

I

No movement, on the desiccated soil. The cows are still, spread roughly in the sparse shade, perhaps lying so to stay cool. Perhaps they've died. In the desert little creatures still teem around the spinefex and boab, but this land is thirstier; it has never learned how to keep itself alive. The heat is unfettered, pulsing, salient. From sunrise to evening, the air is obscene with it; sucking the last marrow from skeletal trees. Nothing dies until it dies like this; with the life bleached from every molecule. Any lingering vestige of colour is reclaimed by the hoarse sunlight. Small sounds are magnified, surreal: the slow ticking of ants making futile circles beneath the crumbling skulls, beneath a leering sky spread wide across in uniform, brilliant blue.

II

By October you'd developed a habit of sitting next to the French windows in your bedroom, often wearing little more than one of my shirts, not caring who saw you. The breeze you were attempting to coax was non-existent, but you'd slouch across your little chaise anyway with the windows flung wide, book clutched limply in one hand; the perfect cliché. Lawrence Durrell or Virginia Woolf. You had a weakness for the overwritten, but could never coerce your reluctant attention span into reading more than a few chapters at a time.

But you read constantly. Sometimes I'd have to physically wrestle the book from you to get you to pay me any heed. I threw a Richard Brautigan out the window once, and you

made me run downstairs without my shoes in the forty-degree heat to retrieve it. The tar on the road was melting and the pavement burnt my feet. People in the café across the street stared. It was a power trip, of course, although you said it was a matter of principle. You weren't that big a Brautigan fan.

In the heat you became lethargic, feline; your movements languid and provocative. Perhaps it was a performance; if so, I didn't care, for it never seemed contrived. Your hair was a moisture-trap; it became thick and heavy and you'd have to continuously push it to one side. It made me think of an old lady's fox-stole, falling richly against your neck. I'd play with it in bed when you were being lazy; lying next to me, scratching my chest. You breathed deeper in the heat. Lying next to you, listening to you inhale, I'd sometimes think you were sighing. Occasionally you'd snore.

I'd watch you sometimes, when I'd first walk into your flat. Calmly flipping a page, ignoring me as I put away my things and removed my wedding ring. The chaise – then so shabby; I'd had it re-upholstered for you later – was so soft and worn it seemed to embrace you, molding itself to your contours. When you stood to greet me there would always be a lingering imprint, a fragmented impression of your body vanishing from the slowly rising material.

III

The town dies like a leaf, withering at the edges, curling inward. Plates of cracked earth

on the lakebed have germinated, yielding clumps of colorless hay. Years ago, Olympic rowers wrestled through the water here, scarlet-checked, sweat-glazed, lakewater flinging blissful acne onto faces ablaze. Is it the memory of water, its phantom surface somewhere above their heads, that causes two men to trail across the lakebed so slowly? Past the flaking sign reading now, F NISH LIN . One kicks at a thistle, sending a spray of parched dirt flying. The thistle bends and springs back violently. The man's companion has walked on and he turns to catch up, leaving the spiny weed swinging there, back and forth, like a gaudy pendulum. Purple and silvergreen. The only organic colour in sight.

IV

That summer, the hottest on record for decades, I took leave off work. Ostensibly to write. Anna was never the literary type, not in the way you were, but she was supportive enough and never questioned me when I disappeared for a couple of days to do research. Often I'd wind up driving down to one of the smaller towns near the coast, just taking mental snapshots. One time I brought you along; a town on the southern coastline. We stayed the night at a motel and had breakfast on the beach. It was chilly and neither of us were particularly hungry. You fed most of yours to a flock of belligerent gulls.

It was around this time that I started buying music, mostly the jazz I'd listened to in my younger years. It wasn't to Anna's taste: it lived in my car, getting played over and over as I drove. You, on the other hand, pretended to like it, tapping your fingers on the

off-beats when you thought I was looking. I found it slightly irritating. I'd have preferred you to just come out and say what you thought. Was it cowardice? I don't think so, for you could be incredibly candid sometimes. You never hesitated to tell me when you had issues with something I had written, for example. I forget exactly how it transpired that you began reading my work. I'd left a chapter at your place, I think, one afternoon when I'd left in a hurry. When I came back to retrieve it you were already on the last page, pen in hand, smoking on the balcony. You had a gift for editing, an instinct for cutting away unnecessary detail, could explain why a certain sentence sounded better in two parts or why a revealing paragraph should be moved to another part of the text. I always hated the smoking, though. The pages faintly reeked of it afterwards. When Anna asked about it, I developed a reluctant pack-a-week habit to keep her from suspecting.

You were too young, that was the thing. Too young, and bright enough to know from the beginning that I didn't love you. Perhaps you kidded yourself that I might, given time. You knew that you were the latest of a long line of infidelities. Perhaps you hoped to be the last.

V

On the face, the lips are the first to go. They peel from the inside out, skin flaking upwards, translucent sails on a sea of mollusk pink. They crack and bleed. You buy balms, creams, Vaseline. You never used to drink much water; now you carry a bottle around with you, give up coffee. A plant on your balcony dies. You keep watering it for a few

days out of belated guilt, then throw it in the compost.

The heat worsens. The elderly die in droves. Your grandmother, lingering in hospital, passes away one weekend and you head south for the funeral. Dry-eyed. You weren't close. On the drive home you hit a wombat, end up staying the night in Bendigo while they fix your car. You have dinner at a pub, talk to the bartender. He tells stories about his patrons, makes you laugh. When he gets off work you are still there, and he takes you home with him. You leave the next morning, early. He is still asleep. You do not have his number, and have not given him yours.

Your apartment block is thirty stories high, but you are only on the fourth floor. You discover the fire-stairs lead to the roof and begin spending the evenings there, enjoying the breeze and the view. City lights. Capsized stars. You flick your cigarette ends at the hotel adjacent. One night a semi-famous photographer staying there sees you on the roof and snaps your picture. Weeks later a friend calls to tell you that your image is part of a traveling photography exhibition. You mean to see it, but never find the time.

VI

I took you to see a show once, when Anna was out of town. It was a stupid risk when I think back on it; anyone could have seen us together and Anna's friend Rachel worked a just couple of blocks down from the theatre. You looked great, as you always did; if a little overdressed. Maybe you were nervous. We rarely were out in public together.

You had a dress on, dove-grey. When you got your period halfway through the first act you walked out, blushing, apologizing to other patrons as you pushed your way past. The mess was noticeable, even in the dark. I waited half an hour in my seat before I realized you weren't coming back. When I went out to find you, you were waiting by the car, furious. We didn't speak the entire way home.

The day I left you was the hottest on record for months. Anna was pregnant again. I met you at a café, sat in the street sweltering as I tried to explain, face-to-face, but you ended up making it easy for me. You walked off. The next day I came by for my things, and found them packed neatly into a cardboard box outside your door. I left your key under the mat, took the box. For weeks I harboured a vague fear that you would tell Anna. I needn't have worried: you weren't the vindictive type. But I never did get my ninth chapter back.

And after that, I didn't see you again. Well, that's not entirely true. A picture of you, months later, hanging in the gallery. Smoking a cigarette, the image waxy, but it was you. You looked good. Perhaps it was just the lighting: reflected orange from the street giving you a glow that you never possessed in real life. I lingered in front of it for a few moments, then moved away.

I continued writing. I found a publisher; they wanted it shorter, warmer, with a more

pronounced human story. I remodelled one of my characters and inserted more dialogue. I told Anna the new character was based on one of her nieces, a girl of about twenty. Physically, she looked like you.

Look, I never set out to hurt you. It's best we get that straight. You knew what we were from the beginning and was clear to both of us how things would end. You were too young. I was too old. You'll have others; you have time to forget me and find someone else and do it all over again. I was just the guy you fucked every now and then because you liked the drama, the feeling of worldliness it gave you. You were just another girl.

I didn't miss you, at first. For a long time I didn't even think of you. I wrote my novel. By this stage I had split it into ten parts, ten fragmented scenes, and I wanted something more concrete to link them all together. I fleshed out my characters. The one who looked like you, the girl; my editor liked her especially. I wrote more. She grew in my mind, daily, clogging my thoughts. That's how I thought of her then, as a blood clot in my brain, blocking my flow of thought. Without meaning it to happen I was turning her into a central figure in the story's geography; its manifestation, its muse. I gave her lines I had once heard you say, I found myself thinking about you, without having seen you for months; your life in that boxy little apartment; picturing you sleeping, reading, screwing, smoking, brushing your goddamned teeth. I stayed awake for hours into the night, writing, and I'd delete it all the next day. My pack-a-week habit became a packet a day. I drank. Scotch. It wasn't even original.

Anna hated it. She wanted me to go back to work, before the baby came, but it was – like a train, too much momentum gathering for too long. Can you understand that? I couldn't. I couldn't explain it to myself, let alone to her.

VII

May brings the first fall of rain. Fat drops, swimming through the air like strange translucent fish, emit as swift radiance as the light filtering in through banked clouds is caught: flash, swish, glinting through the air before shattering thickly on the ground. In the dam the raindrops drive themselves deep into the soft mud. The remaining tadpoles cluster in growing puddles, their tails flickering like slippery black flames. The ones that hadn't been so lucky – fragile black shells burnt brittle by the sun – float atop the rising water, drawing endless circles as the rain propels them in a random dance.

In the cities, interminable blue skies give way to a rumbling, churning grey. And everywhere; in the streets, in the foyers of office blocks, in underground parking lots, the smell is unmistakable; the smell preceding rain.

VIII

So this is what's going to happen. I won't finish this novel. I know it now. I'll sit here, writing the latest chapter in my head, fall asleep on the couch and decide against it when I get up tomorrow. I can see you now, late afternoon, perched on the windowsill. You

sold the chaise months ago. The sky froths in shades of yellow, grey, mauve; kinder to the eye after months of interminable blue. You watch as the first drops come down, one after another. At first they sound like palpitations, individual and disconnected, but soon they vibrate against your window in a soft cacophony, washing it clean. You walk onto your balcony. The rain falls in a slant, towards you. You breathe. Lips apart. The pellets explode against your teeth, fizzing; a taste that is slightly earthy: the rain, falling like static towards the thirsty clay.