of showing it – her – to others has become almost laughable in its derangement.

‘They’ll think we did this to her,’ she said.

(did we not?)

‘At the beginning, I thought bringing her out to be among them was too dangerous for *her*. But now it’s too dangerous for us.’ Móraí never explains a thing.

I don’t understand this and Móraí’s face closes when I ask, so I don’t bother much anymore. The answers that I have received are so obscure that they’re more maddening than having no answers at all.

The *beginning* that Móraí talks about is sometime when I was very young. I think just after my birthday. No one has told me this exactly, but when I turned twelve, I heard Dada in its room talking to it. His words were clogging in his throat and came out in staggered gasps. I have not seen many people cry, only islanders following caskets and sometimes the women of the fishermen down by the shores. Móraí might cry, but I’ve never seen it. I suppose I cried when I was younger but stopped when nothing came of it. That day when I was twelve and waiting to have my cake – we don’t have a particular day for my birthday, I only know that in July I gain a year – I heard his choked words speaking to the bed-thing.

‘As she gets older it brings it all back. I can’t bear it. The older she gets, the longer it’s been but the pain never lessens. I miss you.’

I remember feeling irked. Why would you miss her? I thought. She's there all the time but you don't come. And I am here, and you never say you miss me.

The islanders hate us but I'm not sure when this hatred took root. Móraí was born here. On the very floor of this bathroom. Her family were islanders going all the way back. The man she married was not. He came from the Mórthír. But I don't think the trouble started then. The pictures I've seen of Dada when he was a little boy are full of smiling faces: Móraí down on the grey sandy beach, her jet-black hair flying right out of the frame as she squints into the camera, pudgy-boy Dada nestled between her knees. Dada at ten, twelve, fifteen out in *his* dada's boat, hauling nets in summertime. These pictures are gathered on a high shelf barely visible unless you seek them out. I think this is a good thing. Displaying them would only make how we live now even sadder.

Even the pictures of Dada after he brought my mother to the island emanate a hopefulness that is alien to me. *These* pictures are not even on the shelf. They are in the sideboard under the curling leaves of old documents and newspapers. There's just a handful and they all look to be from the same day. They show Dada and a young woman laughing. Her hair is bone pale and she is petite but, at the time of the photo, swamped by an enormous pregnant belly. It's a belly too huge to be believed and each time I visit the image in my mind, I think I must be remembering it bigger and more monstrous than it could possibly have been. I go back to check and see that it is indeed a massive thing taking over her small body.

The questions I have tried before are simple ones:

What happened after *I* happened?

Is she sick?

Will she get better?

What was she like?

Who did this to her?

Móraí's response is to close down.

‘Ná bí ag caint ar sin,’ her mouth mutters. Her features fold inwards and I know I’ll get nothing. When, from time to time, I pleaded or begged or shouted, her face folded tighter and I invariably wore myself out against the wall of her silence.

There is a question I have never asked. On the nights that we find her far from her bed, her ragged hands reaching towards nothing, the idea prods me. Is the bed-thing trying to get away? Are *we* doing this to her?

Crouching close to the bath to begin on her face, I pinch my thumb and forefinger together inside the cloth to draw it down the edge of her cheekbone. Her face is so starved of fat, this knife-like bone is an overhang. In the shadows below, taut skin shows the hinge of her jaw and even hints of the back teeth within. Her mouth is, as ever, agape, her lips peeled. Inside is strangely arid. Her mouth is a dry well. Even though she is fed and watered often, the draft of the opening means the moisture in her mouth evaporates in minutes. Her pale tongue is dusty. Breathing is slow. It’s loud but perhaps it only seems so because of her stillness. The air creaks inwards until it catches at the top of the inhale. Deep in the back of her skull there’s a crack then nothing for a second before, with a low whistle, the breath turns and slips back out.

Lastly it’s the eyeholes. The tips of my fingers curl over the socket bone and sweep around carefully to remove any accumulations of dust, dirt or crust. Even when I perform this delicate task, her eyes don’t close. They dash from side to side. The eyes are never at rest. I have never seen the lids down. Does it sleep?

Now we are done. She has little hair to wash. Washing her hair used to make the bath twice as long – Dada loves its hair – but years ago, we cut it all off and Móraí glued and sewed the long hair, pale and tough like catgut, to a tight little mesh cap. We take it on and off now. Dada doesn’t ask about the hair though he has surely noticed. It doesn’t look quite right.

I take up the thick wedge of foam that stands upright between the end of the bath and the toilet. It is foam that was yanked from the backseat of an abandoned car years ago. It’s unpleasant to touch, slightly bristly. The tiny fibres latch to the rough skin on my hands. I drop it on the floor directly

below the pulley. I twist to loosen the rope from around the cleat behind me and then turn back to pull the hooks down again. I guide them to the belts, careful not to graze her – these hooks are rusty, and meaner than the ones above the bed. I ease my end of the rope down to create a tension to prevent the hooks from coming free. I regrip and lean back to pit my weight against gravity. I raise her like salvage from the bay. She is a wreck. The skin beneath her rib cage curves inward like a small sail filled with wind, the bones are its rigging. On the underside, fins of vertebrae descend like keels.

As she passes above the lip of the tub, the angle of the pulley causes her hull to swing against me. Despite her wasting body there is heft there and I must lean into the weight of her so I don't slip. Water falls in sheets from her over the edge of the bath and onto the foam below. Once she is steadied, I raise her some more, until she is chest-height. This makes drying easier for me and I can get all the way around and under her. The stream of water eases off until it's just a *drip drip drip*. She glistens. The dull daylight making its way down to us at the bottom of our depressed shaft tells me it's nearing midday. I have been at this nearly two hours, and I'm fed up. Time in this house is thick and slow moving; everything has long ago decelerated to match her pace. I imagine even the blood in our veins trudges.

Dealing with her takes longer without Móraí, but I have to get used to this. From tomorrow on, the museum will take Móraí away most days of this summer. I swipe my hand through the pool of water that always forms in the concave of the bed-thing's stomach. Next, I check the sores. In the bed, we turn her and turn her and turn her but it's an ongoing battle. Like rust on a boat, once the skin cracks, abrasions advance over the healthy skin with alacrity. We sluice them, we dry them. Drying her is very important as any moisture will nurture infection. We sand back the blackened necrotic skin. Occasionally it needs to be sliced out and snipped away. She remains impassive through it all. If she feels the pain, she doesn't show it.

Before me now, she hangs horizontal, head hanging backward and limbs dangling. My eyes run over her and I visit each of the current colony of wounds.

The mouldy wounds gain ground over pressure points and range in colour and texture. The majority are not so bad at the moment, just patches of redness here and there, but I take note of the locations to make sure to pad these areas when she's back in the bed. We use circles of foam and sheepskin to cushion her and spread her weight so that it isn't so concentrated on one spot.

Right now, there is a bad one on the back of her right shoulder blade that I have been eying for some time. It looks back at me unblinking. It resembles a reptile eye or at least what I know of one from the shelf of encyclopaedias in the sitting room. The edges of the sore bring it to about the size of my palm. In the middle, it's yellow, swelling with pus. This is ringed in black, fading out to scaly red scabs. At the very centre of it is a narrow, elliptical pupil where the skin is split. It's a gouge deep enough to appear totally black. The last time I saw the eye, I couldn't resist investigating how deep the fissure went. I winched her bed up so I could get behind her shoulder. I waited until Móraí went out to the veggie patch and then I got a knife. I lit a match and let the flame lick the tip until the match burned down to my fingers. Then I went and took the knife to watchful eye. I got close and gently inserted the hot end into the lizard's pupil. I almost expected the eye to blink or shut but no, I could've pressed on as far as I liked it seemed. My mother bucked a little but made no sound – she's an obedient animal. I could have pushed as deep as I wanted. I held myself in check. If the eye got worse, it'd be my problem and my problem only. I'd be the one suffering the drag of it starting to fester.

Examining it now, I see the eye is worsening and looks even more alive for it. The thing is growing and weeping and shows more sign of life than she does.

Drying her is like polishing an ancient piece of furniture – she's my antique mother. The smooth knobs of her elbows, ankles and knees come up well, but enormous care is required over other stretches. On her thighs and buttocks, back and breasts – anywhere fat should be – the skin is drum-tight and diaphanous, prone to splitting. A tiny snag and all of her could slop right out. However, even though I participate in the foul cycles of her body

every day, I can't quite believe that she has insides. If we gut her, all I can imagine is swill and rust water leaking out.

Móraí shuffles past the open door with the tool kit. 'Toilet her. You're taking too long,' she grunts without turning to look at me. I watch her navigate the mutilated floor and drop to her knees before a large divot just level with the door to my room. The bend of her body sends the breath out of her in a guttural sigh.

Before Dada's visit, we must always take care of the bed-thing's scratchings. We have perfected the method. We used to soap the bloodied wood until pink scum foamed but it never got the stain out. So now we leave the scratches until they are dried out. Then we carve them right out of the floor little by little with sandpaper and blocks of wood – sometimes a chisel. I am edgy as she takes the paper from the greasy steel box and wraps it around one of the smaller blocks. I want to do the floors, but I don't want Móraí to see this. I don't want her to wonder why.

'Your back! Móraí, I can do it,' I call through the door, my hand still steadying the docile body hanging before me.

'No. Put the thing on the toilet before there's a mess.' Móraí begins to scrub at the floor.

I finish drying the thing and start the awkward process of getting it to the toilet. Because there is only one beam for a pulley in here, I must loop an extra rope that hooks above the toilet to draw her into position above the seat and then lower her. It's not a perfect system and we go through a lot of ropes, just like the wooden chairs. The ropes burn away and the chairs legs rub down to stumps.

Once on the Mórthír when I was about ten, I saw a man in a wheelchair and I asked Móraí why we didn't use one. She was extra snappy about it. 'There's enough rumours about us. We don't need them seeing us bringing a wheelchair up here.'

At the time, I didn't know what the rumours might consist of. When the rumours are about you, people don't tend to be telling you the rumours. And even if they did, the islanders didn't tend to tell us anything at all anyway. I remember wondering if it was because Dada didn't live with us. Did they

think he was mean to leave his old mother to mind his child? I'm not sure they know about his wife, the bed-thing.

As time went by, however, the islanders' wall of denial regarding our existence became unstable, rocked by the questions of their own children. When an island child found its tongue, they inevitably began to ask. Children obsess over other children. They recognised me as like them in appearance, but I confounded them. I did not go to the schoolroom and when I got older I didn't go to the secondary on the Mórthír. I was not in the shop on sunny days looking for Choc Ices. I was rarely out of the house and when I was, despite Móraí's scolds, I always went swimming off the grey beach or climbed to the back of the island where no one except unthinking tourists ever stray.

The children were fed morsels of a story about us. I sense the story's details were ever-shifting and imprecise but the dreadful texture of the report remained the same. I know this because elements of it funnelled through the children. They hurled very particular taunts. We were crazy, we were bad luck, we were evil, we were traitors. I was growing in tandem with these taunting children and it was they who were teaching me about myself. I digested their words as truth and now they feel true. I am crazy, I am bad luck, I am evil, I am a traitor. But I still don't know why.

Sometimes when I pass near the older islanders, strands of more specific things trail behind them and catch me.

'Níl sí beo.'

She doesn't live.

I heard it first when I was skirting around the side of the shop and two islanders stepped out in front of me. Their eyes fell immediately and never rose higher than my feet. They spat quickly and they turned fast. 'Níl sí beo, níl sí beo,' dropped like pebbles from their mouths and lay on the ground in their wake.

The first time, I assumed it was someone else being talked about. Someone dead.

Then it seemed like I was hearing the words whenever I went near an islander. The utterance was everywhere. It left their cleaved mouths and

clung to me like an odour. *Nil sí beo /she doesn't live* seemed to rise from the ground as I walked over it. The wind blowing through the loose rocks of the walls of the island and then the wheezing wall of our kitchen all repeated it.

But she is not dead. If only she was. She is a bloody blight. But she is not dead.

‘If they think she is dead, why don’t you tell them she’s not?’ In my teens, I waged this question like a war on Móraí.

She pressed her mouth shut, she pressed so hard the skin of her chin puckered and she looked even uglier than usual. She shook her head. Her head swung ‘no, no, no’ so much over the years that I thought I heard her teeth clack with all the head shaking.

‘You need to get on with your job.’ Móraí, paused in her work, has one knee up and is twisted towards me, glaring.

‘I am. Sorry.’

The thoughts and questions could take me sometimes and minutes would pass before the house and this life would swim back into focus, Móraí’s impatience and hostility simmering among it all.

I check the position of the thing above the fetid mouth of the loo and then lower it. The toilet receives her like a rancid cradle. Her head and neck meet the cistern first, coming to rest on the damp sod of a pillow we keep there. I continue to lower, the neck remains snapped open, her head hinged back so far she is gazing at the wall behind her. I guide her torso until her body comes to a seated position. I loosen the leg belt and bring it lower so I can pull her knees wide. I wish we could just have her shit in the bath but it is too risky for infections. I hitch the rope back on the cleat so that I can rest for a minute. It’s hard work. For something that looks so decrepit there’s a density to her. There’s a weight to death and even though she is alive, the death is undoubtedly advancing. Just look at her. She is death-logged. Urine falls out of her but nothing more. I give it a few minutes and then, I close my hands around its waist to knead its innards and this works. My hands press and squeeze, wringing the waste from it. When it’s over, I pull the two

buckets of rags towards me – one to clean and one to disinfect. I raise her up some and hurry through this last chore. I want to help with the floor.

I undo the guyline and she swings back to centre, the pulley giving a sudden, unnerving shriek. I take a clean, folded dress from the shelf above the towels and draw it over her suspended body, guiding her arms into the arms, coaxing the floral cotton under the straps. I crouch under her and button it down her back. Then, finally, I lower her back into the chair.

Dada buys all the dresses from a shop on the Mórthír. The ladies there know him very well and make sure to always have his preference in stock: long dresses that button all the way up the front. They order pretty patterns and sweetheart necklines. They speculate about the husband who buys his wife's wardrobe. He has told them many lies. He accepts the soft packages they prepare for him and every time he supplies another strand of invention for the ladies to add to the tapestry they've worked up into a story of his life. The wife is ill. They live in Castlefreynes. They never had kids. She loves white, delicate prints. She thanks them for their choices. Her hair is long and pale. He loves her. They live quietly but they are happy, so so happy. It's a fairy tale Dada can live in most of the time if he closes his eyes against the drab light of his little flat.

We ruin it when he comes here.

This dress is light blue with a tiny pattern of baby'sbreath sprayed across it. It has a low, square neckline which closes just under the twin fins of her shoulder blades. Some of the styles look a little strange when worn backwards but the system works well. My last task is to brush her teeth. The top of the chair behind her head is separate to the rest, attached by two tiny hinges. There is a bolt, the kind used on the inside of a door to keep the head of the chair upright, but when we brush her teeth or need to inspect her mouth, we draw the bolt down and the top will flip back and her head with it. I load her toothbrush with toothpaste and steer it carefully around the fraying lips to scrub her teeth. When I'm done, I bring the little wooden slat back upright and drive the bolt home. Her head jolts.

Finally I have her ready. I rotate the chair so it's facing the right way to drag her back to her room. I belt her to it, tilt her and start to pull. I come through the hallway and the screech of wood against wood and the hiss and scrape of Móraí's sanding sound like the voice of the same terrible animal. The noise crowds my head and plucks at my nerves. The chair tracks to the right and we are back in the bedroom. I position her to face the window, which is my version of a joke.

The window is stacked with stones. The wispy lace of light threads around them but there is no view. Her hands rest in her lap as though she is at peace.

Back in the hall, I take up some sandpaper and a piece of wood from the steel box. Móraí is still on all fours, doggedly wearing away at her stretch of floor.

'I'll do the bedroom.'

Móraí's response is a shrug of her shoulders: on the ground like that she looks like an animal bridling.

5.

In the bedroom, I start at the corner farthest from the door and get down on the floor. I run my fingers over rough and stained wooden slats while my eyes scan. Sometimes looking by touch is better for finding them, a fact I will never tell Móraí. She is starting to be no good for this job. She is strong enough for the sanding – she is a working animal but her eyes are getting dull, and she's missing more and more scratches.

I am sharp-eyed and meticulous. In a house where nothing changes, the scraped and scratched floors are something. Evidence of our protracted confinement. For years, I thought they were just some reflex of the bed-thing. An urge leftover from life. I thought she believed she was scrubbing the floors clean perhaps.

We never see her make the marks, but the aftermath of a bout is grotesque. Her fists minced from her feverish scrubbing.

Móraí says back when it began, they tried everything to keep her hands still – I'm just too young to remember. Móraí says she bound the hands but then the feet started. They bound the feet and tied her down but then the teeth started in on the mouth and so much damage was done that they left all the rags off at night and instead began to immobilise her with drugs. Dada gets the medication – no doubt more lies required – and we grind it into her dinner. The nights are still not always calm, though. We never hear her, but she is capable from time to time of rising up and breaching the surface of her narcotic grave. This is how the hands have become so awful.

Yet she still manages to rub and scratch and gouge with these chucks of meat.

Now the bone is showing in that right hand finger though, and she's begun to carve. Móraí doesn't know.

Down here in the corner, the smell manages to be both flesh and metal – it's a presence in my mouth. The wood is bloodied, a rusty brown, and just below the start of the bedframe are two splintery letters:

Sí

I start to scuff the sandpaper against the floor to cover the sound of the floorboard lifting under the bed. Scuff, scuff – I lift out the copybook and pencil. And slide the board home. The copy falls open to the most recently used page and I quickly add 'sí' to the mangle of letters and almost-words logged there. I slide the copy with pencil tucked inside under the mattress to my right, my eyes running to the bedroom door beyond which only Móraí's feet, jittering with the movement of her labours, can be seen. It's important that the copybook remains hidden but close at hand in case I find more.

Three years ago, when I first saw what looked to be a letter amid the random savaging of the floor in this corner of the bedroom, a shock raced up my body and ignited me. I did what needed to be done and scrubbed out the scrappy P but I held the image tight in my mind for several days. I didn't even think to write it down. Why would I have? In a life as eventless as mine, the appearance of the P was a singular explosive occurrence. Writing it down didn't seem necessary. And then, of course, a doubt rose in my body. Had I really seen it? The reality of the P began to flicker. Was it a P or perhaps just a random pattern of cracking wood? Was it really there? The questions drained me of my certainty. I tried to feel again the pad of my thumb running over the edges of the P. The letter itself had been an absence. I could only feel where it was not. I worried that in trying to polish the memory and interrogate it, I was wearing it out. I revisited the moment too often. The recollection became flimsy; it began to take on the quality of a dream. To test myself, I tried out imagining a different letter and when I found I could just as convincingly carve an R into the memory instead of a P, I was rattled. The corporality of the scratched-in P was corrupted and, for

the first time ever, I regarded my own mind with suspicion. Could it/I not be fully trusted?

The encounter with the P/R and the treachery of memory troubled me for many months. I visited the bald patch of floor where the P/R/nothing had been before I sanded it back. I pressed my eyes to the spot until the ghost of the scraping seemed to be there. After staring for a few minutes, my eyes would protest: they'd fizz and snap shut and when I looked again, the ghost scratching had disappeared.

I asked Móraí if she ever saw things or thought she saw things and the question seemed to both scare her and enrage her.

'Don't go looking for things and then you won't think you see them. Do you want to go back to the doctor?' This question, out of Móraí's mouth, was a threat.

I was by then seventeen and fairly certain the doctor wouldn't remember me. It'd been nearly ten years since I'd seen him and nothing had come of the appointment. He'd probed ineffectually and I'd said nothing. Dada had said at the time it was 'precautionary', which was not a word I understood then and even now knowing what it means still doesn't quite explain the visit. I retained other mysterious terms from that day: predisposition, pathological abnormality, passed down.

I don't know what they mean or how they apply to me, but they seem to orbit my mother and I am her wretched satellite. Are they trying to see if I will end up like this? I would like to know too. But that's hard when I don't know what *this* is. The appearance of the P had upturned my version of the world in which she was a barely animate, an object. The creaking breaths, the occasional flinch to pain and the senseless automotive repetitions – the rubbing and chewing and tearing of flesh – were proof of life but only in its most rudimentary definition. The P entirely unravelled my understanding of the very situation I was living in. The P meant the thing was thinking. The P meant the thing was trying to communicate. Perhaps this was why I found it almost easier to believe I had invented the P.

Then came an

LE

Much smaller than the P, the Le was in the same corner but tucked in by the skirting board. It was a showery April Tuesday when, in the course of my customary sanding, my eyes snagged on it and shock gusted from my mouth. I reversed out from the side of the bed and went over to the chair where the thing was sitting. I looked her over. Its eyes, as always, skitter-skittered under the lids, like a shadow dancing back and forth beneath the threshold of a door. In the mess of her hands, resting in her lap, I didn't see anything different right away. They were sodden lumps as always. Parts of her wasted limbs are pearly and smooth like the impossible perfection glimpsed inside shells, but the extremities – head, hands and feet – are so punished as to be barely recognisable. Then something glinting in the stew of her hands caught me. I peered down and tried to make sense of what I was seeing. It was my first time seeing the tiny bone protruding like a tooth from her right index forefinger. I touched it and she shuddered then stilled again.

I went to my room and got the copybook. From the locked kitchen press, I got a pencil. Back down by the skirting board I wrote down 'Le' in my copy and then, so there could be no second-guessing, I pressed the page over the letters in the floor and shaded gently to take a rubbing. How else would I make these marks real? These messages were not safe on surfaces as malleable as mind and timber. They could weather too easily. I needed back-up evidence of this new fractured, dialogue.

That morning, I bandaged her hands but was careful to leave the little bone uncovered. However, I saw no new marks for some weeks. Since then, the markings and letters have followed a maddening non-rhythm. Sometimes there are many for weeks then nothing, the floors fall silent again.

Even more trying: though I am careful to catalogue every new letter and rune and syllable, no sense is emerging from the effort. No overarching message is coming into focus. If anything, the more I add to this lexicon,

the more chaotic it appears. When it began I couldn't help but wish that the thing would scratch out some answers to my questions.

What happened after I happened?

Is it sick?

Will it get better?

What was it like?

Who did this to it?

But no answer is being revealed; there's no great message or puzzle to be solved. The revelation, if you could call it that, is that the scratching and carvings are just more obsessive gestures by the desperate, bewildered thing. My mother.

So even though I note the traces she drives into the floors, I know that it's to no end. It has become one of *my* obsessive gestures. I don't want to drop the thread because what if –
whatifwhatifwhatif

(one day there is an answer?)

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6.

On May 29th, Rachel arrives on the island. On the day she arrives, Móraí leaves after breakfast for her first day at the museum. A low westerly combs across the fields at the sunken end of the island and a change, one I don't quite perceive in the moment, stirs.

'Slán,' I call after Móraí. She slams the door on my farewell. Dada is arriving later. The day opens empty before me. Under the vomitous yellow light of the kitchen – stoned-up windows mean that even on a summer morning the light is on – I run a finger through the grease and jam on my empty plate and then take it to the sink. I clean up breakfast, then I pull the tall vegetable basket over to the sink. Disturbing the dusty spuds sends up a soily fug. I slip the key from its home and retrieve the peeler and paring knife. I skin the potatoes over the sink, twisting the tip of the knife to gouge out the eyes and then rinse them. I dump them in the big pot and fill it with water. Next, I root up some carrots from the basket and scrub off the dirt and debris. Into the water they go. With the dinner started, I go out to the hall. My practised bare feet landing flat over the ravines in the floor. I keep my toes flexed up so as not to catch on the edges. I don't need to watch my step, I know the geography of this place well. I check her as I pass the door. I already put her in the chair before breakfast. She is fed and dressed – the same baby's-breath dress as the day before. She went into it clean, so it is fine to use today.

I carry on to my room and pull on dark grey jeans and a worn old t-shirt with the Eiffel Tower on the front. The t-shirt is a part of the informal dossier on my family that I have been compiling for many years. It is a clue. There was a time when the people in this house went to Paris. Not Móraí –

of this I am certain. It must have been Dada and the bed-thing. I cannot picture it. I have a sense of what I think Paris might look like. Elegant, grey buildings with curved awnings. Bridges and boulevards with more of the assured and focused people I've seen on the Mórthír. Paris came up in the geography book under the chapter about capital cities. A year ago, if I had a day like this with Móraí busy and tasks checked off, I would have been left with homework. School was always out of the question but the year I was ten, Dada bought the textbooks and the copybooks and stacked them on the walnut table in the corner of the living room. I pouted; I wanted to sit by the window.

'These are your window.' Dada lay a hand on the top of the book tower. He looked unfathomably sad. Later, that night I heard them in the sitting room.

'I know you already do so much, Mamaí.' He sounded anguished.

'I do what has to be done.'

'It's my mess. You shouldn't have to—'

'She has to learn something or they'll both be useless.' Móraí had a shrug in her voice. Then there was silence until Dada's crying gradually filled it.

So I can read and write. Through the books I learned about things I didn't have and things I wouldn't do. Some seemed unappealing. Jobs and exams and that. Other things were just baffling: the children in my books led lives of incomprehensible simplicity, lost balls in the park and got new pets. I got ahold of the basics but, every month when Dada visited, I could see I was not doing it right. I became a mismatch. My body grew but my mind stayed small.

He brought me more books and tried to ask me about my studies. I would give him an empty smile and he'd turn away, pained. I was – and I am – as useless as her in the end. That must be the reason for his disposal of us. I added the theory to the dossier. When I reached land after the turbulent sea of adolescence, they absolved me of the tedium. My graduation was unceremonious.

‘You’ve probably got all you’ll get. Or even need,’ Móraí said. Dada said nothing at all, just sat with his spongy head and cowering features. Dada is the most alive of us I think. He hogs all the feelings in this withered house. He is swollen with guilt and pressed down with disappointment. He leaks tears like bilge water. It’s a relief when he goes.

Today, with no more schoolwork and no Móraí watching, I can fill the hours as I like. I put the cardboard towel I use for swimming and my togs into my rucksack. I throw in the big knit jumper, even though the day looks fine so far. I step into my peeling old runners and shoulder the backpack. I turn into her room, take the back of the chair and drag her to the kitchen. I deposit her at the table facing the heaving wall. Because our house faces west, even on the calmest of days like today, the wall hisses and pants. I get a clean cup, put her forearms on the table and pull her hands around the mug so that they look like they’re cupping it. The hands are bandaged today after the recent bout of rubbing. The tacky tablecloth keeps her arms in position. I go to the door to take in the scene. I squint to dim my eyes. She looks like a person. Almost normal. I am pleased with the effect. The wall even gives an approving swoosh. I flick off the light and the figure at the table goes dark. The wall lets up for a moment so that the creak of her breath may be heard. Before it reaches the top of its inhale, I pull the door closed and turn away into the day.

7.

It's still early. The sun is climbing from the edge of the ocean, but directly above the island a grey sky is parked like a granite slab. In another couple of hours the sun will pass over the edge of this morass and disappear. It's a very fine day for the island. The wind has mostly backed off for once. The price of this is that the grey cover will remain. From our vantage up here, the lower half of the island is entirely visible. From where my feet are planted, the island gradually declines until the point where, at the bare lunar beach at the eastern end, it takes on water, descending into the ocean. This is where I swim. Swimming is unheard of on the island, and so is another thing they hold against me.

The people of this island, as a rule, do not swim. They don't even learn. Their refusal defies reason; every year there are deaths. Half the island works the ocean. They fish or they run the taxi to the Mórthír. They will usher ferries back and forth all summer long, bringing passengers belted into life preservers, and they will wear nothing but the heavy knitted geansaí forged in coarse, rope-like wool by the brisk hands of the women in their lives. The geansaí does the direct opposite of preserve life – it is the life-ender. It swamps them, colluding with the sea to pull them under. There is even contingency for their deaths worked into each geansaí, a particular turn of wool – patterns and cables, in cuffs or necks – to identify which family owns the corpses when they're returned, not only unrecognisable to their people, but hardly recognisable as human beings.

I've always gone down for a look when the dead come in and the variety of things this corrosive water can do to flesh is a marvel. They never return quickly. They are always held back from the shore by callous tides

for days or weeks. I suppose until the sea has its way – and it always gets its way.

They never come back in a state good enough to be waked in an open coffin. They are always bulging. The skin, if it isn't putrid, strains to contain the horrors inside – dead though they are, the body is often teeming with death-loving creatures revelling in the feast. When they come ashore the bodies must be handled tentatively. Depending how long they've been in the water, the flesh remaining on the bone is liable to come away if disturbed. Sometimes it is the men's clothing itself holding the approximation of a human shape in place. Attempts to haul the bodies away from the murderous ocean can be disastrous, the skin sloughing off, leaving a porridgy mess behind. Often the limbs come to a blunt end, the hands and feet gone. Móraí says this is from the body being exposed to harsh elements, the ocean's push and pull. But I know the islanders see it as a deliberate act done to render the men helpless, denying them of what little means of escape they might have had. The islanders whisper about the hopeless limbs thrashing through water and sliding helplessly off ropes. Without evidence to refute it, the idea mutates and catches on like an illness. The island is ill with many things and the waters are infected with the spoiled remains of the island's men.

The bodies who bear the closest resemblance to the people they were before are the ones who wash up pale and strangely greased. Their flesh, instead of turned to slops, is firm – making a hard case around their bones and organs. Under the sea's instruction, these bodies have grown their own tomb. I have heard that babies in particular do this, but a drowned baby is very rare. A blue-moon disaster that subdues the island for many weeks. Dada says the phenomenon is called grave wax: it forms in fat. He says, it's not unique to this water but the islanders believe everything this sea does is a particular punishment for them. I see the sea's gleeful mutilation of the men as inevitable. The island is hostile; the seas murder the men and regurgitate them for us to see and know what's coming for us all.

And still the people of this island never learn to swim. Never, ever. They are superstitious. They believe to do so is an act of hubris, an

outrageous and foolish attempt at dominion over nature. They believe that it will invite trouble from the water. The islanders treat their sea like a cruel, unstable parent to be appeased. If the sea decides to have you, you must succumb. And so when rogue and malevolent waves, common in the waters around the island, rear up and close over the boats, the men go into the ocean with resignation.

It takes me twenty minutes to cut a path down to the beach. The elements reach for me with every step. Thick salt air floods my nose and mouth and, though the day is calm, my head is still full of the discordant crying made by wind pushing through the loose stone walls. This head-shriek is always with me. I often can't decipher whether it's really happening or if it's just the echo of it inside me.

Dada had wanted me to learn how to swim.

Móraí mocked him. 'What? You think if she'd known how to swim that things would've been any different?'

I grab hold of this information. She. It? The bed-thing? If it had been able to swim ...

I had something new to work with now. Had she been damaged in the water?

He brought me to a man on the Mórthír to instruct me on the process. In a cold, hard rectangle cut from the ground in a cold, hard, echoing room, the man stood in waist-deep water beside me and guided me onto my back. This neutered water bore no relation to the ocean I knew. It lapped tenderly at my ears.

'Now, I'm letting go and if you fill your lungs, you'll float.'

He let go and when I felt myself dip slightly, I pulled in air and held myself straight, finding balance in the water.

'She takes to it!' the man had said, with surprise in his voice. 'She's a selkie!'

Dada stood above us on the edge. The light was behind him; I couldn't quite see him. His face was in darkness; it looked scooped out.

'She doesn't have to be good, just give her enough that she won't ... you know.'

The voice that came from the hole was nervous.

They gave me just enough and the sea gave me the rest. I am a good swimmer now, which had not been their aim. Móraí and Dada forbade the swimming. Dada took away the swimming costume, saying he had only wanted me to know ‘just in case’. I went in my knickers and without a towel. They continued to try and block me and I continued to disobey them. I had to: the swimming was a refuge. The confinement of my life up until that point had been so total that the sensation of submersion, a completely altered state, was overwhelming. In the sea I was ecstatic. It was a feeling so potent that at first I couldn’t make sense of it: am I in danger? Is this a good thing? The sea responded to me in a way that no one ever had. It held me and drew me in. The sea didn’t love me – I am not stupid, no one loves me – but it didn’t ignore me. When I was younger, in bed at night, I swaddled myself in the blankets trying to make a tight embrace, but the exertion required ruined the illusion. In the sea, I didn’t have to drive this embrace around me. The sea swarms me, reaching up my body as I make my way in. The sea wants me.

It was Móraí in the end that argued my case. Not in my presence. As ever, I heard them in the night; their conversations always followed a pattern. They swapped bare utterances until Dada sighed and Móraí muttered, ‘togha’. In the case of the swimming it went like this:

‘It’s tempting fate.’ Dada, for all his rationale, appeared in this instance to be the one bowing to superstition.

‘It doesn’t work that way. *She* has nothing to do with *her*.’

‘But it seems ... It ...’ He got stuck. I heard him swallow and sigh. Then he tried again. ‘It’s a graveyard. She’s standing in the grave of—’

‘She has no happiness.’ Móraí’s tone hardened. ‘I know how that feels. We’ll give her this. Her interest will wane.’

They said nothing further and the next morning the swimming togs were hanging on the outside handle of my door.

I don’t go every day. That would be madness. On many days it would be certain suicide. But when the waves have turned the right direction and they aren’t thrashing too much, I get in and I feel like a different thing. The

head-shriek recedes and I feel like I'm a part of the world. In the sea, when I carve my way with my cupped palm I am filled with a sense of purpose, that some potential is unfolding. I am not just dwelling, servile, at the foot of a rancid mother's bed – I am living, even if it's only for a short while.

The light glints off the steely beach spread before me and I quicken my pace until the ground beneath my feet becomes dark powdery beach. Here my strides turn to staggers as they always do on sand – the sea wrongfoots us, crippling us before we even get to it. I go to the sleek, humped rocks beached over to my right where I always keep my bag and towel to avoid the grit of the shore. I pull off my clothes, shimmying into my togs at the same time. Then I mound my jeans and t-shirt on top of my backpack.

A cry separate from me interrupts the ever-blowing head-shriek and my body snaps awake. I whip left, then right. Nothing. I'm immediately on high alert; I have had bad times on this beach. Children shouting and laughing. Island men delighting in coming upon me. Driving themselves into me despite their friend's sneering. 'He'd fuck anything. Get on with it,' they shout as if their friend is doing little more than taking a piss. He finishes and stands, moves mere inches to the right of me and then actually does urinate. The boiling run-off finds me.

'That thing is a curse, you'd better douse your prick in holy water.' They laugh and move off, spitting.

Behind me I see what's made the cry. A baby is on the sand. It is about a man's length from where the water foams. I can't quite connect the idea; the facts are untethered.

A baby

is on the beach.

From where I stand I think it is naked. It is so young that it is quite still. It probably hasn't even found its hands yet. Its eyes haven't settled on a colour. It is malleable. Its small skull is the size of a man's fist, yet unimaginably vulnerable. I know from the science book that below the taut skin, it is still knitting its pieces together. This shape-shifting in humans

goes on forever. I've watched it and monitored it all my life: we grow and we decline, grow and decline. The baby is still not moving but emits another cry, and I move towards it as thoughts of what to do drift in my head. I could put it in my bag and bring it to Móraí. I don't know what good that would do, but I don't want to bring it to the pub or the shop and for it to be tied to me in the mind of the island. They might not accept the baby if I'm the one proffering it.

I am now standing above it and see that it *is* wearing clothes. It's a white cotton jumpsuit. It's so young that the skin on its neck is loose and reptilian. It needs fattening. It is curled in on itself as though still locked in the centre of a woman. A rain jacket is splayed on the sand beside it, and I realise that the baby was on this but has apparently managed to edge and quiver itself right off. I move a little past the baby and see, tucked under the jacket, a dress and mud-crusting hiking boots.

'Hi!' rings from the sea behind me. I turn fast, my panic sparked.

A woman is coming out of the sea. I quickly retreat, away from her things, away from her baby, forgetting she's not an islander.

'Hi,' she repeats. 'Dia duit ...?'

I continue to draw myself backwards through the sand. If an islander found me hovering over a baby like this, they would pull me away and spit on the ground, which is their way of heading off a cursed thing.

When I was fifteen, I was outside the shop when Áine Rilleagh's toddler fell off the side of the slipway at the Seancéibh. She left her younger baby in its pram and ran down at full tilt to go in after him. Islanders were drawn by her screams and began to assemble as they always did. A few went down to the water to help; the rest just stood blankly, ready to witness the disaster or the relief, whichever it would be. In the pram a little over to my right, a mournful little squall had kicked up. I went over and took the u-shaped handle that curved up behind the bassinet and gently rocked the pram, shhing and hushing, mimicking the mothering I'd overheard on the island.

One of the Súilleabháin sisters saw me first. 'Get away,' she bawled, rushing at me.

Though I made no stab at resistance, three of them descended on me, shouting and spitting and pushing. They pursued me until I was well away from the baby. They went back to the pram and I hung on there on the edge of things. I stayed near in case they gave some hint at what I was that was so awful. I wanted to understand. I stood watching as Áine, soaked, with her toddler son tangled round her, made her way back to the pram, now being guarded by several grimacing women. The group absorbed Áine and her son and the stop-start and rise-fall of talk came from the huddle. They broke rank to gesture at me here and there. I sensed they were making a plan of some sort. A part of me knew I should leave then and there but another part – a pathetic part – held out hope that perhaps Áine would come and thank me for trying to comfort her baby.

After a few minutes, the women parted to release Áine. She came towards me, keeping her eyes down. She came all the way up, much nearer than the other islanders or even Móraí ever did. Her bowed head was so close, I could see the sliver of white scalp bisecting her head where her ropey hair parted. With little movement, I could have kissed this delicate ribbon of skin. It was a gesture I'd seen pass among mothers and their children. She spat on me three times and backed away. This must have been what they'd decided would undo the pall I cast. The pathetic hope for gratitude deserted me and I turned for home, her spit stringing on my skirt and bare shins.

The woman calling to me is now nearly out of the water. Her toes are pointed and her steps light as she makes her way through the shallows. She is wearing a heavy-duty white bra and voluminous white knickers that come up so high they nearly meet her breasts. Through the damp white I can see the shadowy hints of her nipples and her pubic hair. Her body, her fullness, amazes me and I'm shy. She looks so juicy and healthy and delicious. Her body is large and generous, spilling and quivering. The urge to touch her takes my hands and I must ball them into fists to make sure they don't plunge forward to feel her. I have never seen a body like this one.

The wrecked thing in the bed at home once resembled this, I realise, and I feel a dormant horror wake. What happened to that thing, what happened to its body?

‘Caint as Bearla?’ She smiles like nobody in her whole life has ever scowled back at her. I glance back down at the baby and can’t believe her trust in this island.

‘Yes. I can, I do.’ My own words startle me, they fly out in a rush without my even arranging them first.

Encountering her is physically overwhelming. My body is opening to her with an exuberance I don’t recognise. Her body arouses in me the same sense of altered state that the ocean does.

‘I’m Rachel.’ She stoops to scoop up the baby. ‘This is Seamus.’

The baby is tiny against her, which meddles with perspective and makes her look like a giant, her damp breasts and belly absorbing the miniature creature.

‘Hi.’ I am abrupt and I wish I knew how else to be. There are just a handful of people that I’ve ever had such a long exchange with. Móraí, obviously. Dada. Aoise in the shop.

Rachel smiles in a way that makes me think she doesn’t mind my awkwardness.

‘What’s your name?’

Telling her my name requires calling it up and dusting it off. I have not needed my name for a very long time. No one has asked me it since the swimming teacher. Móraí doesn’t use my name and I don’t really use hers. We don’t need names in that calcified house, if we speak it’s only ever to each other.

‘My name is Aoileann.’ The rarely used word feels unwieldy in my mouth.

‘Illin?’ She tries it out for herself.

‘No, Eeeeel-in,’ I correct her.

‘Beautiful,’ she says. ‘What does it mean?’

No one’s ever told me this so I just shrug.

‘Maybe it’s island? It sounds like oileán.’

‘Yes,’ I mumble, embarrassed at another gap in my knowledge of my own self.

‘Would you hold Seamus for me while I put my dress on?’

This question is staggering to me. A woman is talking to me; a woman wants me to hold her baby. She doesn’t even wait for me to answer, just deposits the baby in my arms, picks up her dress and gives him a gentle little polish with the hem to dry the bits of damp he’s caught from her body.

The baby seems to be as trusting as his mother. He hangs limp across my forearms. Rachel has pulled her dress over her head. It’s an ugly tent in navy with little to no shape. She lifts the streaming weeds of her hair out of the neck of the dress and slings it around itself on top of her head. She ties it in place with an elastic from her wrist.

‘Now. Thank you for this.’ She slips the baby from my arms and lays him on her shoulder.

‘Are you from here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does everyone speak Irish?’

‘Yes.’

‘But they speak English too?’

‘Kind of.’

‘You don’t say much?’

‘No.’

She laughs at this and I wonder, am I being funny? I get an intriguing little wriggle deep down in my body at the sight of her laughing. Her open face is the nicest thing I’ve ever seen. She has a very wide mouth, a gap in her front teeth and deep-set dark eyes. She is tanned with blood-filled lips and dimpled cheeks reddened from the cold sea.

‘Are you going for a swim?’ She indicates my swimming costume.

‘Yes.’ I want her to keep looking at me and I know to hold those eyes I must say something else. ‘No one swims on the island,’ I blurt. ‘They’ll probably look at you funny.’

I’ve succeeded. She moves to step into her loose-laced boots but her eyes – those eyes! – stay on me.

‘Oh really?’

‘They’re superstitious.’

‘But you swim. Do they look at you funny?’

‘Oh, they hardly look at me at all.’

Her smile trips a little at these words and I worry I have put her off.

But no. Her face softens. ‘I understand how that feels.’ She shapes the words softly; each one emerges tender as a bud from those lips.

*(Those
lips)*

She doesn’t say any more but the disparate facts on the beach draw together and a picture comes into focus. She is older than me but still young. Maybe in her twenties. She is swimming off the edge of an awful place that she probably thinks is an escape. There is no one, no *man*, to hold the baby so she leaves it on the sand, on capricious ground that’s always loose and shifting: treacherous ground that is capable of holding the baby or parting and swallowing it. If swallowed, at first the baby would blithely heave in the sand, unaware of how dangerously its world had just tilted. Tiny, pursed lips would suck in the grit. Eyes and ears and nostrils would be packed with it. The sand would fill the baby up so that it would become heavy and wet, while the mother screamed and clawed for it above. If it was unearthed by its distraught mother, she would find the baby spongy and porous. She would press her face against the baby in devastation and the little head would cave in.

‘I was living in a small town,’ Rachel adds in explanation. ‘It was bad enough that I was an artist, then the baby announced itself.’ She mimed the big belly. ‘Very impertinent.’ She smiles, admonishing the slumped body on her shoulder. ‘I found out I got the residency here the week before he was born, so the timing is shite. He’s only out a few weeks! But it was too big to turn it down. I’ve a free house for six weeks! Money every week. I can’t believe it.’ My mind traipses after her words, trying to string them into some order I can understand. I am dull and slack in front of her, struggling

because no one talks in my house. The exchanges between Móraí and me are so basic that I've never learned to sort through so many strands of story at once. I grasp at the one that most attracts me.

'You're an artist.' The word takes precision in the mouth: it starts in the throat, ascends the tongue and hisses to a halt at barred teeth. I've seen it written down but never said it out loud before.

'Yes.' Rachel is now zipping herself and the baby into her wax jacket. 'Though I haven't made much since the birth. It's very hard with him.' Rachel looks momentarily deflated before recovering. 'Art is hard. Even when everything is going well, it's hard to believe you're an artist. So if things are a bit slow or coming out a bit shite, that's hard.'

'I didn't really know people were still artists.' This elicits a perplexed look from Rachel and I try to explain. 'I saw about Leonardo da Vinci in my history book. And ...' I cast around for one of the other names. 'And Rembrandt?' I'm not sure I'm saying it right but hurry on in my words nonetheless. 'I just thought that was gone ... you know ... with cameras now ...' I watch the patient smile pass over her lips and wish I'd stopped speaking twenty words back.

'Well, it's all very different now. So you're right – we don't have artists like those these days.' She's trying to make me feel less stupid. 'Lots of those artists were trying to represent life of the time. Like you said, no cameras, so it was a form of recording the moment. Art now still does that sometimes, but also we're not always trying to reproduce what's right in front of us. Sometimes we're trying to make something tangible that is right in front of us but that we can't all see. Like a feeling or a story. Know what I mean?'

No, but I nod mutely. I wish I had my copybook to write this perplexing insight in, many pages away from the primitive letters and rubbings of my mother. To put them side-by-side would be tragic.

'I have to get this one back to the house for a feed.'

'Yes. Sorry for making you stay.'

'Stop that! It was lovely chatting to you. I wonder actually ... would you maybe be able to come up to the house some time over the next few

days? I have a table to move and it's a two-woman job.'

'Yes.'

From her slight smile, I understand that this is possibly a bit abrupt. I add: 'That'd be very nice.'

'Lovely! Thank you. Will we meet back here tomorrow? At one? I'll take you up to the house and make us lunch.' She has already left me and moved all the way to the stone road that follows the edge of the beach.

'Yes.'

'See you then. Slán, Aoileann.'

Hearing my name jars. My whole being is jarred. I hurry into the freezing water so that my outsides can feel as alien and electric as my insides.

8.

Witness the island.

witness

it

At this point in summer on the island, the night comes at close to midnight. The darkness draws over at speed when it finally decides to. As dark as the sky is, the island is darker. Once the sky is dark it's revealed as actually an absence, a black hole. But the island is a material darkness, a solid mass of dark.

dorcha dorcha dorcha

The islanders use this word for all kinds of darkness. Muddy gloom and deep voids. They call the bottom of sea 'an ghrinneall dhorcha', the dark bed.

*(the dark bed,
where she lies)*

The island is dark but the sea is dark too, though it is made of something else entirely. It is silky and each undulation and ripple is edged in what little shy lustre can be drawn down from the endless sky-hole above. The sea is dead, gilded with the dead light of dead stars and, because it sways and sings and chants, it feels alive, although it's not. It is teeming with death and it is very, very beautiful. At the base of the cliffs at the west end, it licks and laps down under the island's hulk. At the east end, it rolls up onto the beach like a lover ready to be taken.

The sea is death reanimated. Down under the shimmying surface, the currents conduct the corpses and they sway in a dance, ringed around the island's underbelly.

On each exhale, the sea draws back and the island-wreck appears to rise and rise. The islanders are doomed passengers, their homes like molluscs clinging to the stone deck. It is all so precarious. One hundred and thirty-four fleshy hearts beat inside fleshy bodies inside toppling stone dwellings, all at the mercy of this dead and angry thing. The smallest heart on the island is the size of a walnut and it belongs to Rachel's baby. To end its delicate throb, you would need only a pinch of a thumb and forefinger. A firm press to pop it like a berry. Every scrap of life on this island is fighting hard in its own little struggle. It seems useless to even try in this hateful place. The thing in the bed may even have the right idea: to succumb, to *beg*, to be ended. The thing in the bed is maybe privy to something. Or perhaps is just more willing than the others to face what this place is capable of.

The others know but they turn away from this knowledge. Out loud they call them accidents. Out loud they call them bad luck. The island records are untrustworthy things, as the museum curators are learning. All that's known for absolute certainty is that no census taker came until 1931.

Mainlanders hated the island because, going back generations, stories about it murmured through their families, spreading unease.

'The Islanders didn't have eyes,' said the stories. Instead, they had two watery boreholes that contained nothing. Looking into the eyes of an islander was like looking straight through to the milky sky behind them; the expanse would devour you.

Never look at them when they smile, warned the old people.

The stories lacked detail, though. They were blank things. The horror was in the blankness. The horror was in the gaps.

'Islanders pulled grateful survivors from the sea,' the stories said. 'Saving them from drowning only to deliver them to a worse end.'

Never let them show you their smile.

Never look inside the mouth. Never see inside them.

‘The island makes people do things,’ they said.

With bloodless, spidery hands, Islanders drew the frightened near-drowned from the shore and led them up to the island’s interior.

The island made people do things, said the old people.

From there, the islanders would let go of the salvaged person and stand back. They didn’t need to do anything more, but they’d stay to watch. They roamed close, tracking the unfortunate person as they stumbled on upwards.

The island made people do things, said the old people.

The islanders witnessed the island.

witnessed

the

island

By the time the first census was recorded, the mainlanders had settled on more ho-hum aversion: the islanders were ugly; they were poor; their Irish was incomprehensible. In spring 1931, the island was home to 187 souls. About ten families, all fishing and living a spartan existence.

The following year, when the man from the department returned to check some details, he found the population had dropped abruptly to 166. Twenty-one people unaccounted for. When the islanders were unforthcoming, the census taker took the matter to the mainland authorities. They made the trip to investigate. The note-taker recorded a little of what went on during the questioning.

The island seems to be some kind of breac-ghaeltacht, but what’s spoken there is a dialect barely related to Irish.

Those we did understand seemed unperturbed by what appears to have been a mass death of 21 people since March of ’31.

We were brought to the island’s rudimentary ‘cemetery’ (located on the island’s high exposed northeast side, see marked map on file). The practices around burial are unusual. We are told by Rionach (girl, about 17) that they cannot dig the island – at its deepest the

soil layer is barely a forearm's length – hence their 'solution'. Island children play in the area and appear unfazed by the macabre spectacle to be found there.

Rionach intimates that the island suffers losses of this scale frequently due to the dangerous nature of fishing the surrounding waters.

When it was pointed out that if this were the case, then the island's population would have died out long ago, the girl ceased to cooperate.

A few of the missing appear to correspond to 'graves' and testimony from islanders claiming to be surviving family, would it seem, corroborate this. However, there are at least seven others entirely unaccounted for. Inconsistencies in the record may be at fault. But even with some error or doubling up, we are still looking for the bodies of at least five people, some of whom appear to be members of the same family. When this is put to the group we assembled outside the island's shop, one elderly man (60s–70s approx.) answered:

'If a man goes and chooses to take his clan with him, what do we do?'

So it would appear that some migration takes place in the community.

The island made people do things, said the old people.

And maybe, yes, for the island to remain so cold to what it has witnessed, it must have some hand in it.

9.

The morning after meeting Rachel, the shriek of the hinge wakes me as always. The night has been a jumble of Rachel. The waters of my sleep are charged. I swim in images of her smiling, of her hair swinging forward as she bends, of her thick, weighty body. I want to plunge my hands into her body. Her gorgeous body. I have been acutely disturbed by our encounter. Utterly unhinged. I apply words to her that I've never had call to use. She is gorgeous, beautiful, alive and delicious.

(delicious, delicious, delicious)

A starvation for her has ambushed me, though I can't even decide what it is that I want to do with her.

The hinge's scream slices through the dreams. Groin to sternum. Like the splayed frog in the science book. The bisection lays bare the fact that our brief encounter has infested me with these Rachel thoughts; an unknown and strange appetite has been seeded.

I go in to Móraí and the thing in the bed. I take my place behind Móraí and pull the rope with her. The thing rises in the bedroom gloom.

Once the rope is secured I tell Móraí: 'You didn't need to come in, I would've. You're late for the first day.'

Móraí adjusts her grey skirt and unrolls her sleeves. She has already been up washing sheets and seething for hours. 'I'll be on time tomorrow. From now, you are doing this. Did you even set the alarm?' Her voice is reproachful, but she isn't even bothered looking at me. 'You can't delay coming in here, you well know.' Móraí is shuffling to the door.

Oh I know.

If left, the nappy ripens, like horrible fruit packed between its legs.

After Móraí leaves, I make the breakfast and eat my toast at the counter. The wall is silent today, which feels like a good omen for visiting Rachel. If the wall was protesting, I would be more nervous. As it is, I am jangly. I've no idea how to climb down off this high ledge of unbearable agitation. All I have is a sense that once I am standing in front of Rachel, it will be subdued.

I have never looked forward to anything before. In the books, the children were excited about Christmas or a new friend or their birthday parties. None of these things have ever happened to me. The one time I asked about the exact day of my birthday, Móraí had been dismissive. 'Those things don't matter.'

Afterwards, I saw her out the back of the house spitting on the ground like the islanders often do when they say or do some bad-luck thing.

(Or when they meet my eye.)

She was ridding herself of some malediction that I didn't understand. It all hurt, but her shielding me from the spitting seemed like something close to affection, for Móraí at least. It seemed like an attempt to mind my feelings, and I have held this dear.

I get dressed while her porridge cools. The day is so still that jeans and a t-shirt under my anorak will do. Next, I fill that vile gash of a mouth with the food. Skitter-skitter go the eyes, like startled spiders. I debate the next move. I do a quick check of the floors to see if there's anything new but there's nothing yet, the freshly sanded areas are still smooth. I wonder if there's a job to do that can stave off the nappy for another few minutes.

The later it gets the worse it gets.

I know.

I fold her forward, forehead to knees. The movement prompts a rasp to escape its mouth as her spine rises, ivory key by ivory key under the papery nightdress. I peel back the material to check on the slitty eye in her back.

Today it is not weeping. Today she won't be bathed so I do a brisk little clean and redress it. I push her back upright.

If I leave the nappy much longer, I will have worse on my hands than the sloppy, sodden piss-fruit of a diaper. Things can rapidly fester in the heat and moisture. We toilet her at intervals every day and perhaps through some muscle memory of amenability she never releases until she's in position. It is only 9am. I'll take this nappy off, then toilet, then just this once, I will leave her in a nappy while I go to Rachel.

(Go to Rachel!)

(A heart-leap.)

Móraí would be annoyed about my leaving it in a nappy for the day.

'She's not incontinent,' she snaps if I ever gripe about how it would be easier to not have to hoist and drag the bed-thing to the toilet at 11am, 2pm, 5pm, 8pm and last thing at night. 'Anyway,' she adds, 'the nappies are worse.' She sniffs.

She's not wrong. The nappy is an ordeal. I pull the basin containing wet wipes, the new nappy and baby cream from under the bed. Every day we clean and restock this basin.

I lift the legs into position. We have sewn pockets onto the end of every bedsheet and her feet slot into these to keep her bent-kneed and gaping while we change her. I pull back the tabs and hold my mouth closed. I lift the front flap down to rest on the bed and recoil from the foetid rush of heat. I turn from her slightly to catch a breath. One at a time, I slip a hand into the hollow behind each knee and give a tug, this gives enough of a gap under her to wiggle out the nappy with my free hand.

I have heard Dada do the nappy and it made a fizzing feeling behind my eyes. He talks to her all the way through. He tells her each thing he is doing, in a quiet lilting voice. Were it not for the words, it could've been a lullaby. He says it is to show her respect and give her some dignity.

When Dada does the nappy, Móraí rages quietly to herself.

‘Easy to give her the dignity seafóid when you only do it once a month,’ she tells the wall sullenly as she stands at the sink, knuckles clenching and unclenching, squeezing and choking the clothes she washes.

I don’t speak to her while I change her. I cannot see the reason I would. Dada is softer than we are. He loves the thing somehow. His memories sustain the love and the thing he sees once a month is tidied up by us, neatened for his consumption. Without it in his eyeline constantly, it is easier for him to recast this thing as a tragic ailing wife and mother. He doesn’t have to look at it every day. It doesn’t hover nearby at all times, ruining his life. He can’t see it for what it is because he has the luxury of never looking straight at it. He has the luxury of looking away.

Exposure has killed Móraí’s compassion.

I wipe down the hidden seam of her other mouth. I draw the wipe through lips and folds. I drop each used wipe to the basin below. My face is set in disgust. It’s revolting. Then I feel bad. Her piteous little life. My piteous little life. I just wish I could care like I used to. It’s been leached from me by the grind of serving her body’s needs.

She moves at night.

Why doesn’t she move to the bloody toilet then?

When it’s done, I leave her legs agape to allow air to hit the hidden part of her and hopefully discourage any infecting things that may be trying to take root there. I take the basin to the kitchen to clean it and restock it.

Now it is 9.30. I slog through the dinner prep: peeling veg and picking a two-day old chicken carcass.

Rachel. Rachel. Rachel goes my head.

Toilet is next: hoist, place, drag, hoist, place. Sluice her, wipe her. Hoist, place, drag, hoist place. I’m sweating by the end.

When she’s back on the bed, I get the new nappy on her and then debate where to put her while I’m gone.

Móraí would be annoyed about my leaving it for the day. We don’t leave it for long periods. She needs rearranging every 30 minutes.

(But just this one day will be fine, won’t it?)

Móraí would be annoyed about me going to Rachel. She wouldn't trust me not to tell her about the bed-thing.

'Do you want to enjoy the view?' I ask it meanly, gesturing to the chair by the stoned-up window. The chair is iffy. We don't tend to keep her in it for longer than an hour at a time. But keeping her in the bed will mean she will have been in it since last night. Twenty hours straight. And with no turning.

(But just this one day?)

Just this one day will be fine, I decide. Bed is best. And it's just for one day. I move her to the chair while I do lunch to give her tender spots a short breather. The chair of course just puts pressure on new places. There is never going to be an end to the heavy pressing of her body. We can only dance her through each day – rolling her and hoisting her and flopping her from side to side – to dodge the endless pressing and fight this oddly passive onslaught, the unrelenting march of degradation.

Lunch is canned chicken soup today. I watch the jellylike cylinder melting in the pot over the heat. It matches the colour of her skin and smells like unwashed scalp. I won't be eating it. Rachel is making lunch for me. What does Rachel eat? I cut the crusts off a slice of soft white bread and put it in a bowl, then I pour the soup on top. While it cools slightly, I write a note to leave on the kitchen table in case Móraí comes back from the museum during her lunch break. I say I am going for a quick swim – she will hate this but has given up trying to stop me. I say I will be back in an hour. Hopefully she won't stay longer than that to see that I don't return. I say all is done with the bed-thing no need to do anything. Hopefully she won't notice the nappy.

I take the soup to it and feed it as patiently as I can. Rushing the eating is very dangerous. Once most of the soup has been tipped down its throat, I scoop up bits of sopping bread and slip these inside her. Bread is filling, but she can only eat it when it's like this, soaked to the point of being scum.

My last task is to put her back in bed. With that done, I am free.

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10.

As I approach the beach, I see Rachel and my body unclenches, making me suddenly aware of how edgy I have been. Edgy that she would not come. Or that I'd dreamed her altogether. Things like that happen here. Dada says it's our minds playing tricks on us, but I think it's the island playing tricks. And 'playing' is much too sweet a word.

He says the same about how the wind calls its forlorn songs through the walls. The songs have no words, but the notes reach into my body and pluck at the different taut fears stretched tight there. My mind is playing tricks on me.

Sometimes it is crying that I hear. For hours and days, the crying doesn't let up. Dada looks more alarmed when I say this. 'Your mind is playing tricks on you.' He repeats this over and over, which makes it sound more like a beseeching prayer than reassurance.

'Your mind is playing tricks on you.' Desperation bleeds into his eyes even though he's smiling as he says it.

My mind is playing tricks.

(This idea is not nice.

*Why, if this is the case, is my mind's trick to
shriek for days like a baby left all alone?)*

No one else gives any sign that they hear the cries, so I must allow that it's possibly sounding only inside my head but still, it is no trick, of that I am certain.

'Maidin mhaith.' Rachel waves happily with her right hand; her left is cupping the lump of the baby held to her chest with a length of grey muslin.

She is in a dress and dirty boots again. Her attempt at Irish is admirable, but way off. I know the island dialect is notoriously unwieldy; it's unlikely she'll ever get it and they're not the type to be charmed by the effort anyway.

'Hi.' I nod and make an effort to mirror her gentle smile.

'Let's go!' She turns and starts up the little track that follows, a half a mile inland, the north coast of the island. Over the fields to our right is the rock slab graveyard where the dead are put. I don't say this as it's unlikely she'll stray to it, but if she knows it's there she might get curious.

As we make our way, I realise she is heading towards the old factory, which is now also home to the new museum.

Móraí is there. I stop dead.

'Are you living at the factory?'

'No,' she turns, perplexed. 'My house is before that but at the end of my stay my work will be shown at the factory! At the museum like. That's why I'm here.'

'Ah.' I resume walking and she does too. Móraí is close but not too close. This is fine, I decide.

She leads us to the door of a stone one-storey I've passed indifferently many times. The house is among the newer buildings on the island, thrown up in the '80s during the last flurry of interest from the mainland. The low-set windows – one on either side of the door – peer out from under the overhang of the roof, giving it a slightly shamefaced look. Rachel carries on through the door and into the dim hallway. I hang back.

I have never been inside another house. This only occurs to me as I stand before the possibility. I am suddenly nervous. I know things are not right in my house. I know enough to know that no one will ever be invited there. I know that going inside Rachel's house might be a cruel assertion of just how horrible and spoiled my own is. I also worry that if I go inside I might leave some taint.

'Come on!' she is calling.

The taint is something unique to me, I have learned. The islanders call it scáth suarach anama. Soul-stench. Where I touch – the door of the shop, the

baby's pram that time – they spit and mutter these words to rid the place of me.

I know it's selfish to go in and risk leaving some smear of wrongness in this place that has been, until now, free from my corrupting presence. Suddenly I'm stricken. It's wrong to make Rachel be near me. To perpetrate myself on her and her home. Móraí would be disgusted at me. Móraí has never said the words *scáth suarach anama* but she knows about me. She holds herself apart from me. When I was a child and trying out my arms, wrapping them around the unyielding bed-thing and my own unsatisfactory self, Móraí appeared tense at all times, ready to repel me with indifference. If I did pull myself to her and lay my head against her belly, she became rigid and stayed that way until I understood and moved away again. When the bed-thing didn't respond to me, it felt OK because I had never seen it use its arms for anything, but Móraí's arms were capable. Once a month, she put them around Dada.

Dada I had never tried to hold. From time to time, he attempts some form of touch. He pats me – on the shoulder, the upper arm – keeping his hand flexed, his fingers bent back to minimise the contact. I often see Móraí spitting in his hands soon after one of these glancing touches. He rubs it off with irritation but I know he doesn't actually *want* to touch me, just feels he has to. The revulsion is in the set of his mouth even as he tries to push himself to smile.

'Aoileann!' Rachel's hand has reached back for me out of the gloom of the hall.

I instinctively lean out of her reach.

(Don't stain her)

'Yes. Coming.' I move over the threshold. The way she smiles at me makes me think that I'm not very good at talking.

'It's dark in here 'cause I need to replace the bulb.' She moves fluidly through the hall ahead of me, reaching a hand up to tap the dud one hanging from the ceiling. There's a rectangle of light ahead of her and as she steps

into it, she looks like a vision. I glimpse myself in a mirror hanging to my right and see that I am a wraith stalking her.

At the end of the hall is a large room spanning the entire width of the house. It has four small windows punched into the back wall facing the sea north of the island. The place smells so good, I inhale deeply to drink it up. At the right end of the room is the kitchen from where the incredibly satisfying smell emanates. There's a pot steaming on a free-standing cooker that has a thick rubber hose leading to a squat gas cylinder. There's a once-white, now yellowing fridge and several presses in orangey oak all topped with a beige plastic counter, home to a toaster, a kettle and a sink. A small round table with two chairs occupies a no-man's stretch between the kitchen and where we stand. On this table are plates and bowls, a dish of butter and a loaf of crusty white bread.

'This is the everything room.' Rachel turns away from the kitchen end of the space to point out the other side where a rack of baby clothes is drying beside a cracked old leather couch, beyond which is a collection of beguiling ephemera. The initial overall impression is a cascade of beauty. Paint dabs are scattered like petals over canvases, wooden boards and diaphanous materials. The pieces are stacked casually, haphazardly, as though there is no need to preserve them. As though there is simply no shortage of this beauty and therefore no need to feel anxiety at its wear and tear. The colours are, in the main, muted. Greys, cloudy greens and mauve mushroom across stretches of white. Occasional arterial lines in deeper colours cut through the ambient abstraction of colour to make a precise and faithful rendering of some human concern. I see a sink in one picture, a pile of walnut shells in another.

Boxes and boxes of supplies are stacked and wedged around the walls, even piled in front of the large sliding glass door that occupies the end wall.

'This is what I need your help with, Aoileann!' She gestures at the chaos of boxes. 'The museum had two lads help me bring my things from the Mórthír but they were mad to go, not arsed helping me organise things. And I'm still not quite myself since the birth so I just can't ...' Her words run out and I take up the thread.

‘They should’ve helped.’

She nods at this.

‘I’m really happy to do it, though.’

She smiles at this.

Her smile turns some inner dial of mine right up and I realise I am smiling back. I’ve never smiled without considerable effort before and, for a second, I am rocked. I think Rachel senses this but says nothing.

‘The first thing we need to do is eat.’ She leaves me standing in the beauty and crosses over to the kitchen. I follow with a reluctance that she spots. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll get back to all that. Do you like them?’ She isn’t angling for flattery; she’s genuinely curious. She unwraps the baby and lays it in a wicker basket propped on a wooden stand under the middle windows.

‘I like them, yes.’ I have no idea how to articulate that I feel I have trespassed on her simply by *looking* at them. How to say that I feel I have rifled through her hidden self and rather than feeling satisfied am only starving for more of her. I am unsettled by the beauty. Unbalanced.

At the table, we eat boiling bowls of tomatoes and lentils with yoghurt dolloped on top. At first I’m cautious because, while the smell is compelling, the food is unfamiliar. I only know what the lentils are because Rachel announces it as she ladles it out. The flavour is earthy with a little sweetness and something else – not quite a taste, but a sensation – that tingles and teases my mouth. It’s startling, a little like my food is fighting back. It reminds me of the time I placed a spider in my mouth. I was much younger. I had seen a spider come out of my mother’s mouth. I didn’t know it wasn’t normal.

I chance a look at Rachel to see if she is finding it tingly or weird; she catches me looking and smiles.

‘Spicy?’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a kind of flavour, you can add to cooking.’ She gets up, grabs a little glass container from the counter and hands it to me. ‘It comes from dried chillies, ground up. I was friends with an Englishman who’d spent

time travelling. He gave me lots of cooking things. This country's no place for vegetarians.' She laughs.

I examine the red powder and then unscrew the lid and breathe it in deeply just as Rachel protests. 'Aoileann! No!'

I reel from the stinging punch of the stuff, my eyes tearing up. 'Shite.' I cough and wipe my face with my sleeve.

'You poor thing; I should've warned you. I only put a small bit in the pot. It's very strong.'

I'm embarrassed, which in turn causes my rage to flare. When she reaches for me, I wrench myself back from her touch and immediately regret it. The fall of her face lets me know I've shown too much of my true self. She settles back in her seat with a caution that wasn't there moments before. Misery streams into my head. I've ruined it.

She shoots a subtle glance at the lump in the basket. Her baby, her precious baby. I must be quick before positions harden and it becomes them against me.

'I'm sorry. I got a fright,' I try. 'I didn't mean to ...' I look down to my lap; I want to retrieve the connection of yesterday. 'I was embarrassed. I don't have friends, and I was hoping ...' I trail off, leaving my plea of hope hanging there between us.

(Hope, I've come to learn, can be a noose. When we hope, we willingly, blithely, put our heads in a sadistic coil and wait to be hanged. I hoped for things when I was younger – pathetic things – and was always left swinging.)

My pleading does it. She relaxes visibly. Her watchful expression thaws and a nod of gentle understanding lets me know I have her back within reach.

'Aoileann, I'm so sorry. Have some yoghurt, it cools the heat of it.' She retrieves the pot of plain yoghurt and scoops some out.

As I take her proffered spoon into my body, I feel a pulse of arousal in me. I think of spoon feeding the bed-thing and wonder at how radically different this is.

After lunch, I help her carry in a huge wooden board from where it was resting on the side wall of the house under a ragged tarp. We set it on top of two sawhorses she has pulled into the centre of the art space and she secures it down with four big metal G clamps that screw into place.

‘Now! I can actually work. If I’m let.’ She tosses a look at the basket, which is creaking. The thing inside is unstilling from its sleep. She presses her hands to her breasts lightly with a tired wince. ‘He’s hungry.’ She lifts him out and lays him on her shoulder while shifting cushions into place on the sofa. His blanket comes away and slides over her arm, falling to the floor. I see my chance to be a part of this. I grab it up and when she is sitting and arranging the baby, I lean down and tuck it around him.

‘Thanks dote, and thanks for your help today.’ A quick smile for me, then she is engrossed in the baby again.

‘Great, sure.’ I edge back from their embrace, aware that I am now unwanted. She is unbuttoning the front of her dress and pulling it back to expose one large pale breast, threaded with veins and tipped with a kissed-pink nipple. She handles herself with a reverent care in this process. Not like the boisterous, unthinking way she scrubbed herself dry after the sea the day before. When she is sharing her body with the baby, her demeanour changes entirely. She’s dreamy as the gummy baby clamps to her nipple. The baby is the most animate I’ve seen it. Its black eyes look curious and the busy determination of it chugging and swallowing now hints at a knowing quality that I hadn’t credited it with. In contrast to the baby’s sudden sly intelligence, she seems sapped and stupid.

‘Maybe I’ll see you at the beach again ...?’

I’m prolonging my leaving.

‘Mmmmm.’ Rachel nods. ‘Yes.’

‘I could hold the baby while you swim?’ The clock says half two. The bed-thing’s nappy is no doubt getting worse, but I don’t want to leave without some confirmation that we’ll see each other again.

‘That would be lovely, Aoileann.’ Rachel smiles as the baby raps a little fist on her breast as if asserting his ownership. ‘Maybe in a day or two, let us settle in.’

‘Same time Wednesday then?’

‘Yes.’ Rachel nodded. ‘Sorry, I’m so dozy. The feeding makes me so tired.’

‘Tuigim. Slán.’ I step back into the dark mouth of the hall and continue to watch with interest as Rachel’s head drifts down to the right. The baby’s sucking is loud in the quiet. I am completely still listening to her breathing slow; I’m sure she is falling asleep. She is leaking. There’s a wet patch spreading from under her other breast and she makes no move to stop it, which seems to confirm that she has drifted off.

I have to go.

I want to stay. I want to watch. I have never seen abundance like Rachel. My mother is desiccated. My grandmother is implacable like stone. Our island is an arid ruin. I want to see how life-giving works.

I ease forward out of the gloom and stand over her. The baby spies me and watches as I gently-gently undo more buttons on her dress and bring the other side back, peeling the fruit of her. Her other breast is gorgeous and streaming milk. She doesn’t stir and I kneel to look closer. The milk forms like pearls on her nipple before spilling in rivulets down the underside of her tit. Her nipple purses in the chill of the air. Beside me at exactly my level, the baby is staring. I look up at Rachel’s face. Every cell of me is tensed but she is utterly docile. Another pearl of milk has formed and the urge to taste her pushes my tongue out between my lips. I am careful not to disturb the couch cushion or touch her legs as I lean forward and gently lap the tiny pearl from her nipple. It is a flicker of a moment but the pleasure detonates deep. I pull back in surprise and fear at the spasm inside me. I close over Rachel’s dress and crawl backwards to the safety of the darkness. The baby, perhaps trying to sound the alarm, unhitches from its breast and shrieks. I skitter farther back towards the door.

‘Oh baby, baby.’ Rachel is still dazed. ‘You want the other side.’ I hear her rearranging and then emitting a gratified sigh as the gulping resumes.

As I leave silently, I realise that right at this precise moment, the baby and I are tasting the exact same sweetness.

Back at the house, I quickly drench my hair in the ash bucket that stands outside to the right of the side door. It's been months since we've lit a fire, so it has just been there brimming with water between downpours since February. I squeeze the rope of hair and twist it on top of my head. Now my damp cold hands and sopping hair smell like fire. We didn't so much as rinse the bucket before it took up its new post by the steps. I don't care. This is my cover in case Móraí has arrived back and seen my note. My hair is wet; I have been swimming.

In the kitchen there is no sign of Móraí. I examine the counters and table for any hint that she came back at some stage in the last few hours. It seems she has not. I rip up the note. Next, I hurry to the bed-thing. It's lying as I left it. I need to get it cleaned and upright quickly in case Móraí arrives back early. Once the sightseers start – oh the sights they could see! I gaze at the bed-thing – Móraí says that most days she will be back by 4.30 but right now there isn't much to do yet, mainly just clearing out the old factory rooms. At some point, surely they'll be cordoning off the place beyond Rachel's house, it's no place for outsider's eyes, that place with the graves and ropes.

I check the nappy and it is predictably sopping. *Next time give her less water beforehand.* The thought asserts itself without any conscious effort from me. There's no next time for the nappy, I remind myself. The nappy was a one-off. But then I remember my meeting with Rachel: the same time Wednesday. Another nappy day won't hurt.

11.

The morning after I go to Rachel's house, I feel full of her. I had only drank the tiniest bit of her milk but the shock of the sweetness is still reverberating as I rise to go to the bed-thing. I have made sure to get up before Móraí this morning. Now that I have Rachel, I must not arouse the slightest bit of notice in Móraí. While I'm not sure why, I know she will be unhappy with me spending even an afternoon with another person. Not that I've ever tried to before. When I was little, the other children on the island were kept out of my reach, the backs of the adults closed around the children if I ever strayed near them.

Sometimes they strayed near to *me* though. When they were out of their mothers' grasp they played on the road up to our house. When they'd approach, their skittish cries filtered through the rocks-slats in the window of the bed-thing's room. The cries penetrated the house, causing a disturbance in the still, empty rooms. I would press my face to the dry cold stone and observe what I could through the rock's chinks. It was only a sliver of a scene, but I could watch them safely and observe their customs. They were constantly moving, clipping each other's heads and twisting limbs. Mean laughter and needling chatter perforated the silence around me inside the house. The robust and gleeful living that the children did outside mocked my confinement; they were dancing on the ground above a corpse.

Their favourite game was to touch the front of our house. One by one, they came charging towards me where I crouched just behind their target. It was thrilling, as though I was playing the game as well. Sometimes they would grab up a handful of the small, splintered bits of rock from the ground by our house and take it back to throw at the group. The children

would scatter, screaming, trying to dodge the rocks. If one got them, glancing off a leg or arm, they'd spit where it landed, right on themselves. Through watching their game, I came to understand that the walls of our house were considered as doomed as they believed me to be.

On days when there was a rupture in the unity of the group, one child might be held down while the others pressed the hard-edged shards right into the pinned one's mouth.

One of the older, strutting boys would invariably raise the game's stakes. He would dash all the way to the defunct front door and lay a palm on the blank wood, polished smooth by so many years of unremitting wind. As they streaked past me, I would enter the game. I wanted to play and the only way I could think of was to give them more dread to weave into their mythology about us.

'Níl me beo,' I would sing, pursing my lips at the gaps between stones to send the words

(I don't live / I'm dead)

out into the day outside. It was my impression of the wind that sang through the wheezing, gasping wall at the back of the house.

It was always hard to tell if my words reached their ears. Did they stab a fright in their chests? Or was my little song drowned in the wind or their own chugging breath?

Occasionally their heads would jerk as they passed close to me. They'd veer wider as though scorched. This was my way of winning the game. The game ended when Móraí went out to roar at them or, if she wasn't home, it ended when they got bored.

From time to time, I let them see me. I would leave the house by the side door and their carefree talk would be snuffed out at the sight of me. I didn't walk down towards them. I didn't want to see them flee, which they inevitably would. It is not a pleasant sensation. Instead, I turned right to begin the steep climb up to the back cliffs. I was always certain they were staring. The very thought thrilled me. I placed my feet into the notches that

formed the only route to the towering ledge at the back of the island. The notches were carved by me. It's said that nobody has been back there since Darrach O'Reaighligh and the poor children he brought with him. It happened when Móraí was a child, and she told me the story when *I* was a child in hopes of warning me off the back cliffs, but I go often. I suspect that the islanders don't believe the children when they bring back reports of my walks. The islanders struggle to believe that even I, as dreadful as I am, would go near that place of badness and tragedy. No doubt the children describe the gouged-out stairs rising up to the land's end, but none of the adults come to see. It's bad enough that we perch oppressively above them in our ugly house; they have no interest in looking at our abhorrent existence up close.

Móraí comes in as I am raising the bed upright. She doesn't offer to help.

'You got up,' she remarks.

'I did.' I nod. 'I want to do it right, Móraí.' I loop the rope and concentrate on tugging the blankets straight. I avoid looking at Móraí. I'm afraid that the traces of Rachel, the steely stitches of a new and potent preoccupation knit into me, will somehow be visible to Móraí. I'm afraid the circling thoughts of Rachel's soft huge body and dripping breasts will surface and show themselves, riddling my skin like scars alongside the veins of me. I must do every single task perfectly so that Móraí has no reason to look at me too closely. In the kitchen, I make the porridge and set it aside in the bowl to cool. I retrieve the key in the wall and get the knife. I slice and toast the bread and mix the new loaf before putting it in the oven. At the table, Móraí sits and accepts the plate of toast I pass her.

'How was the factory yesterday?'

'Museum,' Móraí corrects.

'Museum,' I reply.

'Fine. Good.'

I want her to mention Rachel, but it seems unlikely that she will of her own accord.

'Was there many there?'

She sighs as though this simple conversation is unbelievably taxing. Perhaps it is; we never converse. We exchange information – updates on the bed-thing, jobs that need to be done.

‘The Mórthírí are still underfoot.’ She rolls her eyes. ‘They’re full of notions. They want to bring a documentary-maker over to record the islanders’ recollections of the old days here. As if those days are gone,’ she scoffs. ‘They went to the pub to ask some of the older ones if they would talk to the camera. They had me come with them to translate. I had to laugh. As if I was some great one to bridge the divide!’

The islanders dislike Móraí even though she’s one of them. We each chew our toast and the gasping of the wall swells to fill the silence. I try to carefully bring the talk round to Rachel.

‘What’s in the museum?’ I run my finger through a stringy clot of jam on my plate.

‘Photographs of the island. The church being built. Fishermen pulling in nets from their boats. Island-life nonsense. They’re trying to get more things to fill the place.’

‘Like what?’

‘Oh, shitty old knits from back when they were handmade. And they want to make a video from a boat going all the way around the island. I told them they’d need to get a television from the Mórthír to play it on and they couldn’t believe there isn’t a single one on the island. They’re very stupid. Sure the radios hardly pick up a thing, never mind a telly.’

‘Will anyone else work there?’

‘Not until they can trick some eejits to come for a holiday.’ She passes her empty plate to me and I bring them to the sink. ‘There’s no one else around at all. Except for a painter girl they’ve dragged over to put her work in the dyeing room. They’re calling it the “artist studio”. They’ve government money to spend so they’re bringing a different artist every few months to live in Teach na Reilige and paint or what have you. They’ll put the pictures in the museum. Lucky she has terrible Irish, she knows what “Teach” means but not “Reilige”.’ Móraí blasts a derisive little exhale out through her teeth.

‘What is the girl like?’ I keep my voice even, my eagerness in check.

Móraí considers for a moment. ‘She’s a solid thing. She’s just had a baby, and I mean just. Stupid idea bringing that here. She won’t manage whatever shite she must do at the museum and that baby at the same time.’

I think of the still thing in the basket. It had seemed placid enough. It cried some but it was happy once it was sucking.

*(Sucking.)
(a throb in my place)*

At the sink, I run the tap.

Móraí rises and retrieves her wool coat from the hook by the side door, preparing to leave, but I want more from her.

‘Why won’t she manage, Móraí?’

Móraí is, I can see, bored of talking to me. She pulls on the coat.

‘Babies are very hard work. They’re awake all night. They feed constantly. She’s feeding him herself, I’ve seen. She’ll be exhausted. It’ll drag her down if she’s not careful. Stupid idea to come here.’

‘Maybe she had to come here.’ I can’t help it – I am defensive on Rachel’s behalf.

‘Mmmm.’ Móraí’s lost all interest. She pulls out the veg basket. ‘Don’t be lazy today. We need to use up the bits at the end here, they’re nearly black.’

‘Móraí?’ There’s something I have been desperate to know since having the milk on my tongue. ‘Did my ... mother ...’ I must work to bring the word up into my mouth and Móraí snaps upright when I say it. ‘Did she feed me herself?’

‘What do you care about that for?’ Móraí spits with a sudden rage and I automatically tense and coil inward. She doesn’t hit because she doesn’t like to touch me, but the force of her anger, when it comes, always strikes me hard, especially because it’s so rare.

‘I was just curious.’ I focus on my hands scrubbing at the plates: they are red, inflamed by the harsh cold water we do all our washing in.

‘She did feed you herself. Even though she struggled to make enough milk. Feeding you wore her out. You were a ravenous baby, always at her.’ She pulls the side door open. ‘Do that veg,’ she instructs without looking back, yanking the door closed behind her.

I go to get the porridge from the counter and find that in the time we were talking it has gone completely cold.

What does it matter? slipped through my head even as I tipped the congealed porridge into a new pot to give it a little heat. It held the bowl shape until I stirred it up a bit. I don’t eat porridge; years of spoon-feeding the grey-tinged slop to the thing in the bed means my stomach protests at the very sight of the stuff. Móraí also avoids it, I presume for the same reason.

Once I’ve taken the chill off it, I scoop it back into the bowl and bring it next door. I spoon it into her. And even when her bites slow – the sign that she has had enough – I keep pushing the spoon into her. I am both aware and unaware of what I’m doing. I am thinking about Rachel carrying Seamus and stroking him. I stare at a spot on the wall behind the bed-thing, thinking about Rachel feeding him. How he ruled over her as he sucked and gulped her down.

A clogged gasp brings me back to the bedside and the thing I am feeding. It is struggling to swallow. I wait indifferently. As soon as she gets the porridge down, it spills back up her throat in a gush.

I sit on the edge of the bed and spoon it into her. I stand up fast to avoid the scrambled porridge, now boiled after a stint inside her, from touching me. The vomit coats its chin and drips in curdled clumps onto the front of her nightgown. I’m furious and viciously smack the mattress just beside where her hips lie. I know it’s my fault, which makes me madder. I storm into the kitchen and dump the bowl and spoon into the sink with a clatter. Then I am back because I must wrench the nightgown from her body. I yank her torso forward, prompting more porridge to spill up from her. She creaks and splutters; her mouth and nose are pressed down into the mess. Good. I ignore the sounds and pull the nightgown apart at the back. Next, I gather the edges of the material and ball it up, making sure the vomit is

contained within. I pull her back upright and swipe at her face with the nightgown, then I take it to the kitchen and stuff it in the bin. I know it's a waste, but I am not scraping her sick off and rinsing it clean.

I take a fresh nightgown from the drawers in the corner of its room. In the bed, its eyes are nervy and streaming. It's panting slightly and the contraction and expansion of its chest is more noticeable than usual. I draw closer with the nightgown. I am so used to its body that, a lot of the time, I hardly see it anymore. However, now, perhaps because I've encountered the lushness of Rachel, I am suddenly struck by my shrivelled mother's ruin. She was not always like this. Did she lie under her baby – me – sapped by love like Rachel did on the couch the day before? I try to find some evidence that this body nourished me. Her heaving chest has calmed. I rearrange the blanket so that the stark reminder of the nappy is concealed. The mother in the nappy thwarts the image I'm trying to conjure.

I examine its breasts with new eyes. They are small and drape slightly over the top of its rib cage. The breasts are barely more than wrinkles of skin with bead-like nipples. Rachel's are heavy and satisfying.

I lean over the bed-thing and take a breast in each hand. I trace the depleted tits and the nipple that, much to my surprise, responds to my touch. The rest of the body is still but her pale nipples tighten under my fingers. I look to her face to see if there's any change in her expression and I am shocked to find her ever-restless eyes are still and watchful, locked on to the wall beyond me. I don't take my hands away. I continue to watch her.

'If you want me to stop, you should do something,' I tell her quietly. Her eyes remain steady. I knead her breast as Rachel did to coax the milk. Does the bed-thing have anything left? I move closer and still it stares at the wall. I pinch her right nipple, rolling it between my thumb and index finger a little. Nothing is coming yet. I lower my mouth to the hard little berry and start to suck.

12.

After I try to feed from it, I cannot get rid of the uneasy sense that I have allowed something in that will not be easily purged. I stand at the sink skinning the veg, a pot is coming to the boil and I am listening to the wall. Today it is hissing in exasperation at me. It says I am stupid to expect anything from the bed-thing. It's two hours since I released her from my mouth's grip, her decrepit breast flopping. Two hours have passed but if I try, I can still feel the withholding nipple probing me, intruding on my body. My tongue laps at the memory of the teat, my lips drawn down over my teeth, working at the bumpy surround – trying to draw something from this mother-carcass. Even though I was the one to place myself on her, I feel angry at her. If she were not so still and useless, I would not be this way.

If she were not so empty, I would be full. I would be boiled pink with love like Rachel's baby. Instead I am an echo.

The steam from the now-boiled pot spreads across the ceiling above me. I pull it away from the heat and pour some into a cup. I debate my choices. It'll hurt, but I have to be rid of her.

13.

That night in my bed, my mouth feels seared from the scalding water but at least the pain has killed the lingering presence of the nipple.

At dinner, Móraí noticed my not eating and looked for some time at the blisters around my mouth but said nothing. A grunt was all I got when I asked about the day. She didn't ask me about mine, but she walked about the house taking inventory of the tasks I had completed. Dinner made, the kitchen wiped free of the constant blizzard of grit that the wall releases daily. Fresh sanding of the scratchings of the bed-thing. I had made secret note of a new line worked into the floor at a right angle to the window in its room. In my copy, I had drawn a little diagram of the window and marked the line's placement with precision. Then I wore at it until it disappeared. Móraí checked the bed-thing, assiduously lifting folds and parting its limbs for evidence of any neglect in its care. She was silent, which meant I had done alright.

In my bed that night, I think about how long the day had been. How each hour had bled into the next at such a maddening pace. I never usually notice. What has changed? The answer, of course, is Rachel. My days have so rarely been made of anything beyond what is contained in the walls of this house. My days have always been obligation after obligation arranged into rows of tedium. The days so rarely deviate that I nearly forgot they could. I forgot that any break from the bland hours had the effect of speeding up time. It was hard returning to my narrow life and the hours clawed back to a crawl once again, each day advancing so slowly it felt like the island's patchy scrub was growing faster.

Entering Rachel's realm, however briefly, had provided a vivid contrast between the lives of other people and the stymied lives contained in this house. Reminding me that dwelling inside the stone jaws of these windows is my life sentence because

she will last forever.

In the next room, she creaks.

We never see her move.

When I was younger and cared more, I would try to stay awake, but on those nights nothing ever happened. Did she know she would be seen? Why does she not want to be seen? Often I would only wake when Móraí was retrieving her. Occasionally the bed-thing gets quite far: out the side door if we forget to lock the kitchen.

For a while, I wondered if Móraí did the moving. The bed-thing didn't seem capable. And the way we find her crumpled, discarded like a loathed thing – it seemed like it could be Móraí. But its legs and hands show the violence caused by it dragging itself, and sometimes I hear Móraí rail at it.

'Is everything else you do not enough, you bitch?' I heard Móraí hiss in the hall one night, her teeth locked in rage and her face pressing right into the bed-thing's. Móraí's impatience with it finally convinced me it wasn't her but had to be the bed-thing all by itself.

Now in the room beside me, I hear the gurgle and glug of the bed-thing. I think I can smell her, even from in here. She is disgusting. More shit and piss tomorrow and every day after. How did I put my mouth on it? Am I so desperate? My face folds in a sneer and the blisters sing with pain. One bursts and wets my chin. I dab at it with the sheet.

Somewhere in the gloomy night across the island, Seamus is getting everything he wants. I imagine Rachel prone as he gorges on her. I imagine slapping him right off her. His floppy body hits the stone floor. His *head* hits the stone floor

(wet cracking)

and I feel good.

Then I am upright and sliding out of the bed. I can go and look at Rachel if I want. Or at least try; she might have the curtains closed but I can try. This is my time, I realise. During the day, the bed-thing demands me but the night hours, I could spend near Rachel. She may even be awake. Móraí had said the nights with a baby were restless, taxing.

After I dress, I carry my runners and move quietly through the house and out the side door. Outside, I stay in my socks. The stony ground shifts and crunches less if I go slowly and curl my feet around the shale. Some pieces are jagged, but I detach from the pain quite easily. Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. My mantra buoys me along to the wall past which I can put my shoes on – I don't think Móraí will hear me from there.

During the day the sea is darker than the terrain of the island, but at night this is reversed. This is what I see now as my eyes adjust to the night: the sea is grey, the waves clutching at what little light the stars give. The island, meanwhile, is black and looks like a hole. I imagine unseen forces holding the surrounding water back, stopping it from spilling down into the void. The island drags everything down and might one day drain even the huge sea.

I make my way down into this depression. Occasionally houses emerge from the darkness around me, then recede again. I feel dislocated in the night; I don't even feel like a body. My limbs and legs come to butt-ends, my hands and feet taken by the dark.

Finally the bulk of the factory slides past me on my left, and I am at Rachel's cottage. The squares of the two front windows are drawn with fine lines of light where the curtains fail to quite meet the frames. Something dark and exquisite unfurls in me. She has left lights on. I will be able to see her. Before I come too close, I pass across the front of the house so that I can approach from the right-hand side. I move in until I am nearly nose to the grey-and-white-speckled stone wall. I think about her on the other side of the wall. We are probably only a foot apart. I think I can feel her, the aliveness of her. Can she feel me?

(my taint)

Has she thought about me? Probably not, I know. Her days are textured, full of creation and newness. Her body is willing things into being, her baby and her milk and her art. She is like the sea, constantly churned up and moving. In comparison, I am blank. Empty like the island, this hole in the ocean.

I hear the baby's cries through the glass to my left and, knowing she will be absorbed in it – him – I feel safe to lean to my left and look in through the tiny gap between curtain and window. In the bed, Rachel is shushing and patting the fleshy lump on her shoulder. Its nappy is tiny, I note. I have only ever seen the bed-thing's nappy. The crying grinds on. It doesn't sound like a human noise. It sounds like rocks scraping against each other. Rachel's face is ashy. She looks a little greased. Her hair hangs in clumps; it's dirty. It's been nearly two days since I've seen her and she looks different, bloodless and weak. The island is draining her and that leaching baby is pursuing her relentlessly. I want to help her so badly. I want to rescue her from the tick. The wet cracking sound in my head again.

(stomping and stomping, till it glugs and gurgles)

So satisfying.

In the bed, Rachel draws her knees up and lays the baby on this pitch of her legs. Its ruddy face is screwed in on itself and its entire body is engaged in the manufacture of this awful, berating noise.

She pleads with it.

'Please little man, mo pheata, please.'

She leans her head on the wall behind, as though the sheer blare of the horrible little thing is forcing her back. A few minutes pass and she does nothing to soothe the baby. I perk up – is she turning against him? Then she takes it back into her arms and pulls up the ratty white t-shirt she's wearing. She attempts to latch him to her right breast but he rears back, his tiny

furious face clenched like a fist. His head, I note, is barely bigger than my own fist.

(pounding, gurgling)

She gives up trying to feed it. She slides her legs out and over the side of the bed. She lays the baby right in the centre of the bed and puts the two pillows that had been stacked behind her alongside its body. She turns from the screaming and eases herself to standing. She looks so ruined by it all, I don't even worry that she'll see me here. She is standing but looks barely conscious. She only stands for a minute before dropping to the floor. She sits against the bed, knees to her chest. She presses her hands to either side of her head and stares at the floor just beyond her long, white feet. She is pressing so hard that the bones of her hands protrude. She doesn't cry but she stays on the floor for a long time and the baby never stops.

At last, she pulls herself up and checks that the raging thing hasn't moved. It is still safe between the pillows. It is incredible to me that such a helpless, immobile thing can exert such tormenting assault. It can't even lift its little fist-head.

I shouldn't be surprised though. My bed-thing is a tormentor too, but with different methods. The bed-thing punishes very passively. It torments us in its listless way, holding us in a grip of obligation. Locked into its care, we try to slow the rot of it, we try to contain the mess of it.

Rachel walks out the bedroom door and into the kitchen. She moves out of sight but, from the light that stretches briefly across the floor, I can tell she has taken something from the fridge. Is she eating? It doesn't seem like her to leave the baby screaming while she eats. She returns holding what, after a couple of seconds, I identify as leaves from a cabbage. They are veiny and rubbery and I can't imagine why she would eat them. But she doesn't, instead she slides them into the left-hand cup of her bra so that they hug close to the breast. She lies on the bed, slips an arm under the baby and positions him to her right so I can no longer see him. Then she settles down on her right side, her right arm draped up out of the way across the mattress

above the baby's head. Now she has her back to me fully and injustice flares in me. The baby quiets at last. I back up and leave them locked together.

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14.

Weeks pass, and though Rachel and I have only met on the beach once since our first encounter, I have spent many more hours with her than that. At night, I cross the island to Rachel. Each night, she is the same: worn and frustrated, pummelled by the baby's tantrums and overcome by exhaustion. Sometimes, I find her rag-dolled on the bed, overtaken by sleep, even amid the squall of the unhappy baby shrieking in her loosened arms. When she is asleep I am emboldened. Tonight, I slide through the side door that leads to the space where her work is piled. I stand among the clutter and ephemera, absorbing it all. Rachel's fingers have touched every inch of every page and stretched canvas and object. The scratch of my scurrying hands sifting is covered by the wails of the baby. Still, I pause in my hunting every few minutes to put an ear to the cries. From standing at the window for hours at a time, I have become familiar with the rhythms of the screaming. A consistent, grating bawl means Rachel is asleep and the baby is tiring, perhaps sensing the futility of carrying on full throttle. I am amazed Rachel can even fall asleep through it, though from what I see of her awake, trudging from kitchen to bedroom to bathroom, it feels like the sleep advances and overthrows her with little effort. I sense it is a smothering sleep, impossible to fight. If the cries pitch up into demanding, head-shredding peals, as it is doing this very instant, this is an indicator that Rachel has woken up again.

The loathed baby is unwittingly helping my cause, sounding a warning for me. I slip back outside in time. I take up my position around the front, gazing into the bedroom window to observe the foreign terrain of love contained within.

She wraps her arms around the baby and sways to soothe him. Even if this doesn't quiet the shrieking, she still smiles down at him despite the exhaustion. She whispers her love to him and when he latches to her, she lies back in ecstatic relief. She carries him from place to place. She leaves him down occasionally, but she always makes sure he's safe. She wanders but is always drawn back to him. He cries and she cries and he cries and she cries. They are both drunken and overcome by their stupid love. The baby is calmest when the swell of Rachel's body enfolds him. They're filled up. Sated by one another. Their bellies kiss when they lie on their sides facing each other for him to feed. Often in the tangle of them, it is hard to find where one ends and the other one begins. I play out stories in my head where it is me that's crawling up alongside her. I am feeding and the baby is nowhere.

(he's still and silent)

I press and squeeze her and she spreads herself so that I can push even more deeply into her. Drawing her around me, I am sucking and pressing and taking everything she gives.

As I dream this, I watch them, and I run my hands over my arms and belly trying so hard to imagine the sensation of another body holding me. The soothing and petting, the swaying and loving.

I tremble as I watch and something delicious that I can't name tugs deep down in me. I am nervous. I leave because these sensations are too much and because another grim dawn is setting in from the east. The morning sky is bleeding across the island as I hurry back to the house. At the top of the rise right in front of our house, I am halted by a horrible sight.

It is a figure bent backwards over the wall, its head cracked right back to face me. Its white eyes are wide and rolling, and a terrible creak emits from the stretched gash it has for a mouth. Its arms are propped stiffly up against the wall and the hands rest, bloody palms up, on the top stones. I don't hurry forward. I am annoyed that I will have to drag it inside. I am also nervous that Móraí heard it drag itself out here, got up to look for my

help and realised I wasn't there. I am nearly at the thing. I glance towards Móraí's window but there's no way of knowing if she is looking back at me. Maybe (hopefully) she is still asleep with no idea that both the bed-thing and I have been on the move. I climb over the wall as the bed-thing continues to creak. Now, I am on the side of the wall where her legs trail to the ground. The blood looks black in the early light. More mess and more to clean up. I lean over her to take her by the shoulders and pull her up, but it is hard, the position hurts my back. Being careful with her means I am the one uncomfortable. I'm the one in pain. She is so decrepit yet so solid. I need to brace against the wall and contort myself. I stare at her and imagine the satisfaction of hurting her. Its neck is slender.

I check that my body is blocking what I'm doing from Móraí's window and then I grab her skinny neck and hook it like a handle. The creaking ceases for one merciful minute when I curl my fingers all the way around, closing my thumb firmly across its throat. I give the notches of its windpipe a little exploratory press. Satisfying.

(stomp, gurgle, nothing)

I use my other hand to push off the wall and heave it up to a sitting position. Then I let it crumple to the ground while I go in search of the current sheet of tarp. We use tarp to get it back in when it has made it all the way outside. I find the blue tarp stuffed in a steel bucket round Móraí's side of the house. We go through a few of these tarps a year; they only have a couple of goes in them before they start to tear under her as we haul her over the rocks. I don't care now if Móraí knows I wasn't in my bed. I will say I woke early and went for a walk. She and the bed-thing own my days, but I can do what I like at night. I dump its wrecked body on the tarp and pull it the twenty or so feet to the house. The bed-thing got far, I note. Where does it think it's going?

I drag it all the way to its room, lay down the belts on the plastic and shove the bed-thing until it is positioned on top of them and I can strap them around. I lower the hooks, attach the straps and raise it onto the bed. I

am tired from the work of it, but I still have to clean up her legs and hands. Black blood beads at the seams of her cuts and grazes. The sun is well above the horizon by the time I have dressed and bandaged her new wounds. Móraí leans in on her way to the toilet. I throw a hand towards the tarp that's still on the floor.

‘She was nearly at the road.’

Móraí shakes her head. ‘Just stop it,’ she admonishes the bed-thing. As if that will ever work. Why does Móraí think the bed-thing *can* stop it? Or do anything at all about itself?

Móraí and I have breakfast and she leaves. I give the bed-thing breakfast and lie down on my bed until it's time to toilet her.

This exhaustion is scalding. I want to fall asleep even if that means the bed-thing will shit in the nappy. I am just so tired.

Her incessant creak sounds through the wall and I start to seethe. The sound and my own growing irritation thwart my sleep. Each time I nearly drop into the comforting dark another rasp yanks me back. I think of my hand closing around its neck. How the tightening of my fingers stoppered her, shutting off the infernal creak until I released her. I leave my bed and go next door. The belts are still strapped around her; I left them on since I would be bringing it to the toilet soon enough. Now I undo the top belt from around its chest and bring it up around its neck. I feed the strap back through the buckle and pull it tight. I experiment with the pressure for a few minutes. It must be tight enough to end the creak but not so tight that she can't breathe. I pull a bit more and the creak stops as her throat twists closed like a tap. I ignore the whiny, scratchy gasps coming from her as I wheedle and press the prong of the buckle into the leather to make a new hole at this exact right spot.

I have to go at it for a few minutes. Her head rolls roughly back and forth as I work the spike. I should have just got a knife from the beginning, but it's nearly done now. Finally I get it there and the creak has been strangled into blissful silence. A hand in front of her nose and mouth confirms that she can breathe. Just. I am delighted. I look at her and it's immensely cheering to see her trussed up like that, her body slack and her

head snapped to the right. Hanged in the bed. Back on my own bed next door, I smile. It is a smile I don't have to think about. It is not one from my repertoire of practised smiles, but one that buds of its own accord.

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15.

Two hours later, the slam of the side door abruptly lifts the sleep-fog. Móraí must be back. I'm out of the bed and raking hands over my hair and face to try and look alert. She's bustling in the kitchen as I slide down the hall and into the bed-thing's room. I must get the belt off it. And the nappy.

In the bed, it looks worse than ever. For some reason its arms are now bent upright at the elbows, finger stumps splayed. The index finger with the glint of tooth-bone protruding is pointed towards the window opposite.

I slap its arms down and reef the belt off. Móraí will no doubt be in here to check on me in a matter of minutes. I examine its neck: it is reddened from the belt but the skin is not broken. I must decide fast. I can get its hair from the drawers over by the door and put it on to cover it up. Móraí will think it's strange but she won't see the marks. Or I can say it has been at itself again.

The tiniest scuff of steps behind me lets me know that Móraí is now in the doorway.

'An raibh maidin mhaith agat?' she asks heavily, no interest in the answer.

'It's been at itself again.' I step aside to indicate the rawness around her neck.

She shakes her head, her mean mouth set, knifing a hard line ear-to-ear across the lower part of her face.

'We're tired of you,' she tells the bed-thing. She turns to me: 'I'm not here for long; I need to bring down some of the old photographs to the museum men. They were too interested when they learned I live in the house up here. They wanted to come and take pictures. I got them off my

back. Said I had loads.’ She leaves and heads into the living room where I can hear the scrape of drawers and shuffle of papers.

I follow her and stand at the door. She is flipping through a stack, taking out rejects and flicking them back into the drawer.

‘Was the artist there this morning?’

Móraí doesn’t look up. ‘She’s around the place. She’s wrecked by the looks of her. The museum men were asking for some things to hang up and she started crying. There’s no hope of her doing anything of use with a brand-new baby. Stupid idea.’

Satisfied with her pickings, Móraí straightens up and stalks past me. ‘I can smell that pissy nappy, you know,’ she accuses without looking back at me. ‘You cannot leave her in it, it’s only more hassle for us.’ At the end of the hall, the kitchen door swallows her, then the side door bangs and, knowing she is gone, I relax. At least the nappy isn’t dirty. The clock on the kitchen wall says noon, I’m late for the bed-thing’s shit but regardless I am drawn to the drawer still hanging open, the photographs Móraí is keeping from the museum, half spewing out.

I pick through them and every one of them shows the bed-thing back in the smiling days

(when she was my mother)

Nobody knows she’s here.

What happened to her?

Is she sick?

Who did this to her?

Why do we keep her going?

On and on she will go.

She will last

forever.

Back at its bedside, I arrange the straps and hoist and drag. Once it’s in place on the toilet there’s a ghastly release. Sluice it, clean it, dry it. I hoist

again and drag again and hoist again. Finally it is done. With Móraí been and gone, I feel safe to go to the beach. I might see Rachel. At the foot of the bed, I grapple with its legs and hips to get a fresh nappy on and this is when I see it down by my feet: a new mark between the end of the bed and the window – a V scratched just beside the stretch that I most recently sanded.

I get my copy out from its spot under the floor and open to the last page where I marked the line from the previous day. I draw the V beside it.

I V

Is it 'I've'? But then I realise the letters are not side by side but stacked.

I
V

I puzzle over the copy for a moment and then an idea slides like a lock into home. I turn my page so that my V and the V on the ground are pointing the same way.

—>

It's not a V or an I but an arrow. I shoot to my feet, half expecting the bed-thing to be sitting up and looking at me. Perhaps its gash-mouth grinning at my discovery. But it is the same as ever. Absolutely still, the interminable creaking from its throat, the only hint that it lives.

(it lives)

Impatience flares in me.

'If you can do *this*?' I screw up the copybook. 'Why can't you do anything else?' I throw it full force at its awful face. The bed-thing doesn't flinch, its eyes don't even close as the book hits its head. I storm out to get the sandpaper. I will get this done and then swim.

Back on the floor, I scrub. The anger has ebbed and I am just eager to get out of the house, then I see another mark scratched in. It is much fainter, exactly where the floor meets the wall under the window. It is another arrow that begins on the floor and then continues up the wall. My eye is drawn higher to where an even lighter arrow is etched. And another above that. They are nearly invisible, mere grazes in the plaster of the wall. Without the deeper arrow gouged into the floor, I would never have spied them. At the window ledge, the arrows cut off. I stand and examine the wall all around the window frame, but there are no other marks.

The brief heat of curiosity dampens. I have tracked its marks for years and there's never been a glimmer of pattern or sense. She's not capable of it. I scoop up the sandpaper and swipe at the little arrows on the wall. At my right ear, wind slices through the teeth of the blocked window and, folded into the familiar whistle, there's another sound. It sounds like the chatter of paper. I turn to see, closing my left eye and pressing my right eye to the gaps in the rocks. My eye waters in the draft but I can see something clamped in the window's jaws. It's a page. How did it get in there? With difficulty. I can tell from the tiny, black blood marks on the surrounding rock edges. I try to work my fingers into the gap, but it is extremely tight.

With my two hands, I attempt to prise the rocks apart. I'm afraid the whole lot will topple but I needn't be: they are wedged in. I retrieve two long knives from the locked press in the kitchen and, using them to prise the gripped rocks, I manage to extract the paper. It is a very old piece of lined notepaper. One side is a letter. 'Dear Aoibh,' it begins. The date is October 1978. I scan to the bottom. It is signed Eoghan, which is Dada's actual name. Aoibh, I know, is the bed-thing, though only Dada ever uses its name. Dada's handwriting is blocky; the pen has pressed the pages so deeply that the ghost of the words appear in reverse on the letter's underside. The underside is oddly scratched up. Barely visible lines run like scars in every direction all over the back of the page. Tilting it in the muted light, I realise it is more writing.

I abandon the swimming plan. With everything that morning, I haven't prepared anything to feed her, so I put more porridge on over a low heat.

While it thickens, I read Dada's letter.

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16.

Dear Aoibh,

If I could have anything in this world, it would be to have you back. If I had never brought you here this would never have happened and you would be well. I know this was not your fault. You don't need to do this. We still have a chance to be a family. We can still be happy. Baby Aoileann needs you and I need you. Please speak, please look at us. Please. I miss you, I love you. We've lost so much, we can't lose each other.

Please come back to us.

Eoghan

I bring the porridge in and feed the bed-thing. He wrote this pleading note nearly twenty years ago. I would have been only a few months old at the time.

*(when I began,
she ended)*

After I clean the bed-thing, I take the letter into my room where there is more light. I carefully flatten the page and begin to slowly tilt it, allowing the light to run over it. The scored letters appear and then recede as I move the page. It is very difficult to make them out. The first letters are i-n-e-d-t-o-e. They're messy, cutting over one another and nearly impossible to untangle.

I get my copybook. If I'm ever to have a chance of reading this, I'll need to transcribe it and from that I'll hopefully draw out some sense. I pore

over the desperate scrawls for hours until the light of the day dims around me, demanding that I turn on the overhead.

In the yellowish glare, the marks are harder to make out and my eyes are tired. Móraí will be back soon and I need to get its nappy off and move it so she doesn't sense any neglect on my part. I debate where to put the letter. A tumorous little worry is forming. What if Móraí knows about the letter? What if this is some test? If I hide it in my room, she'll know I've found it. This scares me. I don't want her to take the letter until I have transcribed more. On the page before me, I only have about a third of it done. The desire to hear the words of the bed-thing for the first time in my entire life has seized me – my every cell is bursting with this desperate want. It feels like the twin of my want for Rachel. I'm afraid Móraí will know I took it if I keep the letter, but I'm more afraid that if I put it back between the rocks, the island will take it. The elements could pound the words right out of the paper. I weigh it up, then make a mark where I must resume my transcription tomorrow and put the letter under my mattress.

I scan what I have laid down in my copy. I still have a little time before Móraí will return. I just need to get the dinner on. In the kitchen, I truss the chicken. I push butter under its spotty flaps of skin and into the oven it goes. Then, next door in the bed-thing's room, I truss her too. I open the nappy, legs bent up and parted, her pinkness splayed. I pull the nappy away and clean her, then into the chair she goes. I drag the chair to the wall by the window and stare at her eyes, willing them to stop jerking under the slitty lids. I will her to look at me.

'I found it,' I tell her needlessly – she was in the room when I did after all. She gives no sign that she's heard me. In her lap, the finger with the little white tooth snags my eye. I lift it up till it's level with my face. I straighten the finger, with the shard of bone emerging from the leathery necrotic skin. My stomach revolts, as I realise I am holding her implement of writing. A grisly instrument she has forged through violent determination. I fling the hand down.

It is one answer at least. The *how* of the lettering.

I return to my room to work some more on the *why* of the thing.

I NEED TO EXPLAIN TO YOU AS AS THE TIME
HAS GONE ON AND I HAVE RETURNED TO MYSELF
IF I HAVE LOOKED OUT OF THE SKIN SLIT
SO MY EYES TO THE WORLD AROUND ME
A SMALL WORLD NOW I GLIMPSE IT ONLY
THROUGH CRACKS IN THE SHEETS OF STONE
NESTACKED FROM TOP TO BOTTOM OF THE
WINDOW BETWEEN EACH IS AN UPRIGHT
SLICE OF THIS AWFUL PLACE AND I AM
ASSAILED BY THE IMAGES OF THAT DAY
MY HANDS DOING THE DOING REGRET IS TOO
A SLIGHT A WORD FOR IT ALL IS IN HORROR
OR DON'T DESERVE TO DIE I DESERVE TO LIVE
I SEARCH OUT NEW METHODS OF PAIN

I take up my pencil and wearily start to draw vertical lines to separate out the words until Móraí comes back and it's time for dinner.

17.

The next night I am so tired, I don't go to Rachel until 4am. I'll only have a short time with her before the day will begin but it's better than not seeing her at all. On my approach to the house, I see that the bedroom light is out, but a perfect yellow square of light lies on the ground outside the sliding door round the side. I circle wide around the front to this side and position myself a few feet back from the reach of the light.

Rachel is at the table tonight. She is bent close to the page in front of her; she is making tiny, detailed strokes with a fine brush, which she occasionally dips in the ink to her right. At her feet tucked under the table is the baby in a bouncer. She gives it a percussive little tap every couple of seconds, keeping time with some mysterious motherly rhythm. Her focus is total, and I relax knowing that because she is absorbed in her work, I can look at her at my leisure. With the lights inside the house, I am completely invisible out here. She could look straight at me through the doors and all she would see is a mirror image of the room she sits in. I boldly edge closer. I pull the hood of my jacket up against the bite of the wind. And I watch.

After some time, the flick of her brush over the page is growing agitated because the baby is starting to stir a little. She jigs her foot faster and he seems to settle again. She looks at the clock and gives a little head shake. She looks utterly spent, her face sagged and pale. She ducks to check on the baby, then gets up and, keeping the baby in sight, backs away to the door that leads to the little bathroom just off the art space. She eases the door open and closes it behind her.

I swing back round to the front where there's a beady little window into the bathroom high up on the wall. I find a flowerpot just along from the

front door – home to dusty soil and a wizened little shrub – and pull it over to just under the window. I ease myself up onto it, inching up to the window until I can see Rachel’s broad back and lovely neck as she steps under the shower. Despite the spitty stream of water she looks relaxed as the steam drifts towards the ceiling. I am under pressure to take her all in as the window will be fogged up soon. Her hair hangs down on either side of her head and sends torrents of water down over her breasts and drooping belly. Blue veins surge outward from her belly button and fine ridges of silver curve round her sides and under towards the top of her pubic hair. Her legs are thick, particularly her thighs, and I feel the want in me swelling. I want to touch her very badly. Against the outside wall, I press myself up against my own tightened fist.

I notice blood is running out of her and pooling at her feet. I press harder, rubbing myself off my own knuckles. Her legs are streaked with it and there is much more of it than the nuisance blood I get every month. It also looks more vivid; the water seems to take a while to dilute it. Suddenly she stiffens and I snap back from the edge of pleasure. She looks towards the door. She turns the water off and listens. She is listening for the baby. I ease myself down and go back to the side door: the baby is sleeping. Her shower resumes and I remain at the side door. With her in the bathroom, I can get closer and see what she is painting. I shouldn’t be surprised that it is a baby, but the sight still causes a brief thrust of jealousy. But as I examine it in more detail I see that the baby is not well. I press on the window to get a better look. The baby is unsettling. It is the exact size of Seamus and it lies on its back staring up from the page. Its skin is slate grey with stretches of livid red darkening to purple. The eyes are unfinished, the sockets empty. A funny-looking scissors pinches flesh at its belly button and parts of its right shoulder and head are mottled and peeling. The shower goes off again and I hurry back from the window as Rachel’s head peeks out from the bathroom. She waits for a full minute, eyes on the other baby under the table, and then closes the door again. The water resumes.

I’m perplexed. What is she doing?

I only have a little longer before the light will reach the island from the east. I scan the other things on the table. There're scraps of wood and rock, presumably from the island. There're needles and thread and torn-up scraps of paper. Hanging from a shelf over on the left-hand wall is a curious object. It is a life-size torso made from translucent paper; the paper shapes that form the round belly and breasts resting over it are sewn together with even rows of fine white stitching. It is peculiar and very beautiful. It turns slowly as it hangs and I can see the dark smudge of something suspended inside it but its particulars are obscured by the paper. Down the centre of the back the paper gathers together, stitched with coarser wool in a dirty white. The effect is a row of misshapen knots of different size descending like a spine from the base of the neck to where the back cuts off. The arms and neck are also cut off and end in similar scruffy knots. The detail on the front is meticulous: collar bones span the top of the chest like delicate wings. The silvery scars I just saw on Rachel are embroidered with care around the sides of the great belly.

I coax my eyes away from it only when the water goes off. I retreat to my spot just beyond the light. Two more minutes and I'll go, I resolve. Rachel emerges in a towel this time. She is done washing and the baby is starting to mewl – an irritating noise, though she smiles down at it anyway. Imagine being looked at that way. That baby doesn't even know any different.

(crunch, gurgle, nothing)

She scoops the baby up and heads away to the other end of the kitchen where the door to the bedroom is. She turns off the kitchen light, which I'm not expecting. In the sudden darkness, I am dangerously exposed. It seems she looks right at me and I freeze. Running would draw even more attention. She has seen me. Or she has seen something at least. Her face stiffens, falling into a mask of fear and in her fright, the baby has slipped a little down her body. She rushes to regrip him and I seize this moment to turn and sprint. I don't go to the road where my feet will scatter rocks and

make too much noise. I stay in the long grass on this side of the fence leading up to the dark factory. Once I am fully past it, I rejoin the road and slow down.

That was a stupid lapse in focus, but I realise it presents an interesting route into Rachel: I've seen enough during my nights looking in to know she is struggling. After tonight she'll be scared. The night is lifting gradually as I slip back into the house. Today I'll go swimming and I will meet her. She needs me.

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18.

Hours later I crouch at the beach and wait. Earlier, I got up and rattled through the morning tasks. I was efficient, my customary resentment replaced by new-born purpose. Now I wait among the rock stacks that border the steel beach ready to happen upon her when she comes. While I wait, I pass the time with my copy of the note the bed-thing carved. With my pencil, I've been slicing lines through the spread of letters, sectioning off the words and finding sense in it. What I find is vague. It begins:

I need to explain to you.

As the time has gone on and I've returned to my self, I have looked out of the skin slits of my eyes to the world around me. A small world now. I glimpse it only through cracks in the sheets of stone stacked from top to bottom of the window. Between each is an upright slice of this awful place and I am assailed by the images of that day. My hands doing the doing. Regret is too slight a word for it all. I sit in horror. I don't deserve to die, I deserve to live. I search out new methods of pain

The words 'that day' are maddening. What day? What regret? Why the pain? I'm torn between staying to see Rachel and going back up to the bed-thing and wrenching answers from it, performing an extraction of its hidden pieces with cuts and slices and humiliation. Tormenting it for the truth. But cruelty has never worked.

(I search out new methods of pain)

Maybe it's never worked because cruelty is what she craves.

I don't know when she made this letter. The very fact of it seems to promise an explanation – 'I need to explain to you' – but so far it says nothing. I will continue transcribing but right now, today, is about Rachel. I slide the copybook into my bag and stay alert for her approach. At last I see them, joined as ever. The baby is in the sling fastened to her like a limpet. How does she tolerate such a suffocating parasite? How does she resist the urge to claw it off and stamp it out?

(crunch, gurgle, then sweet nothing)

I wait till she is sitting down on the sand and then I go down to her.

'Hello,' I call and she turns. She is flat today, I see. Her eyes are small with tiredness and anxiety. She looks defenceless as I close in.

'Hi, Aoileann.' She has a weak smile for me, then sadness overtakes it and her eyes stream. I am wrong-footed. Irked. She should be happy. I'm *here* now. I am what she needs. A wave shatters on the sand's edge, cutting through my irritation and reminding me to speak. It's OK; she just doesn't know that I am here to help her.

'Are you OK?'

'Sorry.' She's wiping her face with the plaid shirt she's wearing. A man's. The baby had to come from somewhere I suppose, though I don't like to think of it. An ungrateful man rooting around between her thighs, fiddling and probing at her.

'I'm just really tired today. But I had to get out of the house.' A tense glance behind her back to where she's come from.

'The baby looks well. He's lovely.'

When I say this, she smiles even though it is patently untrue. The baby is a fattening tick.

'He's so good.' She gazes into its face. 'He's a lot of work at night though.' A pull of worry in her voice.

'That must be hard. Before my mother died, I had to care for her through the nights.' I land this information with precision.

‘Aoileann, I’m so sorry, my god.’

She is completely focused on me now, the baby forgotten and I must suppress a smile.

‘It’s OK. My mother had to end. It had to end, I mean. She had a lot of pain.’

‘You poor dote,’ Rachel whispers, pulling my hands to her mouth to kiss them. She is like my subject and I feel powerful standing over them both.

‘At night my hours are totally empty now – it feels wrong.’

‘When did she die?’

‘A while ago.’ I leave it at that because I don’t really know how to make things up, though this lie isn’t too hard. It’s not so far from the truth. The bed-thing – my mother – has been a dead thing for my whole life. Our work, our care has never been about keeping her alive, only slowing the end.

‘I’m sorry, Aoileann. I’m sure she loved you so much. She was lucky to have you.’

The innocence of this! No laughing now, Aoileann.

‘How is your art going?’

‘It’s ... well ...’ She is still holding my hands and now she presses them to her head. ‘Can you tell that my head’s about to explode?!’

I am meant to smile at this, I see. And I duly do. But the head exploding is a distraction. Under my hands I feel the hair and bone. This lovely head of hers. My gaze slides past our entwined hands, down to the head of the baby and I spy the sly pulse beating under its wisps of hair.

‘Why is your head exploding?’ I keep my hands resting lightly on her, trying to prolong the contact.

‘Oh, I’m tired. My mind is worn out. He needs me so much and it’s just hard. I don’t feel like myself.’

‘In what way?’ I take my hands away, nervous that my touch will linger too long.

I join her on the ashy sand.

‘I can’t do the things I usually do. I have so many things I want to make but I feel so stymied. My mind is just so fixed on the baby. Even if I try to

think of something else, a painting or whatever, I start to panic. I feel like I'm being selfish, neglecting him.' Her face is caving in on itself as she struggles to get the last words out: 'And I feel ashamed of some of the things in my head.'

'Taking care of someone is very hard.' I pat her back in the awkward way Dada has done to me before. 'Are you going to swim? I can hold the baby.'

'I don't think I can today. I thought I wanted to, but I feel, I don't know, not good, I feel wide open somehow. Does that make sense?'

I ignore the question because I can't find sense in it. 'Can I see your art again?' I try to keep the desperation from my voice.

'Yes, that would be nice. The house feels so empty.'

When we reach the house, she apologises for the mess. And it is messy. It's not the same house of my first visit. Even from my nightly vigils, I hadn't seen the extent of the neglect. The dishes in the sink are days old, crusted with food. There are curds of spoiled milk floating in old teacups and rust-streaked tissues strewn around.

'I can't find time to do anything. Or the energy.' The baby, still in the sling, is beginning to protest. 'Any time I start to try to do something, this happens.' She indicates; despite the rueful smile I can see the strain in the slant of her mouth and her restless eyes.

'Does he want you to feed him?' I am careful with my tone; I must not betray any disdain.

'Always.' She starts towards the kitchen. 'I'll make us tea though.'

'Don't!' I catch her hand – it's so lovely to touch her – and she turns in surprise. 'Let me do it. You feed him.' Her taut expression slackens and she looks pathetically grateful.

While she settles herself and the baby I boil the kettle and do a cursory tidy of the kitchen. I fill the basin with suds and hot water. In go all the dishes to steep for a while. I move quickly but make sure I'm unobtrusive so that she won't try to stop me. I check the fridge and cupboards: there's a few spongy potatoes and carrots. I skin and chop them as the tea draws in the pot.

‘What are you at, Aoileann?’ There’s a little smile in her voice.

‘I’m at nothing,’ I retort, grinning as I carry her tea over. ‘I’m just throwing some veg on for a soup. You feed him, who feeds you? Soup’ll be good for you to have later. You need minding too.’

She looks upset again.

‘I’m— thank you, Aoileann.’

As she feeds the baby, I give the kitchen a bit of order and dry and put away the ware. Over by the art table is the clothes horse draped in small baby things. I fold and sort these and stare at the hanging torso by the window.

‘You can look at it,’ Rachel says. ‘I made it just before we came here.’

‘What’s inside it?’

‘Tell me what you think it is.’

I pick my way around the boxes and other pieces. Up close the torso is even more beautiful. The white thread catching the light reminds me of the delicate incisions of the bed-thing’s note. *I must get back*, I think with regret. But I need to find the right way to suture myself to Rachel before I leave again. She needs me. I must make her see.

I peer through the knots at the back and try to make out the thing inside.

‘It’s so hard to see it, tell me!’ I appeal to Rachel.

‘Maybe the point is that you can’t see it.’

She sounds sad. At the table, I linger on the baby painting.

‘This is a little ...’

‘It’s awful,’ she interrupts. ‘There’s something sick in it. I don’t know why that came out. I wanted to paint Seamus.’

‘Is it not Seamus?’

She stares at me. ‘It’s *not* Seamus,’ she says, with force. Then: ‘I’m sorry. It scared me a little when it came. I felt like I didn’t quite do it. That it was just coming through me. I don’t feel right.’ She looks up at me through a veil of sudden misery. ‘I’m scared all the time here.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know why. I don’t know if it’s me or this place. I feel wide open since having the baby. When I was pregnant I felt happy. I made beautiful

things and it felt like the baby was with me as I created. Then they pull you open and they pull the baby out and they leave you like that.’ She looks back down at the baby. ‘I haven’t closed back up yet. I feel like anything could get in. I feel like a channel. I thought I would be here with my baby and that I would be a channel of peace – that we would be safe with each other. But I am wide open and all that’s coming in is awful. I am so tired. I think I’m hearing things and seeing things and sometimes my thoughts darken and they are so awful. And I don’t want to do those bad things.’

(This awful place, that day)

‘It’s OK, Rachel.’ I come back to her and kneel beside her. ‘You are so good. You are. Seamus is lucky to have you. You are good. You’re tired. It can make things seem strange.’ I think this is true: in the history book they mentioned not letting war prisoners sleep to break them down.

She gives a bleak nod.

‘I can come at night and help, Rachel.’

‘Oh, Aoileann, that is so kind, but it’s too much.’

‘Really! I can.’

‘I can manage.’

I decide to change tack.

‘What are you hearing? At night, I mean?’

‘A crying baby.’ The words slip from her mouth. She’s uneasy. My eyes flick to the baby on her breast, which she sees and immediately adds: ‘It’s not him. Every time I check and every time it’s not him – it’s so weird. I keep trying to tell myself it’s in my head, that it’s the night playing tricks on me. But I never had it before the island.’

Now the stop-start of her shower makes sense. She was stopping to listen.

‘And I hear it in the daytime too, only much fainter,’ she whispers. ‘I’ve heard it through the rock walls and in the ocean too.’ Her whispered words are spilling out, cresting on a wave of panic.

‘I have heard the crying baby,’ I announce. ‘My dada says it’s just the way of the wind here, but I’ve heard it on the very calmest nights. But it’s OK.’ She looks at me, waiting expectantly for whatever reassurance I’m about to offer. She doesn’t realise I want her uneasy, precarious in her own mind. Doubting herself and wary of this place. Needing me.

I continue, speaking plainly:

‘We hear the crying baby because the gravesite of the island is over there down the north cliffs. The baby is trying to make its way there. The baby is unburied, you see. There’re many who’re unburied here. No way to dig. So they hang them from the cliffs to feed the ocean and get them away from the island.’

Rachel looks stricken. ‘Who does this? Do they *still* do this?’ She unconsciously works at her breast to stimulate the milk.

‘Ah no!’ I bring up a smile. ‘It’s just stories! Maybe it’s Seamus crying and he just stops when he sees you.’

She frowns, clearly unnerved. ‘I don’t know.’

‘What have you seen though?’

‘I think I’ve seen something outside. A few times. I thought it was animals but last night I thought I saw it again and it looked right at me.’ She nodded to the sliding glass doors. ‘Out there. It was so strange. I turned the light off in here and I thought for a second I was seeing the face of the moon low in the sky. But then it blinked and I was so afraid. I nearly let go of the baby and the next second it had disappeared. I just don’t know what to do if I’m seeing things that aren’t there.’ She looks desperate.

She needs me. She has to understand that she needs me.

‘That is scary.’ I walk to the doors. I’m buying time. I need to find the thing to say that will make her see that she needs me here at night. Apparitions are scary but the real horror is to be found in people. A smudge on the window catches my eye. It’s from my own hand. I turn back to her.

‘I don’t think you’re imagining things.’ I indicate the grease mark. ‘Someone was out here. The island boys, probably. They’re not so nice.’

Rachel heaves herself up. Seamus is satisfied, flopped in her arms.

(floppy)

She fixes her clothes and comes to peer at the window, her mouth open. She eventually straightens up.

‘I don’t know if it’s worse or better that I didn’t imagine it.’

‘It’s much better,’ I tell her. ‘See? There’s nothing wrong with you. There’s nothing wrong with your thoughts. You are so kind, Rachel. And good.’

Rachel is frowning. ‘I’d better go up and tell the museum men.’

‘Maybe ...’ I don’t rush to correct her. I pretend to think. ‘But ...’ I pause.

‘What?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. The islanders can be very funny about outsiders. If you make a fuss, it could cause more trouble. The boys are only coming around because you’re alone here and they have nothing else to do. But if you complain, it could get nasty.’

Rachel looks a little annoyed. ‘The museum people wouldn’t be happy knowing they’re harassing me.’

‘But they’re not harassing you, are they? They haven’t really *done* anything. I’m only telling you because I know how they can be to people who are not like them.’

Rachel shifts the baby up onto her shoulder. She’s thinking, then finally speaks.

‘Aoileann. You know the way you said ... Do you think you could come back tonight?’

I keep my voice steady. ‘Yes, of course. I can come back every night.’

19.

When I return to the house, there's a nasty surprise. In the kitchen, Móraí is at the table with the bed-thing. Its shorn mouth is hanging open. They look like they've been in consultation with each other.

'You've been gone for hours.' Móraí glares, waving the note I'd left about going for a quick swim. 'This says you'll be back by lunch; it's almost 3. Only that I came back and moved her, she'd have been in one position for hours. Where have you been? Your hair is dry.'

'I was on my way to swim and—' I race through possible excuses. Something that will appease Móraí without revealing anything.

'Agus cad?' she snaps.

The bed-thing is still gaping over, its eyes down but steady for once. I think of its note in my bag. I must must must keep Móraí contained. She cannot decide to observe me more closely. Things are finally happening to me.

'I found a baby down on the beach, lying in the sand.'

'What?' Móraí's voice leaps high. 'What *what*?' She is up and rushing at me before I fully grasp what's happening. I have never seen her move so fast. I've never seen such a big reaction in her before.

'Where is it? Where, where?' She is staggering and tearing up. She grabs my upper arms. For a moment, I'm so disconcerted by her animation, I lose my grip on my own lie.

'What's wrong, Móraí? Why do you care?'

'Shut up, you bitch,' she fires each word. 'Where's the baby? Is it living?'

‘Yes, the baby is fine; I helped the mother. She was in the sea. They are fine now. She is the woman at the museum I think.’

At this Móraí seems to catch herself. ‘OK. OK ... fine.’ She sits back down heavily. ‘That is fine. Tuigim. You had to help. But you cannot go swimming during the day anymore. Your mother cannot be left, you know this. It’s nearly time for Dada to come again and we must keep her nice for him.’

‘Yes, Móraí. I am sorry, I won’t go again.’

‘Indeed you will not,’ she slaps the words down as she rises again. ‘I have to go back down to the bloody museum. They’ll wonder where I’ve been. Sitting here waiting for you,’ she complains. ‘Today I’m putting island pictures in frames for an exhibition. They’re calling it *Island Reflections*. The fools!’ she pulls a face. ‘Raiméis! The reflection of this place is too dreadful to be seen. They’d dive from the cliffs if they knew.’ She wound her scarf around her neck.

‘Mind the damn drag of a mother you have. And start the dinner.’ She leaves.

I drag the drag back to its room and winch it up and onto the bed. I haul the head of the bed up to its 45° angle.

‘You’re hungry, I suppose.’

It hasn’t been fed for hours; neither have I.

Back in the kitchen, I eat some brown bread and butter. It’s claggy and requires work to swallow. I pour oats into the pot and rinse my mouth with a glass of water to clear the soily dregs of bread and fat from the gutters between cheek and gum. As I move to refill the glass with water to add to the oats, I hesitate. The gasping wall rasps to me, pushing words from her note into my head.

(I deserve to live. I search out new methods of pain)

I toss the water back down the sink and bring the pot into the bedroom. I stand by the top of the bed and bring its head round to face me.

‘You’re the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen,’ I inform it matter-of-factly. I savour the words as they leave me. ‘Here you go.’

I fill its mouth with the first spoon of dusty oats and it hacks an arid little cough from the back of its throat.

‘Slowly,’ I instruct. ‘You don’t want it to go down the wrong way.’ Over the next half an hour, I lift the spoon again and again. At one point, I even go to get more oats from the kitchen. When I get up the bed-thing slackens with relief; it doesn’t know that I’m not finished. When I return it tenses once more, though it doesn’t turn away even when I bring the spoon to its gash-mouth.

‘You’re so, so hungry today,’ I mock it, pushing in the coarse oats in time with my words. I am aiming for nineteen spoons, one for every year that she has been a creaking, bleeding, shitting, pissing drag of a thing. One for every year she has given me nothing.

*(a delicate brush of lips to the pink shell of an infant ear
Rachel’s generous body, full up for her baby
the teasing of mother milk on tiny bud-like lips
to wake the baby hunger)*

My mother – the drag, the bed-thing, whose leathery tits give nothing nothing – is gasping between the gentle onslaught of this nourishment. Still she gives no resistance. I’m not sure if it can resist. The dart of its eyes seems different in this moment. The darting looks like panic. The panic of someone being engulfed. I am thrilled with my ingenuity. I am feeding it and I am punishing it. Two birds one stone.

(stones could work nicely too)

I pocket the thought. By the time I have finished, two cups of uncooked oats have been pushed down its neck, no doubt drawing every ounce of moisture from its body. I skip out of her room back to the kitchen where the wheezing wall is applauding my innovation. No gelatine-thickened water today. Such a brilliant quiet torment to inflict. The perfect thing: a secret

punishment hidden by the very body enduring it. Móraí would never see. The oats will expand inside the bed-thing and her stomach will strain and contract like a bellows.

As I tidy up the stray oats on the counter, I daydream. If I kept going, would the drum-tight walls of its stomach split, spilling the contents out into the cavity of her body? Filling her up, drowning her from the inside? Or would her veins clog with porridgy blood, so heavy the heart could no longer push it to her brain and around her useless body? Such a caring death, this overzealous feeding. Such a flaw in our design to have a mouth. A wide-open crevasse, into which such effortless destruction may be poured.

*(Even Rachel's baby has this chink in its smashable face
its pink petal lips part to reveal the vulnerable path
leading to where its miniature organs hang like fruit so easily
squeezed, plucked and crushed out of existence)*

In my room, even as I'm deciphering more of the letter, I am thinking of Rachel. I'm strung between these two obsessions. Rachel and the letter. They feel intimately connected. Every moment spent in my worship of Rachel reveals more crimes of the selfish mother in the bed. And every word unravelled from the note reveals her too.

Now that I am used to pulling the letters from one another, I transcribe and make sense of the rest of the note much more quickly:

... to visit horror on my self. More hands doing doings.

The hands are nearly demolished. I rub them off my teeth and the walls and the floor. They'll be gone all the way soon. The things that did the thing will be finally gone. They are like the black rocks that reach into the frigid water where the island ends. The water wears at the island, waging a long war. I wear at the rest of my self too, waging a sustained and focused war of my own.

When you move me to the kitchen and leave me there, the island still whispers to me through the loosely woven wall. This must mean that I am still mad or that the island is still bad. Or I am the bad and the island is mad. In the hard chair, I sit lost in my darkness until you all see fit to move me again.

The island speaks about you. It has watched you since you began. It says I am to blame for you.

I am to blame.

For your emptiness and your rage, that crouches, ready – I am to blame.

Blame me, blame me, please blame me.

I say I am to blame: for ending you before you began. I murdered your soul and you are empty now. You're a damned thing.

The island says I am to blame: for not succeeding all the way.

Whoever is right, I deserve this and more. Give me more, I can take it, I welcome it, I need it.

I close the copybook. And bring it next door where its eyes are still watering from the vigorous feeding.

‘Thank you for that lovely letter, mother-cunt.’ I only know this word is bad because the island men said it about me.

*(‘Put it in her cunt,’
they said to one another.
‘And clean it well after,’
they said spitting,
always spitting.)*

I take up its left hand and spread the finger remains. Despite her efforts

(the sustained war)

they are all there to some extent or another. Most still have the knuckle and some have a bit of fraying flesh at the tips. I place her hand at the edge of

the mattress. I take the copybook, select a pristine page from the centre and carefully tear it out. I hold it tight between my hands so that the edge is as sharp as a fine blade. I methodically draw the paper down through the delicate webbing between each of its fingers. Each slit parts like a mouth. With each slice, the thing shudders but it doesn't pull its hand clear of my precise little attack. Her face doesn't change, but I can't observe it right at the moment of slicing, as I need to look at what I'm doing. This frustrates me. I want to see. Four swipes of paper through filmy skin are completed on her left hand. I'll save her other hand, I decide. But I still want to bring this game to a more satisfying conclusion – a way to see her take it! Excited, in the kitchen, I retrieve the bottle of vinegar and douse my hands. Then I watch her face with blank fascination

(you are empty now)

as I thread my fingers through hers. She shudders and shudders. The darting eyes close and a moan rises in it. I draw my lips into a smile. My smile is the leering twin of her simpering one.

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20.

From then, my exquisite nights caring for Rachel begin. The hours away from the bed-thing and Móraí are thrillingly vivid in comparison to the monotony of my life in the stitched-up house. I usually arrive at about eleven, once I'm sure Móraí is asleep.

I pile clothes under my blanket in case Móraí decides to take a sudden interest in me – something that has not happened in years. At night, the gasping kitchen wall as ever carries the pleas of a baby as I slip past. I barely hear it anymore. I cover the ground between my door and Rachel's fast: only the island observes my foaming enthusiasm.

I unlatch the door to Rachel's and enter the soft, consoling atmosphere. The lamps cast a gentle light, often draping across an already dozing Rachel on the couch, baby tucked securely into the folds of her body. Some nights they are both submerged in the bedsheets, dead tired. And some nights Rachel is tiptoeing about, waiting to lay the baby in my arms and breathe a kiss to my cheek. I am nearly used to this now. And used to the warm squirm down low in my body that these kisses tug at.

She will then spread herself on the bed, face down, sometimes, and pull a pillow over her head to block any sounds the baby might make between now and feeding.

I often can lose hours at the foot of the bed. My gaze travelling from the grubby undersides of her feet up fleshy tractable legs. I keep the baby pressed to me as I lean forward to push her nighty up higher. It's tempting to slide my hand up too. But it would be impossible to explain if she woke. With her head covered, she looks decapitated, her neck appears to end before the pillow. With my eyes on her rear under the nighty, I muse on

what could be done to her if she was just a body. I could throw the baby away and lie on top of her. I could rub myself on the full length of her. I could press my hands into her folds and wriggle fingers up inside her. But without a head there'd be no more kisses and no more milk.

When she gets restless in the bed, I move away to the kitchen and the art room. I keep the baby as settled as I can in the time between his feeds, but invariably he gets grisly after a few hours. After the first few nights, I realised that I didn't need to wake Rachel fully to nurse him. I relish rolling her onto her side, lying the baby with his belly touching hers and latching the baby on. I squeeze the nipple to release some milk to coax him to feed and I hold his head in place.

Sometimes Rachel stirs and smiles groggily at me. If I look only at her eyes and wet lips, I can pretend the baby isn't there between us. I can pretend that it's just the two of us.

Now that she is getting more rest, Rachel's art is going well. The mouldy baby painting has been hidden behind a row of newer works. They are fascinating depictions of the island as I've never seen it. Veins of water cut through the flat limestone and gather in inky pools of greys and rust. Long colourless hair spills up from these natural wells and forms braided ropes held by pale disembodied hands. Other pictures show the loose walls. One shows a wall with tiny, perfectly rendered eyes peering through every gap – the watching wall seems to shiver and blink. Another wall drips with waxy-looking hands and arms.

We talk about the art. I ask question after question and she patiently answers. Her answers are expansive and thoughtful. I have never been given much more than a stunted reply to anything I've asked Móraí or Dada and can barely take in the abundance in her responses.

She tells me she draws and paints and stitches. She tells me that drawing and painting and stitching are just doing, that what makes something art is the intention behind it. If the intention is to communicate some intangible feeling or slippery truth that resists capture by words, then it is art.

I luxuriate in her words, a throb of happiness beating at my centre.

She tells me that she likes the island but is looking forward to going back to the Mórthír.

She tells me that she will be lost without me.

She tells me she won't need me at night anymore soon.

She tells me the baby is beginning to settle, as is she.

This won't do.

I need to keep them both unsettled. I must remain essential.

I mull it during the days back at our house. Behind the rock-barred windows, I run scenarios in my head. As I hoist the bed-thing and polish it and tend to it, I try to think of a way to make Rachel need me. I also amuse myself: I boil the bed-thing's dinners and funnel the diarrhoea of meat and veg down its neck. I keep handfuls of shale in my pocket now and intermittently, between her glugging swallows, I spoon some of these rock shards in too. She doesn't resist, just works her jaw to grind them as much as she can before taking them down into her.

A few days after I begin the rock-feeding, I notice with great relish that her shit is mingled with blood. I indulge in imagining the grating and stabbing of the rocks through her system. I'm eroding her from the inside out. I am quietly pleased with myself.

(what makes something art is the intention behind it)

It is through my experimentation with the bed-thing that I hit upon what I must do to keep myself indispensable to Rachel. She must get scared: the baby must get sick.

I begin to carry a little glass jar with me down to Rachel's at night. I make a brief stop at the dark beach to fill the jar with seawater and then stow it in my bag. At first it's hard to know how much to give him and what implement to use, but I master it quickly. Once I've accepted the little limp body – always warm through his cotton sleepsuit – from Rachel, I escort her to the bedroom where she will give his neck a final nuzzle and exclaim:

‘How is he so beautiful?’ or ‘Aoileann, smell him! He’s like a little loaf of bread, freshly baked!’

She presses her nose to the velvet-soft border where his temples meet fine hair and nibbles the tops of his ears where the light glows through translucent skin. ‘It’s so funny, how is it that I want to both kiss him and eat him up?’

I can easily imagine how, I think, as I eye the inviting pouch of skin that puckers just under her chin. I’d take any part of her.

When she leaves him with me I begin to administer the seawater from the jar. Rachel has no bottles, so to begin with I tried cups and glasses and then spoons. They were all useless, as the baby sputtered the liquid out. Then in frustration one night, I just used my hand.

Sometimes it’s the simplest things that work the best. Now I pour the water into a wide bowl on the counter. I hold the baby with my left arm. His lower body rests on the plastic surface, legs trailing out before him, his torso is clamped in the crook of my left arm and my left hand reaches round to grip his head by the jaw and pinch his rubbery little mouth open.

I lower my right hand into the bowl and, just like Rachel’s painting, the water runs in to form a little pool.

I squeeze my hand tightly to prevent the water from draining out and lift this to the baby’s mouth. The water funnels through a little gutter created by my lifeline and into the baby’s mouth. I am quick with this part. I tip in the water and then I close my hand over his mouth to prevent him from expelling it. I tighten my arms around him as the tiny body spasms. I dig my fingers into his face. I feel the itty bitty bones and the tendons and ligaments of his throat.

I start him on a half jar a night and monitor the effects. He is certainly tetchier by the end of the night. And Rachel mentions he has fewer wet nappies. A little more vigour in my approach is needed, so I up it to the full jar and immediately there’s a better outcome. He is fractious all day and Rachel is too. The baby is changing in appearance also. It is subtle but the strangeness is palpable. Its eyes look sunken and lifeless. The tiny little soft

spot on top of the head is sinking too – a borehole growing. When Rachel’s asleep, as a private little treat, I press on it.

(spongey, gurgling, then nothing)

Every few days I pull back on the water and he improves. Rachel is relieved. She tells me how much she needs me. And I am happy. But I mustn’t get complacent. I must keep applying the pressure.

(spongey, then nothing)

One night, after I leave Rachel’s, I bring a ratty, thorny old rope up from the graveyard to Rachel’s house and hook the end with the loop over the front door handle. Then I head home.

The next day, I wake with a start, remembering what I’ve done. I did it in a half dream and now I am uneasy. I even consider bringing it back to where I got it from, but I know it’s probably too late to undo this. Might as well have some fun with it.

(the island speaks about you

It has watched you since you began

It says I am to blame for you)

I press on with the plan, making sure to let Rachel find it, which she does that day.

When I arrive for the night shift, Rachel is feeding the baby at the table and sketching the rope, which is now coiled on the large table.

‘What have you done?’ I ask, barely able to keep the glee from my face. ‘Why is this here? This is a terrible relic. This is sick, Rachel. Why have you meddled in the graves?’

‘What?’ She is alarmed. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘This is a gravewall rope, this is how the island’s dead are buried. I told you.’ I indicate the small loop tied where it ends. ‘This one was for a tiny child. Probably a toddler.’

Rachel is frozen, a hand over her mouth. Both she and the baby aren't looking at all well. They're lost in an ocean they're not even aware of, and I am a dense wave rearing over them.

'How could you take this from the gravesite?' I let a little anger leak into my words.

(your emptiness and your rage, that crouches, ready)

The night crowds around the cottage and my interrogation of her is reflected from different angles in every window.

'I didn't take it, Aoileann, I promise.' She's close to tears. 'I found it on the door handle. It must be the island boys back.'

'No, Rachel, no one would touch a thing like this. No way. This is very bad. We have to return it.'

'But how did it get here?' Rachel's eyes slip from dark window to dark window, then down to her sketch of the rope.

'I don't think you should think about that.' This is the truth. I don't want to think about it either. I am stunned that I did this. Perhaps I am trapped under the sway of some other rearing force. The menacing rock we stand on? What else could have pushed me down to that awful site to draw this demon thing back up from over the edge?

'What exactly is a gravewall rope, Aoileann? You said that thing before about the bodies—'

'Don't think about it. I will take care of this', I wave my hand over the rope and the drawing, 'on my way home. You need rest – you are so tired.' I stroke her face and then lead her to bed. Then, over the next few hours between feeds, I scoop saltwater into the baby's mouth and stopper its cries with my white-knuckled hand.

21.

On the morning before the museum opens, I stay too long at Rachel's. The night was troubled and Seamus and Rachel are both unsettled. I don't usually stay until dawn because Móraí would realise I was gone but as the weeks have passed, I have become bolder. I have learned a few things. What could Móraí do to me? Nothing without me doing something back.

'Have a shower, Rachel.' I go to the couch, unhitch the baby from her and lay him on my left shoulder; with my right arm I drop slices of bread into the toaster.

While she washes, I stir melted butter into eggs over a medium heat and by the time she's reappeared in a fresh wool dress and wet hair twisted up in a knot, I have breakfast on the table. We sit down like a family and smile sleepily at one another. She nibbles at the eggs on her fork. 'These are gorgeous – thank you, Aoils.'

'How are you feeling about tomorrow?' I pour the tea and slide her milky sugary one over to her. The baby continues to doze.

'Good, good. I just wish I wasn't so tired. I'm so much more anxious when I'm tired.'

'It will be wonderful. All your work will look so beautiful.' I try not to think about how the launch of the museum and the exhibition of Rachel's work mean she will be leaving soon. I think instead about the long day ahead. It is bath day again for the bed-thing and I have been sleeping less and less since playing night nurse with Rachel and the baby. Dada is coming tonight, a day early because of the museum opening, so the damned corpse must be polished up for his arrival. In my pocket, I roll the needles

I've taken from Rachel's worktable in my fingers. I have something special in mind for this visit.

*(stitching is just doing;
what makes something art is
the intention behind it)*

I fold the rest of my toast into my mouth and ease myself up to standing. I lay the baby carefully in the centre of the bed and draw the blankets up around him. He is looking dry and slightly scaly but just about OK. I have mastered a sweet spot with his saltwater. Just the right amount to keep him perched on the narrow divide between sick and healthy. Rachel frets endlessly. This keeps her perched as well. It all means I am indispensable. I am beloved. Every time Rachel mentions their imminent departure, regret leaks out around her smile. I still haven't decided how to ensure that I accompany her yet. I mull it.

It might be that the baby will die and I will have to bring Rachel back to the Mórthír and guide her through grief. It might be that the baby becomes more sickened and she needs me with her to continue to help. The right thing will present itself.

22.

I return to the house after breakfast with Rachel, and Móraí is furious.

‘Where have you been? You look strange.’

‘I don’t look strange.’ I bare my teeth at her, smiling, and she recoils.

‘Your eyes—’ she falters.

‘My eyes are fine,’ I snap. I am feeling cavalier today. I feel certain that each day, I am edging closer and closer to some kind of resolution. What it is I am not quite sure of yet but change is coming. I’ve seen another life now and I know I won’t be toiling over my mother, the bed-thing, for much longer. The more I read of her demented words, the more indifferent I feel.

Móraí is, I notice, staying back from me.

In the grubby mirror in my room, I see that she’s right: my eyes do look strange. The inky black, usually just pin pricks at the centre of my eyes, has bled out so that almost none of the iris is left. I look drugged. I know it must be Rachel. I have taken her into me. When she sleeps, I lean close and swallow the breath as it leaves her body. All night long I carry the baby, the thing that contains her entire spirit. Her happiness and her hope, all under my sway. I am their god. A quiet god. A loving god.

(that day, the hands doing the doing)

That’s what a baby is, I’ve come to see now. It is the mother’s whole soul extracted, freed from her body and out of her control. It is her entire existence absorbed by this chunk of meat, a jumble of tiny bones and flickering organs. That’s what a baby is. A little device with which to torment its mother. A bite of the meat-baby tears at the mother. Dash the little thing against the rocks, throw it away, and the mother ends.

(the gravewall rope is in my bed)

If I want Rachel with me forever, I have a way.

I go into the bed-thing and smile big at it.

‘You’re the damned thing, you know, not me,’ I inform it brightly. ‘We’ll make you nice for Dada though. He’s coming tonight. He won’t know you!’

‘You’ve been coming and going at night.’ Móraí’s behind me in the room now.

‘So what? I’m taking care of the bitch during the day. Do you see a problem with her?’

‘So what? So what? You can’t see anyone, you fool.’ Móraí’s trying to wrest back some control.

‘And why not?’ I pant the words as I haul the bed upright and lash the straps around my mother. ‘Why not?’ I round on Móraí, who braces herself against my words but does not shrink this time.

‘Because nobody knows about *her*. Your mother. And they can’t. And you ... you are not right. You are a wrong thing. You are infecting that woman and her baby. I can see it in them. Just like you infected us.’ Spit, spit, spit, she goes. ‘You’ll leave them alone or I will see to it that they leave *you* alone. I’ll see to it that they run from you. That they shut the door against you.’

I draw my lips back to smile at her like I’ve been taught.

‘You shouldn’t have taught me to play along so well.’

Móraí stares at me.

‘We thought if you never knew, it wouldn’t affect you, but I see now it is catching.’

‘So what’ll ye do with me? Whatever ye’ve done to this pathetic thing.’ I indicate the bed-thing who, sitting up, creaking and with its head turned toward us, gives all the impression of taking part in this confrontation.

Móraí gives a curdled smile.

‘You *leibide*. She did this to herself.’ Móraí circles the bed, picking up blackened limbs and ragged skin, waves a hand over the whole sordid,

pulpy mess.

‘All we did was try to protect her, but she wouldn’t be protected. She did every bit of this to herself.’

*(I sit in horror.
I don’t deserve to die,
I deserve to live. I search out new methods of pain)*

I keep still, refusing to betray the racing confusion. I won’t give Móraí the satisfaction of seeing she’s rattled me, upended my whole understanding of what has unfolded around me for years in this house. Of what I have participated in.

‘Haha, news to you.’ Móraí revels anyway. ‘She ruined us that day. She ruined my boy. And then, if that wasn’t enough, she has plagued us ever since. She had options. We were ready to pretend, but she wanted to be a martyr.’ Móraí’s eyes shift to my mother. ‘A martyr doesn’t pull every single person down with them,’ she hammered out at her. ‘You sentenced us all to this half-life, you demon thing. And another daughter annihilated.’ Móraí gestures at me and my mother does something new and freshly awful. Her eyes move. She looks at me. She stares at me.

*(The island speaks about you.
It has watched you since
you began
It says I am to blame for you)*

At the sight of her eyes shifting, Móraí staggers backward – a scream is strangled at the back of her mouth and she starts spitting and crying. ‘Stop it, stop it, stop it,’ she pleads and holds her head. ‘Come away from it,’ she shouts at me, caring all of a sudden. ‘It’s a terrible thing.’

I don’t move; of course I don’t. I am transfixed. My mother is looking at me. Today, for the first time, my mother is looking at me. Its head slowly tilts, a fraction to the right and so does mine, as though we are sharing a joke.

‘I have to get on with things, Móraí. Dada will be here soon.’

Móraí is quiet, still standing by the door. She looks like the island after a gale. Rearranged and blank.

‘We did all we knew how to do.’ She doesn’t look at me. ‘I won’t be going to the museum today. They are ready for the opening. I need to ...’

She abandons her words. Suddenly she looks older than the land. Greyed and beaten back by the sudden change of course in the house. ‘I must lie down.’ She moves back, keeping my mother and me in her sights until she’s passed the door frame.

I get back to my first job of the day. The bath.

I hoist and drag and hoist and submerge. Her eyes stay on me. In the bath, I get experimental. I lay my hand, fingers spread over her face and push it gently down below the surface. Her eyes don’t even flicker as the water rushes over them. She looks up at me through the murk of bathwater. The only sign she is living is the bubbles escaping her nose and mouth. And then they stop.

A little song comes into my head. Rachel sings it to the baby – *her* helpless thing.

*(A stór mo chroí, when you’re far away, from the home
you’ll soon be leaving)*

My mother’s body gives three thrashing thrusts. Why do death and ecstasy look so similar? I grab her up out of the water by the handle of her neck. Her eyes are still but she’s breathing. I give her current sores a cursory once-over but really there’s hardly any point at this stage, is there?

Back in the bedroom, I arrange her in her chair and fix her dress in place. It’s a dark red one.

‘I’m going to take extra care today. He’ll be very taken with you this time.’ I am thrilled with my plan and from my pocket I retrieve the makings of it. Dada has always been blind to the reality of this thing: I’m certain he won’t notice anything amiss except how lovely I have polished her up. Tonight, like always, I will refurbish this dead thing, I will make up her

demolished face. We have gathered around her in a never-ending vigil for a long time. This is the end of a nineteen-year wake.

It doesn't matter that Dada will probably shy away from my efforts. Always deceiving himself. It's Móraí I am creating this awful spectacle for. I must keep Móraí cowed and frightened until this is all done. I don't want her talking to Rachel or getting an idea to stop me.

'I have the most wonderful idea,' I tell the bed-thing. My mother. I pull back the bolt on the back of the chair so that her head snaps back. Her hands are hanging down past the seat of the chair; I gather them into her lap and knit the fingers to make a cradle for my implements which I arrange across her palms, six one-inch needles to make my little project.

I lean over her and one by one with the utmost care, I slowly push the needles up through her cheeks, three on the left side and two on the right – there is only flesh enough for two on that side with all the damage over the years. I make sure that each end of the needle is buried in the tissue of her face, and so invisible. Then I re-bolt the back of the chair so that her head is upright. A little arranging of her is required before the needles are fully propped between the teeth of her upper jaw and her lower jaw.

Then she is done. I stand back to admire her. She smiles back. She can't but smile now.

'So beautiful,' I tell her. 'No eating, I'm afraid, but more important to look nice for Móraí and Dada.'

I haul her into the kitchen and position her at the table while I set about making dinner. Her mouth is propped wide and drawn back into a crude awful smile. She beams over at me. The wall gasps in admiration of my work also.

'Thank you,' I nod at it, as I peel and chop and brown the chunks of meat.

The lamb stew is ready and sitting on low by the time Dada arrives.

'There you are.' He musters a greeting for me, his damned child. 'Agus tú féin.' He takes my mother's hand in his uneasy way. 'You look well, a stór.' He kisses the wig and straightens. 'Where is Móraí?'

‘In her bed, I think. Tell her dinner’s ready.’

He goes down the hall and in to his mother; I slip after him to listen at the door.

‘Aoibh looks well.’ Dada never complains. He hardly can, given he can escape this grave house.

‘Things are turning with that child,’ Móraí answers. ‘She is getting all kinds of ideas. She is getting like *her*, like Aoibh. I can see the look creeping over her, just like it did over Aoibh. They’re not made of the same stuff as us; they weren’t built to live here. The island breaks into their heads.’

‘A Mhaim,’ Dada is placating, ‘that’s island stories. Sure Aoibh was sick —’

‘Yes,’ Móraí’s voice rises. ‘She was sickened by that baby in there. And now that baby is dragging the life from another mother. A young woman on the island. She is in distress; her baby is too and now I find out that beast is visiting them. It’s happening again. That poor young woman thinks she’s a helpful local girl. We know she shouldn’t be around a baby.’

‘It is not happening. Nothing is happening. This is completely different. Look, we know we made mistakes with Aoileann. She shouldn’t have stayed here. She has grown up strange and it’s a mistake we made. But she wasn’t right enough to bring anywhere else either, we both know that. It’s good that she has found someone who will talk to her. Someone who doesn’t think she’s ... responsible.’

‘It’s time to tell her.’ Móraí’s voice is straining against his denial.

I’m bored. Sick of them. And so back I go to the bed-thing. Mother mother.

(Regret is too slight a word for it all. I sit in horror)

‘You sit in horror and so we all have to sit in your horror too,’ I singsong at it.

Móraí and Dada come in and I turn my mother to greet them.

‘Look who’s here,’ my words chime.

Móraí sags in horror at the sight of the leering, smiling, bed-thing. Dada just nods. He can't see it for what it is; he's too clouded by the memory of the woman that it was.

Dinner is unappetising in the presence of the gaping face, but I force it down and so does Dada. Móraí is watchful and very, very still, but I can see behind her eyes the churning of plans. She is not going to let me be happy.

After dinner I bring the bed-thing into the living room for Dada to sit with and play pretend. I turn to leave but he stops me.

'You don't understand Móraí. She's scared; she has seen a lot of bad things. And she has never left here. Not even once. The island gets to people. It got to your mother. I shouldn't have brought her here. Or we shouldn't have had children. It was too much for her.'

I look at him; the bed-thing's eyes have snapped up also.

'Children?'

'Children, yes,' he repeats and sighs. 'You had a sister. We called her Étaín but she didn't live.'

(Nil sí beo)

Didn't live. I scoff silently. He is always dodging around words. He's too scared to ever fully say anything.

'She died?'

'Yes.' He has picked up the bed-thing's hands; its eyes are lowered and darting again. 'Étaín drowned. And your mother blamed herself. But it wasn't her fault. She wasn't right in the head.'

*(You damned thing
The island says I am to blame:
For not succeeding all the way)*

'I got down there, but not in time to save you both.' He lets go of her hand and stands. 'She wrote down her thoughts after you were born and, well, it's obvious she was sick.' He goes to the bureau and pulls out the top drawer. A drawer I have combed through many times. He runs his hands

across the underside and peels away an envelope. He comes back and hands it to me.

‘It’s been a long time since I’ve read it. I don’t want to see it. You can look at it on your own.’

‘How old was Étaín when she died?’

‘You were both six weeks and three days old. She was your twin.’

I briefly glimpse a different life in this house. One with a sister my age, a mother in the kitchen and a Dada out on the boats. Móraí would look at me, they would call me by my name. No island men spitting on me. No soupy stench or wringing nappies.

Rachel’s baby is not much more than six weeks. Defenceless. Tiny hands with softly curled fingers. He is floppy. Throwaway. It would be easy to do.

‘Did she mean to kill us both?’

‘She didn’t kill her.’ A sharpness has come into his voice. ‘She just ... didn’t intervene. That day was beautiful. A perfect morning in July. Aoibh was up with the sun. She was always frantic during that time, speeded up and fretful. She would be up all night with the babies and then somehow be too tired to sleep. She said strange things and asked strange questions around that time. She asked if I thought the babies were OK. All the time she asked me. “Do you think they seem right?” “Do you think they love me?” She was, I realise now, very scared.

‘The letter’, he nodded at the envelope in my hand, ‘explained a lot but all too late. I thought she had taken you two for a walk, which she did all the time. I didn’t think anything was amiss until I went into the babies’ room – your room now. The crib where you both slept was in smithereens. I went out to look for her – I had a dread hanging inside me. Outside was too bright. The day was so calm but for some reason I thought I could hear baby cries coming from all over. Blowing through the walls. Leading me down those gouged paths that go nowhere. If I hadn’t been waylaid so much ...’ He shakes his head heavily. As powerless even now as he was that day. ‘Finally I ran down to the dark sand beach and saw her at last. I was so relieved I even stopped to catch my breath. I called down to her. I was

walking by then. And that's when I realised what I was looking at. Aoibh was sitting on the sand watching the waves. There were two little things lying a ways in front of her, just where the water was meeting the sand. I thought it was driftwood. Then I knew what they were, and the world just fell away.'

The bed-thing sits grinning throughout the retelling while Dada's misery leaks down over his cheeks. He turns to her.

'We don't blame you, Aoibh, we don't.' He holds onto her hands like she'll save him. 'You weren't well. We don't blame you.'

(don't we?)

His gaze travels past me through the jaws of the window, his mind returning to the calm clear day and little things crying in the sand. 'I pitched forward running but I never seemed to get any closer. I heard the crying and I ran and ran, screaming and screaming. I screamed at her but she didn't turn and she didn't move. And my little babies came loosened from the land and began to roll in the waves. And she just watched. She watched the water come in around our babies. The water pushed them in towards her and then pulled them away. And that's when the crying gradually stopped. It was so cruel. If she had just reached out.

'I howled at her, "Aoibh, please!" I finally got to the sand and hurled myself into the sea to try and grab you both up. I got you into my arms, but Étaín kept slipping out of my hands, dropping under the water and being pulled away. I couldn't search properly with you in my arms, I ran out and put you back up the beach and went back in to find Étaín. Aoibh never moved the entire time.'

He stares at the floor between his shoes, his hands now dangling between his knees and I feel a tiny throb of pity for him. How does he still get up and put on shoes every day? How does he eat? How does he use those arms for stupid mundane things, the arms that lost his baby?

'I never found Baby Étaín. I searched for hours. Móraí found us a while later. She held you and begged me to come in, but she couldn't get me back

out. I couldn't walk out of the sea without my baby. I couldn't leave her in the ocean. Aoibh just sat there the whole time. I eventually did come out of the water and not a single second of my life has felt right since that moment. I've never felt right again. I can't remember how it is to wake up without the terrible weight of absence.

'No one on the island ever knew the full story. We let them think Aoibh had died with the baby. We didn't think they would hold it against you but they're odd people. Superstitious.'

He shakes his head in a pathetic helpless way. 'Aoibh seemed to realise what had happened eventually. She was wild with it. She wanted us to turn her in and when we wouldn't ... this began ...' He gestured to the bed-thing.

'So good of her to make her guilt all of our problem.'

'Stop it, Aoileann, she was so beautiful. And so loving.' He doesn't even look at me; he takes up her hands again. 'She didn't deserve this. We still brought you to her breast for you to feed. She gave you what she could.'

I fume in my chair; my trickle of pity evaporates. I hate him. He's so weak and stupid. I long to attack his beloved bed-thing right in front of him. I long to hurt him.

He comes back and holds it.

23.

She wrote:

Why did I look forward to a baby? When I was a little girl, I saw my neighbours in Ballygangaragh staggering under large bellies and I couldn't wait. The mothers of all my little school friends made babies regularly. The babies were littered around the raucous houses that I visited after school. We held the babies in our small laps and they were gorgeous. A year in and they were so round and heavy, they felt like hapless giants in our reedy arms. By this hour of the baba's life, the mamais would already be staggering again. The mamais held the bellies with their hands at all times, as though they were proffering the bundle to all the rest of us. I never saw the bodies of the women. The production of these new humans took place entirely hidden under layers of rose-scented house dresses, skirts and jumpers. It gave me the idea that little babies were cultivated in soft clean pillows of fabrics. They were woven in the bed of their mothers. They arrived soft and furred and already swaddled contained and clean. It was a gentle and safe emergence into our enthusiastic arms. I thought the fine strands of baby hair were a clue to their creation, these were the loose ends snipped from the loom, I thought. The women seemed wan but tender and happy for us to take the babies and sniff them and trace their miniature features.

The babies' arrivals were never witnessed by any men or children. The arrivals didn't attract much notice from the other

women in the town, save for the odd sigh or wince of the ones down at the butcher's. This made sense. It was, I believed, an event as unobtrusive as slipping a pillowy little quilted baby out from under the folds of a cotton dress.

My own mother never proffered any bundles. Little rosy babies didn't sit plumply around our house. It was a very quiet place. I preferred being in the neighbours' homes where life raged at a reassuring pitch and there were people everywhere. When I asked where our babies were, my dada would only shake his head. The babies weren't good for Maim, I learned.

My house was very quiet. The halls and rooms were always deserted. Maim stayed in her room until Dada came back in the evenings. He left before I woke up and stayed away as long as he could. Maim would come down to the kitchen and make a dinner before he appeared. We ate it quietly. Maim would drift away again. She was always sweet but very far away, even right beside us she was at strae. She died the year I was ten. It was a cancer in her brain. I cried because even though she had been distant, her absence ached. It bored a hole in me – a pain pit at the centre of my days, one I had to circle around carefully so as not to lose myself to it. I combed the house searching for traces of her smell but she'd existed so lightly that there was nothing of her left anywhere. No notes or journal. She hardly had possessions, no friends to recall her to me.

I fell in love with the island boy in my teens. He was a lovely creature. His father was dead, gone to the sea years before, so after the marriage we came to the island to be with his mother. At the wedding, my father tried to speak to me about children but he couldn't get the right words out. He said he wasn't sure it was a good idea for me and that there were ways a woman could stop it. I kissed him and told him I'd be back, but I never got back. I stepped onto the island and the thing was done.

You started in me around the end of October. A bad feeling. My insides being pulled and tugged, nausea churned and pain flared. Something, you, wrenched around my lower abdomen, drawing through me like razor wire.

'Something has to be wrong. It hurts so much,' I cried, curled in the bed.

'No,' everyone said. 'They're stretching pains. All normal.'

Their denial of it forced my fears underground. The months went on and the thing rose in me. This was nothing like the quilted, cosy emergence of downy babies. This was something hauling itself up from the depths of me. It was growing to fill me more and more every day. The seams of my stomach and breasts were stretched, so much so that silvery fault lines, where the skin was giving way, began slicing out from the epicentre of these monstrous boils. I lay unmoving for days at a time. I was beached by the tumour and scared to move in case my flesh split and this unseen thing slid free. Then at last the growing stopped. I was misshapen with it though. I felt foreign limbs reaching up, lodged in my throat. Feet pressed up inside my rib cage. It felt like I had swallowed a jumble of bones.

Then it began to move and my mind began to turn, lured to terrible things.

The drum-tight skin of the bulging belly was so stretched it barely contained the abhorrent animal that they insisted was a baby. They delighted in the slithering and writhing of it under the belly's surface. The happy island boy ran his hands over the spiney form that stirred underneath gossamer skin. My head clanged with terror at the sight of him stroking the beast beneath. He looked like a demented man caressing the mottled corpse of his child, not realising it's dead.

All my hours were spent in dread. My thoughts didn't feel like my own. Alien ideas presented themselves as though implanted. Kill it. Kill yourself. Relentless terror ground me down. I wanted to excise

the horror-baby but doubts grabbed me back endlessly. The baby was not the problem. I am fine, the baby is fine. But I am not fine, the baby is not fine. Am I not fine? This is all in my head. This is all in my head. This is all in my head.

This is all in your head, the island boy smiles.

This is all in your head, his mother pleads.

This is all in your head, the island jeers.

The island's thoughts are becoming my own, I think. They're wheedling in and nestling among my memories of my old life and my dreams for my new life.

Look what you have done. You're an aberration, you are not fit. Look at what is rotting in your womb. You are not fit.

But remember this is all in your head.

The island had me pinned. I was trapped under the weight of its certainty. I was not fit. Look what my body was giving life to, something unnatural. What baby could overtake a body so completely? It was a beast crouched and flexing in my cavity. Of this I became certain. I became talkative. 'It's all wrong. It's all wrong.'

I screamed sometimes. 'It's inside of me.' I wouldn't know a scream was coming when I'd begin the words. It startled then scared the island boy and his mother. I was so disorientated that I felt amazed if I managed to go to the toilet or eat a bite of food without incident. I had splintered, I realised. Some of me went on as normal, I walked to the shop and smiled at the islanders. I set the table for our meals. But in the night, thoughts drove me from the bed and down the roads and paths chiselled into the island. The beast came everywhere of course. It had made its nest in me, seeing my every move and knowing my thoughts. Perhaps the beast was my thoughts. The coloniser. Perhaps it had stretched all the way up, behind my eyes, to where I end.

Had it overthrown me completely?

Whispered remedies found me. Suggestions. Solutions. They rose vaporous from the rocks and waters of this dire place.

End it, end yourself. The solution seemed so obvious. So inevitable. How had I not seen that this was why I arrived on this place? To die.

'The island says that this is where I end.' I told them. I tried to say it calmly but it came out as a shriek. A cold front of concern blew from the face of the island boy to the face of the mother.

They began to sit up at night and watch me so that I couldn't leave. In the mornings they bustled in the kitchen making tea and sausages. The island boy made a large sturdy crib. I watched it all and the terror streamed from my eyes and my ears and out through my locked teeth. I could see the noxious stuff lapping at my island boy beside me on the bed at night.

And then one night, my body at last tried to expel the beastly thing. It was a dreadful fight but finally they dragged it shrieking from me.

The beast had split in two, I saw. So cunning.

I was scooped out. Strings of gore and viscera trailed from me. A meat trail leading back up into the cradle of all this horror; the womb where it had been dwelling all this time.

'They are so beautiful,' said the island boy.

24.

At the museum opening the next day, I flaunt my new family to Dada and Móraí. I carry Rachel's baby around the large airy room where Rachel's paintings and sculptures hang, and no one comes near me. The baby is like a shield. The islanders look disbelieving at the fool bitch from the Mórthír who has allowed me to touch her child, but they don't intervene. It seems, as long as I'm staying away from them, they don't care.

They're so selfish: they roam the space, amused at the earnest descriptions of 'old island life' written on little foam-backed cards hanging around the room beside blown-up pictures of boats and islanders packed into thick woollen jumpers and dresses. The clothes once made by hand in this very room.

Rachel has packed up the cottage. She told me when I arrived to walk her and Seamus up to the factory for the opening. It's sudden – I assumed we had a little more time but with baby Seamus struggling here on the island, she has agreed with the museum people that she will leave now that her body of work from her residency is completed and the exhibition open. I have told her that I can take the work down and get it to her when it needs to be dismantled. I have no intention of doing this. I am coming with her. I'm still a little uncertain how to make this happen, but I will.

I think of my mother, sitting on the beach that day, watching. That brand of passive evil will not work for this current problem, though I do admire it. It was certainly an elegant (though not wholly successful) solution to the supposed malevolence of my sister and me.

I am positive that whatever malevolence is in me was planted that day and certainly not a moment before. Whatever I am, you made me so,

Mother mother.

I smile into the back of the baby's head at the irony.

The dip at the top of the head is now so pronounced it could hold water. A fontanelle fountain. This baby is not well.

I circle the room. Rachel is at its centre, receiving congratulations from the museum people. She will be on the boat early the next morning.

I tense, watching as Móraí approaches and leans into Rachel's sphere. Rachel nods with a polite smile to the start of Móraí's spiel. Móraí is presumably introducing herself as my grandmother. As Móraí continues to speak, I can see Rachel's expansive expression start to shut down. Móraí is no doubt unleashing about me, as promised. What is she saying? Rachel is looking around warily. She is looking for her baby, I realise. I move into her eyeline and hold the baby's hand up so that he is waving. She gives a tense little nod.

'I will throw Móraí from the back cliffs for this,' I sing quietly into the baby's ear.

Then I'm cut off by Móraí's stark shout as Rachel disengages and hurries towards me.

I didn't catch Móraí's words, only the rage in her voice. The rest of the crowd murmurs on, apparently not bothered by Rachel cutting a rushed path through the room. I steel myself for the blow. She is coming to rescue the baby. She knows what I am now.

'If your mammy tries to leave me, maybe I'll throw us all off the back cliff,' I sing to the baby.

'Aoileann.' In her haste Rachel butts right into me and it takes me a minute to realise that she isn't grabbing the baby from me but is in fact bundling me into a haphazard embrace. There're tears in her eyes.

'What's wrong? My grandmother—'

'Your grandmother is not a good person.' Rachel presses her lips to my ear and pleasure sears in my secret part. 'She just told me crazy things about—' She shakes her head angrily. 'It doesn't even matter. You can't stay with her, Aoileann. She'll poison you.'

I trip on this choice of words. So funny.

‘You should leave, Aoileann.’ Rachel looks anguished as she steers us out the side door of the workroom and away from Móraí’s wretched watch. Outside we’re alone but for the island. I can’t believe how well this is going, Móraí herself has provided the solution. I drop my smirk as I turn back to Rachel. She’s still pleading with me. Pleading with *me!*

‘You’re an adult, you don’t have to stay here, Aoileann. She said you were unnatural. All kinds of awful lies. That isn’t right. Life doesn’t have to be like this. Just because people are family doesn’t mean they’re good. I’ve spent long enough being treated that way by hypocrites. I don’t want this for you.’

‘I can’t leave, Rachel.’ I sigh. If I push myself on her, later she will wonder about it all. She might get to thinking. I must do some small show of resistance. She can never think I forced this. ‘If I left,’ I whisper, ‘I wouldn’t know what to do. I didn’t even go to school.’

‘That’s what they *do*.’ She pulls me close again, Seamus wedged gently between us. ‘They keep you small so you can’t ever get away. But you can.’ She’s emphatic. ‘Come with me, Aoileann. I’ll help you, I promise. Like you’ve helped me.’

Her eyes hold mine and I make sure to keep my smile tentative at first, then I allow it to spread slowly.

‘Really?’

‘Really! Of course, really. I would have lost my mind here if it wasn’t for you. You saved us. We will go to the Mórthír and make a home and Seamus will get better. And we’ll have each other. Until you’re ready to leave, obviously.’

I don’t dwell on that last bit: I can deal with that when the time arises. Rachel will always need me. I look beyond Rachel through the open door to the workroom. Móraí looks to be gone. She is probably walking Dada to the early evening boat.

‘I’ll need to get my things organised,’ I tell Rachel.

‘Of course!’ Rachel pulls me and Seamus close. ‘This is going to be wonderful. You don’t know how wonderful life can be, Aoileann.’

I don’t.

‘What time will we meet tomorrow?’ I ask.

‘Seven in the morning for the first boat – the museum men are organising my things to be sent on, they know I’m keen to get the baby back.’ She takes Seamus from my arms and a crease of worry passes over her features as she checks him. My irritation flares. Always worrying about the baby, this is *our* moment.

I summon a warm smile, though with some effort. ‘He’ll get so much better when we get to the Mórthír,’ I tell her. ‘And you will too. You’ve been doing so much here. You’ll be able to rest more and I can do the housework. We’ll get you well and get your milk nice and fatty.’

Rachel blinks but then quickly smiles.

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25.

In the advancing gloom I walk, bent against the incline, to my stitched-up home, making my plans.

It wouldn't be right to leave without proper goodbyes, I think. My barking laugh tumbles out onto the path ahead of me.

Móraí's hysterical in the kitchen when I arrive.

'She wouldn't listen to me! I've seen what you did with your mother's face, you wretch. I will bring that silly girl up here to show her myself if I have to.'

'You will not!' I laugh. 'Sure then you'd have to explain something for a change. Everyone would know what you've been doing up here all these years and things will get even worse for you.'

'What do you mean, for me?'

'I'm off, so it'd be on you really.' I stroll to my bedroom, barely glancing at the smiling bed-thing plonked out in its chair in the middle of the hallway. In my room, I put the few bits of clothes I have into my backpack.

'Where are you going?' Móraí has followed me.

'I'm going with Rachel. She asked me. After your awful stories, she feels even more sorry for me. So thanks for that.' Móraí stays frozen as I shoulder my bag and walk past her back into the hall. She wheels round.

'You can't—'

'You really shouldn't keep this here,' I cut her off, flicking at the bed-thing's head. 'It's right in the way.' I tilt the chair back then drive the bed-thing into her room. Her legs catch on the gouges in the floor as I knew they would and the chair's sudden stop dumps her onto the floor in a heap. I

shiver with satisfaction – the tide of power has turned to me and I feel strong and fearless – ready for the next step.

‘You can’t go,’ Móraí is pleading, which is curious to hear. In my whole life, she has never sounded weak. ‘You can’t leave me with her.’

‘HmMMM,’ I say. ‘Let’s have some tea. I’m not going till the morning anyway.’

‘You can’t leave, you don’t know how to be.’

‘I’m learning,’ I snap.

Móraí makes no move to pick up the bed-thing. Maybe Móraí knows what’s coming.

I don’t bother to pick her up either. No need. In the kitchen, old habits drive me to the locked box and the day’s bread. A few minutes later, we are settled at the table. We chew and drink our tea as the night draws down around us. I wonder if Móraí will say anything. Sorry, perhaps? But no, as the hours pass I sense no hint of remorse. Her occasional sighs seem to suggest that, if anything, she feels vindicated by all this – as though everything she thought about my treacherous nature is now confirmed.

We sit and she doesn’t say a thing and I don’t say a thing. We sit and I think how closely this night without words resembles all of the other nights we have spent suspended here in this hole of a house, hanging together forever. In her silence I understand that any fight has gone out of her. She wants it all to end and no doubt a secret part of her is relieved that I am willing to do it.

At last she stands up.

‘Oíche mhaith.’ She turns and leaves. I listen to her progress down the pitch-black hall to her bedroom. She didn’t so much as pause by the discarded woman on the floor in the doorway.

I wash up as I’ve always done and tidy away the bits. Knife back in the box and key in the wall. The wall is quiet tonight.

In my room, I draw the gravewall rope out from my bedclothes. I’ve been sleeping with it coiled around me since the night I stole it. I didn’t exactly know why except that the island encouraged the idea, and I felt the purpose would arise naturally.

And so it has.

*(the island is still bad.
Or I am the bad and the island is mad)*

I walk back to the thing on the floor, loosen the loop of the stiff rope and shove its head and arms through. Gravewall ropes are the toughest things on the island. They have to be to withstand the beating they get hanging over the side for such long periods of time. This one is years old. It has likely hung many bodies. The rope never goes around the neck, because when they used to do this back at the beginning of things, the necks rotted through too fast and the bodies dropped like early fruit. The shoreline became clogged with the nuisance of the headless dead. The grave-wall was supposed to weather them, so they would disintegrate and stop returning on the tides. So now the rope goes around the torso and under the hips too sometimes. I drag the clump that is my mother through the house by the gravewall rope. It's loud work, she knocks off corners and bumps over the step of the back door. Móraí surely hears but doesn't want to know any more than she has to. She wants me to get on with it, no doubt.

Outside the temperature has dropped. I lean into the rope to drag my mother on over the jagged stone path. I look down the island to my left. All the oblivious people down there are unaware that tonight is the most important, exciting night of my life. I think of Rachel folding away her clothes and packing up her possessions, taking care of loose ends. The pull of the rope drags me back from my Rachel thoughts and I look back at the bed-thing, to see what she's catching on. Incredibly, her wig's still on. I drop the rope and go to her. I squat down beside the bed-thing and see that she is still grinning, her face pressing down into the ground, her eyes wide and fixed. Her arms drag behind, her palms up. This is going to take all night. I stand and circle her, toeing the mottled, scabbed limbs. I'm fed up.

‘Just walk, will you?’

The bed-thing obeys.

It rises up before me in total silence.

The rocks don't even crunch under its curled feet.

Its hands hang slack. Its head lolls, speared on its neck. It grins and it stares.

I feel no swoop of shock at her sudden sign of life. I feel only a funny sense of inevitability. As though somehow I've known all along that this was where it was all leading.

I tug the gravewall rope and the bed-thing begins to move. And then it even starts to lead. At the wall of the house, it turns right to the worn notches leading to the back cliffs. It walks compliantly, showing no wrench of pain at the serrated rocks underfoot. After a dozen or so steps, it's leaving glistening black stains in its wake. Its soles are bleeding.

It walks, rising with the island, and I follow. What a cursed thing this walk is. The walk seems to go on forever. Just like Dada running towards his babies rolling and dragging in the waves. Finally, the bed-thing comes to a stop and in the darkness I see we've come to the high edge of this place. This awful place and this awful life.

The prow of the island reaches out over the rocks and waves below. I tilt forward very slightly to assess the drop and see what my mother's death might entail, but it is complete blackness. I can hear the churning ocean down there and the crying. Always the crying. I wonder now if the crying got inside me that day. It got inside me and then never left me. The cries hadn't come from across the fields and rocks of the island as I'd thought, the cries – my baby sister's cries – called up from the echoing well that I am. The echoing well that I've always been.

(she gurgled and cried, then the ocean found her, reached around her baby body and swallowed. Then nothing)

'You can just jump if you want,' I tell it, indicating the void with a shrug. 'I don't mind.'

It turns and holds my gaze.

I know that jumping is not what it wants. Too easy, too quick.

Grinning wide, it shakes its head *no*.

‘Fine,’ I snap. I’m impatient to be done with this.

I reef the rope hard towards me, yanking her forwards down onto her front, snapping her head up. I walk the rope back a bit until I find the perfect rock, sticking up from the ground, glinting like a thrust knife. I test it. It’s solid. I tie the rope around the rock, knotting it many times. Then I walk back to where the bed-thing is still lying on its front. Its creak has started up and it smiles up at me.

(never let them show you their smile)
(I deserve this and more. Give me more, I can take it,
I welcome it, I need it)

I sit and take the rope in my hands, holding it loosely and centring it in my lap. I breathe and bend my legs up. I place my feet on her shoulders and start to push. I breathe and push again. And again. The staring, delighted thing inches away from me feet first, towards the edge. As her body starts to go over, her weight comes on the rope connecting her to me. I lean back against the pull. *Savour it*, I remind myself. I ease her gently, gently and the blackness beyond the edge begins to reach up around her. Swallowing her, also savouring. I tease the last moment out, until her whole body is over and just her head is hooked on to the land. Her smile is so big, she blinks across at me from the edge. I let her hang, wondering if any pleading will enter her eyes but no. She just smiles on.

I let go, her head drops from sight and the rope rushes over my legs. I heave myself clear just as it pulls tight.

I crouch and listen to the night. She didn’t make a sound going over. All I can hear now is the rasp and creak of the twisting rope.

It’ll be a long death. She won’t drown, she will wither. The waves don’t reach that high. If the weather’s nice she’ll be scorched. She will hang off the back of the island staring out to where ocean dead-ends into sky until she dies. It will take a while before thirst will wring the life out of her.

She will hang for at least three days, maybe even longer. And how long will those three days feel, alone and hanging? Fleeting compared with her

life in the bed, I imagine.

The night is lifting, and I want to make good time for Rachel. I skip over the rope and start back down, towards Rachel and towards my deliverance. I am going to take Étaín as my name from now on, I've decided. I want to be untainted. Étaín escaped and now the bed-thing's escaped and Móraí and Dada and I will too.

This is where it ends.

Where I end.

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