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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Stealing from Winter

Dissertation submitted in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, School of English, University College Cork, by

William Wall

Under the supervision of Dr. Éibhear Walshe

Head of the School of English: Professor Lee Jenkins

April, 2018

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Abstract

This thesis was submitted as part of a PhD by Prior Publication. It explores my motivations for writing, the thematic concerns which run through all my work and have their roots in my early experiences, and some of my approaches to language and imagery. The thesis is divided into two parts: An essay called 'Stealing From Winter' and a draft of the novel *Grace's Day*. The essay seeks to form a narrative linking my early unpublished writing (juvenilia) with my published work and is, itself, divided into two sections. It explores, in the first section, the objective conditions of my life at the moment in which I can state definitively that I began to write and in which I began to think of myself, for the first time, as a writer. In order to achieve this it makes use of my private archive. In the second section I examine the concerns that lie behind three of my novels – *Alice Falling* (2000), *This Is The Country* (2005) and *Grace's Day* (2018). Because *Grace's Day* had not yet been published at the time of examination, I include a draft as the second part of this thesis. As a draft it may be compared with the published novel to provide an insight into my editing practice.

Keywords: William Wall writer, *Alice Falling*, *This is the Country*, *Grace's Day*, Irish literature, creative writing, memoir, juvenilia, Irish fiction, Irish poetry, Irish writer, Irish memoir, Irish short story, writers and illness, Irish political writing.

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Too late alas I name my parents Michael and Margaret whose gift of love is the foundation of all my work. To my sons, Illan and Oisín who saw their father hunched over his notebook or keyboard all their childhood and have always believed. To Éibhear my supervisor who helped me to see my own work through a new lens. Most of all to Liz, grá mo chroí, my first and best reader and the reason for everything.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis submitted is my own work and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere.

Signed:

William Wall

Date:

'William Wall overhears and observes the invisible people that walk our streets, figures freighted with loss, with alienation, with dark secrets.'

Deirdre Conroy, Irish Independent

Stealing From Winter

> Still's Disease is a kind of Winter. It settles on the bones and the joints with a wintry determination: pain and misery is the signature. The pain makes you feel cold all the time. You sit by a fire or a radiator, no matter what the season, husbanding warmth. Warmth eases the joints the way a warm January day softens the budding branches. But there is no sap rising: knuckles and knees swell but it is a false Spring: the buds are galls, like the white hollow oak-fruit that the gall-wasp makes. You call for the doctor and the doctor comes with his bag in his hand and he looks at you with a kind of pity because he knows the truth. This is your disease and he can't take it away from you.
>
> (Unpublished Essay by the author)

1.1 The child as father to the man

I fell ill at twelve years of age and began writing at around that time. The coincidence, if coincidence it be, has always seemed to me to present two possibilities: (a) writing as therapy, presenting the illusion of meaning in a context of meaninglessness, a form of interpretation or (b) writing as an escape, a way of hiding myself in other imagined communities which do not contain my personal pain. 'Hiding and veiling of a man's self' (Bacon, 26) as Bacon called it in his essay 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation', undoubtedly plays a part but I have never been able to resolve this question. Instead I have insisted on the act of writing as the assembling of an apparatus with its own internal discourse, a construct like any other cultural artefact, defined by the cultural discourses in which it happens. I make no claims for 'realism', merely that the texts contain, as far as I am capable of making them so, narratives of the world as I see it, that 'seeing' itself defined by the discourse. In a sense, writing is both a product of culture and a producer of culture.

In the many years since then I have been unable to untangle the beginning of writing and the beginning of a lifelong illness. Both have had enormous consequences in my life and the pain has, I believe, informed my work, giving it a darker twist. I have assiduously avoided writing directly about what Virginia Woolf, in her essay 'On Being Ill' (Online, no page numbers), called 'the daily drama of the body' or the 'daily assault of fever' for perhaps the very reasons she suggests, because '(i)n illness words seem to possess a mystic quality', but equally because, as Susan Sontag suggests in her essay 'Illness as Metaphor', illness accrues obscuring metaphor to the point of cliché. My one approach to writing about the 'kingdom of the ill' (Sontag, 3) (so much for abjuring metaphor) was in a long poem sequence called simply 'Q':

> God is mechanics
> and the triumph of engineering
> and Q thinks
> he is filling up with dead bits.
>
> In the aftermath
> he is ecstatic,
> drifting between death and sleep
> awash with pain.
>
> It's a good one, God says,
> a beautiful piece.
> Give me a spare rib, he jokes,
> and I'll give you a prosthesis.
>
> (*Fahrenheit Says Nothing To Me*, 52)

What is certain is that a period of enforced immobility (I was out of school for a year) at twelve years of age made me turn inwards and towards books; the imagination was my emancipation. Spending hours, days, weeks in bed, I began writing, for the first time, stories, poems and songs. It was the start of a lifelong habit (or indulgence) of writing on a

tea-tray sitting in bed. Over the years I have acquired more elaborate tea-trays, including one with legs and a little drawer for pens.

I feel certain that the experience of entering into what Sontag called 'the night-side of life' (Sontag, 3) at such a young age, of being a relatively helpless patient whose life was modulated by medical professionals and medication and who was dependent on parents very often for things like help sitting up in bed, had the effect of making me aware of the physicality of the body in a way that normally resides in the unconscious for all of childhood. It made me conscious of power relations and of the relative powerlessness of the weak, the ill, the old, the poor. I think it accounts for such an early and determined drive to create worlds and plots and characters over whom I had at least partial control.

1.2. Early reading

Although there were many books in the house, the first poetry I laid my hands on was Walton's *New Treasury of Irish Songs and Ballads*, a source of much genteel drawing-room balladry, but also containing one or two gems of the real thing which, in due course, would pique my interest in the Border Ballads. Later, through some unknown agency, the house would acquire a *Selected Poems* of WB Yeats and Kavanagh's *Collected Poems*. Sitting up in bed I devoured these along with whatever novels I could lay hands on. Sometime around the age of fifteen I first read Stevenson's *Kidnapped*. It had a profound effect on me. I loved it primarily as a book about friendship. But I have grown to love it for its directness, its lyrical drive, the Scots in the rhythm, the intensity of landscape and its people: 'There is a regular ferry from Torosay to Kinlochaline on the mainland. Both shores of the Sound are in the country of the strong clan of the Macleans, and the people that passed the ferry with me were almost all of that clan.' (Stevenson, 112) Or scenes like this which perhaps have led me to try to write about the sea in every book I've ever finished :

> As we got a little nearer, it became plain she was a ship of merchandise; and what still more puzzled me, not only her decks, but the sea-beach also, were quite black with people, and skiffs were continually plying to and fro between them. Yet nearer, and there began to come to our ears a great sound of mourning, the people on board and those on the shore crying and lamenting one to another so as to pierce the heart. (Stevenson, 112)

I think too that Stevenson was yet another gateway into the border ballads that came to fascinate me. I was attracted to the combination of allusive narrative and direct, almost brutal lyricism, and tried to cultivate it in my own work.

I worked at that casual cruelty for *Alice Falling, This Is The Country* and for *Grace's Day*. I often played border ballads from my collection to teach me to keep the language clear and hard. It helped me to pare back the imagery to the minimum. I sometimes chose phrases that were deliberately reminiscent of the folk rhythms. These from *Grace's Day* illustrate the point: 'The mountain sheep knew the way, those that came to the island. The seabirds on the cliffs knew. The seals, the dolphins, the fin whales. Their sinuous bodies found the seaway without pain' (41); 'As I lay shivering in the morning sheets' (61); 'A long time ago I had two sisters' (3); 'I saw a crow breaking a mussel on a stone.' (210) And sometimes I played Irish *sean nós* because the lyricism was different and led to different effects in my own writing; in particular *sean nós* songs such as 'Dónal Óg' gave me a key to interior states of love, loss and anguish in a way that the Ballads did not.

1.3. Early writing

Some time in the first year or so of the disease my parents bought me a typewriter on the advice of an aunt who was a nurse. The idea was that typing would keep my fingers from

turning into claws, which was the usual fate of a child with arthritis in 1967 or 1968. I began to write stories and some of them were read on RTE radio. I won a prize for a poem also on RTE. I 'published' a 'newspaper' called The Eagle, which I typed on a single sheet and taped to the inside of the front window of our house.

When I was fifteen my mother gathered everything I had written and sent it to the playwright John B Keane whom she had heard interviewed in relation to the first Listowel Writers' Week. He wrote back by return of post enclosing a ten pound cheque (a huge sum of money for a boy then) and praising the work. The money, he said, was a new literary prize and I was the first winner. So far as I know I was also the last. From then on, my parents, who had taken few holidays in their married life, brought me each year to Writers' Week where I would meet Keane himself and many other writers, and where I first saw and was enthralled and shocked by *Waiting for Godot*.

I remember that production very well. It took place in the Lartigue Little Theatre which had no wings, and so the characters had to enter and exit by ladders to the loft. It has always seemed to me the only way to stage the play. There also I first heard readings of poetry and prose. For someone who wanted to write it was an undeniable way-mark, a kind of village Utopia in the rain.

At school I was encountering T.S. Eliot and Thomas Kinsella and the Shakespearian play that has left the deepest mark on me: *King Lear*. We had an old Theobald's Shakespeare which had belonged to my mother in her school days and I read *Macbeth* in that and soon I was seeking out the other plays. By seventeen I had discovered (in the APCK[1] bookshop in Cork) Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus, St Exupery, De Maupassant, Hardy, Dostoevsky, Lawrence, Gogol, Orwell and the ubiquitous Solzhenitsen (at the time he was the West's favourite Russian). This rag-tag reading list was probably typical for most young writers

[1] Association For The Proliferation of Christian Knowledge! The only bookshop in the city that stocked psychology and philosophy in any depth and had a big selection of poetry.

who didn't grow up in a well-educated, literature orientated household. I have since met writers whose parents were from the well-educated middle class and my feeling is that they grew up in a world where a canon of sorts presented itself and was readily to hand. For me every new writer was a startling, unlikely and somewhat miraculous discovery. When I finished a book I had no idea what I would read next, or what I should read next, and so tended to follow a writer's work as long as I could get the books. They were hard come by until I went to university in my seventeenth year.

But what did the young teenager write about? I am fortunate to have a stapled, typed copy of the poems and stories I wrote between the ages of twelve and fifteen. Maddeningly, only the last page is dated – 1971, though I'm almost certain, from memory and from the changes in style and influence that it's chronological, or roughly so – young people set such store by the order and direction of time. I remember putting it together in early spring and it was a carbon copy of the typescript sent to John B. Keane. I had not looked at it in forty years. It had to be retrieved from the attic where I store some of my parent's papers.

Much of it, needless to say, was romantic escapism based on the kind of songs I came across in the *New Treasury*. Maybe taking a cue from the Young Irelander ballads, and still stirred by the commemoration of the 1916 rebellion in 1966, there are indications of the political interest ('Is Ireland Alive?', 'Ulster', 'James Connolly is dead'[2]) that would later come to be a fascination and a study. Then much of the classic teenage 'love' (better called 'longing' perhaps) poetry, directed at a loved one who does not know she is beloved ('A brown and sad eyed sombre girl/met me in my dreams…') and even naming a girl on whom I had a distant crush and who also happens to be the same 'brown-eyed girl' in several poems. There are many poems which I vaguely recall writing to please my family.

[2] These and the following quotations and titles from juvenilia come from an untitled and unpublished type-script in the author's possession.

One on an ancient family friend called Paddy; one called 'Auntie's coming home'; several expressing religious devotion of an entirely clichéed kind ('and dare we stand now, as they stood,/for Ireland and for God'). Writing about love in my later work I've always been conscious of the need to avoid such sentimentality.

But most surprising for me at this long remove are the poems that relate to the illness. I had expected none, and in fact, over the years I have interpreted the air of melancholy that pervades my pre-publication writing as a kind of stereotypical Romantic disillusionment. However another interpretation is possible. In these poems I attempt to come to terms with what I knew to be irreversible changes in my life ('My land of youth where once I wandered/I bid you now a fond farewell'), and in my later work I would often use writing to explore the meaning of life-events. Sprinkled among the jaunty, patriotic and sentimental rhymes are raw lines like this: 'Pain, pain burning and turning./On this side is agony on that is pain' or 'Down down the darkened pain path I went' (called 'Hospital Night').

This verse from a poem called 'Shadows' still rings strikingly true for me:

> The shadow of an image
> in a mirror cast aside
> never died …
>
> But the things it hasn't shown,
> Not the flesh and not the bone,
> the thoughts and secret fear
> are not there….
>
> but the shadows seen by eyes
> are not shadows in a glass
> and those shadows never pass.

I am impressed by those short, three-syllable lines and wonder where I got the idea.

The influence of Yeats is dominant in the early poems ('Beggar and Better Man', 'One Whom I know', 'The Bishop and the Fool', 'The Shores of Lochnaree' etc) or this from a Yeatsian pastiche sequence called 'Soft Spoken Strangers': "'Come away with me and trouble naught,/for God or man," said the stranger at the door./"Your youthful head will soon be bent with care…"

In the later poems there is Wordsworth ('On his oaken oars the rower lies/watching the bay in pleased surprise..'); Clarke in poems that imitate translations ('The Danes are lain (sic) tonight in the lion's den…'); Shelley for despair and poems about the loneliness of the sea; Auden for satire (a poem entitled 'Citizen J1/1901/T'); and possibly Blake in poems like 'The God, God':

> Bow down low,
> Worship all ye mortals
> at the shrine of the shrine
> of the great god 'God'…

I'm not sure where this wide reading came from, though inevitably some of it must have come from the Intermediate Certificate anthology – a 'canon of literature' style school textbook for early teenage years which began, if I remember rightly, with mediaeval lyrics and came up to then modern times.

1.4. First stories

Another surprise for me was the number of stories in the typescript. I knew I had written them, but the weight of the typewriter keys made them physically difficult for my arthritic hands. I would have expected two or three, but in fact there are fifteen. By contrast, the

total number of poems is two hundred and two.

A Christmas visit to an aunt's house is an opportunity to write lyrically about stars and frost 'The frost lay heavily on the ditches as we passed and the stars glittered and shone unseen in the Winter sky but I had seen a clock move and that had made all the difference' – Robert Frost, another poem from the school anthology, making his appearance in the last phrase. The story delights in the details of the farmhouse - the bellows, the shotgun over the door (single-barrelled), and the clock-face which is engraved and has 'funny crooked hands'. Seeing the clock-face change is the closest the story comes to an epiphany, not fully achieved and, anyway, fatally undermined by the banality of a summary last phrase, but the yearning to achieve a moment of psychological or philosophical insight is palpable if unrealised. Another story, 'Full Religious And Civil Liberty' plays with irony in a tale of a striking building gang and, as in several poems, deploys James Connolly's fate at the hands of a firing squad as a rhetorical device, both by the workers and by the narratorial voice reflecting ironically that the builders spent their strike day drinking. The tone is influenced by Frank O'Connor - the school text contained several of his stories.

Most of the stories fall into the category of amusing or uncanny incidents, but one attempts something of the menace that I would later feel drawn to in both stories and novels. It's called 'The Beggar Boy'. A 'beggar boy' sits on a sea-wall watching a rough sea. He sees an exceptionally high wave coming and stays, fascinated. When the wave is gone the boy is gone. The story then shifts to Sunday with a little comment about the villagers pious pre-Eucharist fasting, and another about how they had turned the beggar boy from their doors. Later on Sunday they find the boy's body on the strand. Now they remember the boy with affection. The priest comes and gives the last rites and when they ask him where the boy will be buried he, 'sick of their hypocritical holy holies', tells them it will be

in the graveyard, to which they object 'not with our people surely?' The social commentary, if that is not too grand a term for it, is clichéd but the technique is interesting. The story spends several hundred words depicting the sea and the giant wave, and then takes time out to talk about the fasting before giving a description of how the body lay on the beach, 'face down with its arms by its sides, floating gently between the stones, and rising and falling calmly between the waves.' That image of gentle rest coupled with the reality of a dead child was an effect that I would often strive for in later work. The last story in the typescript, my first actual fiction publication, read on RTÉ[3], feels less of a child's story. It opens:

> It was a close overdone afternoon. Close and sticky the way it is before thunder comes and the rain has not yet fallen to clear the heavy air and bring the smell of the salt fresh to your nostrils… It was one of those afternoons when the colours are dull and sounds are exaggerated to compliment (sic) the dullness.

The first few hundred words are devoted to scene-setting then enter a dog cavorting on the beach, his antics described in detail. Eventually the dog falls into a 'hole between the rocks and a plume of water erupted…' He re-emerges to the invisible owner's laughter. Eventually the owner appears, 'a soft girl, with hair that brushed her shoulders and a dark eye-ful (sic) face – lorded over by her eyes.'– that brown-eyed girl again! The narrator watches as she walks to the edge of the sea and 'stands there triumphant over the roaring Atlantic' (despite everything else suggesting a calm humid day). '[T]he waves rolled and whitened and broke on the un-yielding rocks below and she stood, arms folded looking down, headbent at the sea.' The narrator decides to meet this girl to 'see why she had come to that lonely place – my lonely place – where the sea met the land and the rocks ran mussel-covered into the Atlantic' but the girl disappears before he can meet her and

[3] Radio Telefís Éireann, the Irish national broadcaster for both radio and television.

inevitably the boy-narrator realises that she is '[g]one forever'. He returns to the shore and the story ends 'My heart sang a sad song and the seagulls mourned with me and the salt wind blew cold against my back.'

In terms of development, the story is remarkable in this collection for its avoidance of teenage moralising, for shunning the drama of a possible encounter, for its concentration on description rather than dialogue or action, and for the first mention of a book in any of the fiction. The book is Walter Macken's *The Coll Doll And Other Stories;* Macken was popular in our house and we had many of his books. Its biggest weakness is the narrator's self-dramatisation as a lonely, isolated boy, but of course it was written by a lonely, isolated boy for whom a romantic engagement with nature was the closest he came to romance. The setting, I am sure, is Corkbeg Beach, and 'The Point' is Corkbeg Island, the location for Ireland's only oil refinery, built during my early childhood, which I used to visit frequently and illicitly despite the security fences. The place and setting are so intensely imagined that I feel I can even remember the day in question. I certainly remember who the 'girl' was: she was at least fifteen years older than me, had worked as a secretary at the United Nations and was rumoured to have been one of the faces of the famous Coca Cola advertisement 'I'd like to teach the world to sing.' She was a classic 1960s beauty. I recognise something too in the drive of those three final conjunctions, and the pattern of 'heart', 'birds' and 'wind' ending on the words 'my back'. Other poetic devices occur throughout the story – alliteration ('It was a high human sound', 'rock-ridden'); simile ('the promontory stretched out below me like a scar into the sea'); repetition ('A black duck rose from the blackness of the Point') and so on, but none of them is over-used and this verbal restraint is a feature of the story. I sense myself working out a way of writing about things I knew well and of combining the equal love of poetry and prose that has been a feature

of my work ever since[4]. For a boy of fifteen it was good.

To come upon that first serious piece of writing after all these years involves a shock of recognition: I have circled that day, that description, that imaginative place – the grey day, the black rocks, the sea – in so much of my writing that it is difficult to believe this first story actually existed. It is as if I have been inventing it for years.

At the same time as these stories start to appear there is a leap forward in the poetry. By then I was in the final two years of schooling and studying, among other poets, Eliot and Kinsella. Modernism had a profound effect on me. I was also deeply affected by my first reading of Sylvia Plath. I can't now remember how I found her work, but I suspect my best friend gave me a copy of *Ariel*, and he probably got it from his elder sister. Plath's work spoke to me deeply, – poems such as the 'Ariel' with its startling opening line ('Stasis in darkness' (Plath, 36)) in which I imagined myself both the child and the suffering listener:

> The child's cry
>
> Melts in the wall.
> And I
> Am the arrow,
>
> The dew that flies
> Suicidal, at one with the drive
> Into the red
>
> Eye, the cauldron of morning.
>
> (Plath, 36)

[4] For example, this review from the New Yorker: 'Wall, who is also a poet, writes prose so charged—at once lyrical and syncopated—that it's as if Cavafy had decided to write about a violent Irish household.' the New Yorker, Jan 15 2001, p.93

I did not, at the time, know the source of the pain that was apparent in her poetry, but I found it answered to something in my own life. I understood a poem like 'Fever 103º', for example, to be about the twice daily fevers that characterise Still's Disease: 'Your body/hurts me as the world hurts God…' (Plath, 59). There is something slightly hallucinatory about much of her work – consider 'The Applicant', for example:

> First, are you our sort of a person?
> Do you wear
> A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
> A brace or a hook,
> Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
>
> (Plath, 14)

And again that aspect of her work seemed to sit well with the strange states of steroid medicated fever that I had to contend with, and that in due course would see their way into 'Q', as well as into the drug trip memories in *This Is The Country*.

Ariel brought the self-irony of postmodernism to my work, the hard uncompromising self-regard which I struggle against – in poetry in particular – in the attempt to make my work more accessible.

One poem which uses a phrase from the *Aeneid* as its title may serve to show this new turn towards some kind of modernity in my fifteen- or sixteen-year old brain:

> **"Lupi Ceu Raptores"**
>
> Come let us twist our adoration,
> Round the alter (sic) of condemnation.
> Let us eye again
> The knife of pain.
> Let us wax and wane,
> (And fly our aeroplane)

And sacrifice
The victim of our own vice….

I feel at a tremendous loss now to understand that boy, so hampered in his ordinary life, yet so rich in thoughts and emotions, so lonely and also so happy. It is such a contradictory mix. Adulthood makes sense of the chaos that is childhood, and perhaps such a filtering is necessary for our sanity's sake, but the loss is immense and irredeemable. In many ways, our pursuit of literature, music and art is a sublimated drive to reanimate the child lost in wonder. Nevertheless, in 2002, attempting to recuperate that synthesis of pain, powerful prescription drugs and aesthetic rapture which is how I think of my young writing self, I began what was to have been an essay with the working title 'Stealing From Winter'. I never finished it because I feared the trap of sentimentality which seemed to me to loom if I continued, but also, more practically, because I feared revisiting the trauma and what repressed experiences might return. It was an attempt to situate that pain and those long nights within the darkness that inhabits all of my writing like an incubus.

1.5. Three novels

So the question is: To what extent are these conditions and concerns reflected in my adult production. There are three novels under consideration here – *Alice Falling* (2000), *This Is The Country* (2005) and *Grace's Day* which was originally listed for publication in 2017 but, since a collection of stories drawn from the novel (called *The Islands*) won the Drue Heinz Literature Prize in the USA, the full novel will not now appear until 2018. I chose these books because of certain thematic links – the political and social commentary, the family in distress, memory and remembering – as well certain stylistic concerns. But during the span

of time represented by the three texts, I was, of course, writing a lot of other things: two other novels published between *Alice* and *This Is the Country*, three volumes of poetry, three of short fiction, my first steps in translation. One of those novels, *The Map Of Tenderness*, was an oblique approach to writing about my own end-of-life concerns while also coming to terms with my parents' death and their legacy in my life. I was teaching. I was helping to raise two boys. In 2005, the year *This Is The Country* was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize, I had a near fatal health episode in London and afterwards had to retire from teaching.

The period of approximately twenty years between *Alice* and *Grace* was one of extraordinary political and social upheavals in The Republic of Ireland. In 1999 Mary Raftery's *States of Fear* documentary exposed the full catalogue of child abuse in Catholic institutions. This was not the first news that we had of it, but it was the fullest and most shocking exposure. I believe that it marked the end of the Church's popular power in Ireland (as opposed to its clandestine political power which still continues) and the reason why, eventually, the same sex marriage referendum was passed with such a large majority. It established a disjunction between political and social power and the people over whom the power was exercised, most recently expressed in the People's Assembly vote to legalise abortion, followed by the shocked recoil of the political class which had expected it to affirm their conservative position. During the same period a tribunal of enquiry revealed the corruption of the political class and this, coupled with the collapse of the banking system from 2008 onwards following the brief but catastrophic 'Celtic Tiger', and years of brutal cutbacks, mass emigration, wage cuts, supplementary taxation, privatisation and the debacle of the attempt to privatise the water supply, has combined to create a radical leftwing political movement which is well to the left of the Labour Party - something not seen in Ireland since the early 20th century.

While my work does not chronicle these changes, it reflects them. *Alice Falling* attacks the entrepreneurial class and the Catholic church; *This Is The Country* satirises, among other things, the values of the Celtic Tiger; *Grace's Day* is both a psychological narrative and a critique of the Green Party's easy rapprochement with the Right. All three books reflect my sense of living under a disciplinary system – powerful men in positions of economic, social or interpersonal privilege, women, children or young people struggling with or against this patriarchal discipline. It could be argued that my interest in power relations reflects a sense of the powerless patient physically and psychologically under the management of others and relatively powerless to change things. An escape to the imagination in such circumstances is practically a cliché.

During this period too, major changes occurred in the nature of the Irish family, most notably with the passage of the same-sex marriage referendum. My work starts from the point that as an economic and fiscal entity (keeping wealth in the family, passing on inherited wealth, benefiting from pro-family tax incentives etc) marriage in Ireland has been highly successful, but as an emotional shelter, as a source of strength and security, as a means of liberating both partners and their offspring it has been an abject failure, and historically this failure has been carefully overseen by the Catholic Church in Ireland. I tend to see the family as a nexus of power relations that reflects the distribution of power in society as a whole including the power relations represented in capitalism. Thus in *Alice Falling*, the priest, the entrepreneur and the politician each play their parts as users and abusers in the construction and destruction of the family relationships in the book. Alice is the victim who in turn commits an act of violence. In *This Is The Country*, a young man and his family encounter various aspects of capitalism's power – the entrepreneurial drug culture stands for (and uses the language of) the entrepreneurial class in general and the politician is an estate agent ('It's an auctioneer's republic.' (238)). In *Grace's Day*, the family is a political, social and environmental laboratory for the father whose ambition is to be a

guru of the green movement. His absence is the centrifugal force that explodes the family.

Grace's Day plays with the problem of shared memories. The novel is narrated by two sisters, in alternate chapters of varying lengths, both of whom remember broadly similar events in their childhood but focus on different aspects, details and people. They differ, however, on a number of significant events. Furthermore, Grace's narrative asserts that the public construction (specifically as told at the inquest) of the events surrounding the death by drowning of a third sister is a fiction. The protagonist of *Alice Falling* also suppresses or partially remembers certain distressing memories from her childhood. On the other hand, the central character of *This Is The Country* simply doesn't remember the order of events in the early part of the book because of the quantity of drugs he takes. The narrative is jerky and regressive until he eventually begins to straighten his life out. Afterwards it proceeds with a broadly linear development.

In each of the three novels power resides with forces outside of the protagonists' control – with the priest and the entrepreneur/husband in *Alice Falling*, with the drug dealers/enforcers and the police in *This Is The Country*, and with the absent father in *Grace's Day*.

I note also the same urge to precision in each of the novels, particularly in relation to description, and the same romantic engagement with nature that characterised my childhood writing. This is, perhaps, a characteristic of prose-writers who are also poets: that attention to the purpose and effect of images, phrases, cadence that is necessary in poetry becomes a necessity too in the prose. As regards nature, I only need to think about how the character of Jeannie in *Grace's Day*, a geologist and therefore a scientist whose character might be expected to take an entirely prosaic approach to nature, speaks about her subject:

> Once in a second-hand bookshop I found a topological map and saw

> that a great wave-train of Old Red Sandstone ran along the coast to the west of our island, with spatters of limestone in the troughs; I saw that the tops of this wave-train were the headlands that I could see marching westwards into the sunset, and that the troughs were the bays that the sea had hollowed out of the soft limestone. (*Grace's Day*, 25)

1.5.1 Alice Falling

Alice Falling began life as a long short story published as 'In Xanadu' in *Phoenix Irish Short Stories* in 1998. 'In Xanadu' explored the lives of a group of hard-drinking, dope-smoking students. The story was important to me for two technical experiments. The first is a change of narrator in the final third of the story. This was a big risk to take in a narrative that until then was first person, recounted by Jim, one of the participants in the group. The shift involved a leap of faith on the part of the reader who had come to believe and trust the voice of Jim. The risk was compounded by the fact that the second narrator was female – Terry, Jim's girlfriend, who has been isolated from the group by her domineering father.

The second experiment is in the prose style. The story begins with a lyrical drive. I remember quite clearly being inspired by Derek Mahon's poem 'The Snow Party' ('Basho, coming/To the city of Nagoya,/Is asked to a snow party' (Mahon, 63)) and that poem gave me the rhythm and initially an image of snow falling on a city which was edited from the story but would eventually reappear in the novel. The language attempts a kind of brutal lyricism, an effort to write about the absurdity and brutality of life in a way which is beautiful, the roots of which lie in folksong – both Border Ballads and Irish folksong. The novel that developed out of this story uses the same brutal lyrical style. It sets out to catalogue the nexus between religion, politics, class, gender, entrepreneurialism and power in modern Ireland.

It concerns the eponymous heroine, Alice Lynch unhappily married to Paddy, and tells the story of her abuse at the hands of a priest and later her husband. In beginning the book I set myself the task of constructing a set of power relations that would reflect a relationship that existed in the intertidal zone between the bourgeois entrepreneurial and patriarchal class and the class of small farmers from which Alice comes. This nexus of relationships is characteristic of Irish society and is encapsulated in the expression 'we're never far from the bog'. It creates an illusion of a classless society, because the entrepreneurial class is rarely more than a generation or two away from its roots among, farmers, middle-men and rural functionaries. In Ireland, this illusion of classlessness is compounded by the absence of any kind of received pronunciation often seen as a class marker in other countries.

Power in *Alice Falling* flows mainly through masculine conduits, principally Paddy, Alice's arrogant and manipulative husband, and Mick Delany, manager of an insurance company and ex-hurler. The women in their lives are, to greater or lesser extents, victims of their attention. Paddy has Alice but also his mistress Sandy and Mick has Nora, his wife. Nora, depressed and unable to cope with Mick's callousness, eventually commits suicide.

A crucial conversation takes place between Alice and Sandy, Paddy's mistress. Sandy has a bruise on her cheekbone. It happened because her period came when she and Paddy were having sex. She laughed, seeing the menstrual blood on Paddy's underpants and jokes that when his wife sees it she will think he has 'had a sex change' (*Alice Falling,* 137). The phrase is carefully chosen and the character of Paddy is constructed in such a way that he would be enraged by the joke upon his masculinity and disgusted by the period blood. He strikes her. Later, recognising the bruise, Alice confronts her. She already has had suspicions of an affair and wants to enlist Sandy in her plan for revenge on Paddy. She schools Sandy on how to read Paddy's interpersonal strategies, the exercise of his power

which is as much about withholding as aggression. The description is intended to be meaningful to Sandy whom she sees as one of Paddy's victims – like herself. The conversation concludes thus:

> 'The great skill is to know the exact moment of power. Watch Paddy next time. He examines people. He pushes a little, maybe insulting them, maybe pushing some business line with them, probing, testing. At some point he loses interest. You can see it in his eyes. He'll look away. Or he'll order another drink. That's when he knows. Then, unless he wants to screw the person, he switches off. He files them away.'
> 'Oh Jesus,' Sandy moans. 'Stop. Please.'
> Alice lies back and closes her eyes. There is the hint of a smile in the corners of her lips. 'At least we know where we stand,' she says. (174)

Alice is not a classic victim. The book opens with her rising from the bed of the young philosophy student she has seduced and watching her husband's car passing on the street outside. From the outset the theme of power is established by the image of Father Bennis in the schoolroom, 'Gargantua's shadow on the world' (1), demanding to know where heaven is on a map – though the nature of that power is only slowly revealed – and in the second line of the opening we are told that a stain on the ceiling 'is a map of Ireland' (1). She watches a fly flitting on it and this provokes the memory of the schoolroom where hung 'an ancient truncated map of the world… China and Siberia missing at one side where a fire had clawed it.' (1) This map imagery seeks to establish a claim of generality. The novel is to be about, not just a set of characters or events, but the larger set that is a community, a country and possibly even a world.

The first tentative draft of the opening contained this: 'It is not difficult to say where it began. Basho, coming to the city of Nagoya, is asked to a snow party. Snow filled the night, and in the spaces between the streetlights it was the night itself, darkness made

tangible.'[5] It doesn't appear in the novel, but snow still haunts the eventual text - in Chapter 2: 'Outside snow was falling on the hills, obscuring well-known shapes. The world was changing its orientation, if only for a night.' (*Alice Falling*, 14) And later Paddy says, 'It's a snow party' (22). The quotations from Mahon were intended as a homage, but of course it could never have worked, not least because those who buy and read novels are not necessarily readers of poetry, but also because the quotations are too obscure. In fact, at this remove, I find it difficult to imagine where I thought I was going with Basho.

I confess to finding the movement from one kind of thought process to another completely baffling. Why does a poem by Mahon inspire the tone of a story or novel? In *Grace's Day* the sources of inspiration are folksongs. I was reading Dante's *Inferno* when I wrote *This Is The Country*. Its epigraph comes from there ('o quanto è corto il dire', 'oh how speech falls short') and indeed the young protagonist is in a kind of recursive hell. But that fragile and often wasteful psychological structure to which the mind attaches itself for the sole purpose of establishing and sustaining belief in the viability of a voice, a tone, a structure, a trope or a character for the purposes of writing a story or a novel is completely opaque to me. In short, while memory often can point to these sources, how they lead to actual writing is a mystery. And they often disappear completely in the writing or revising while remaining in memory as a sort of ghost-text.

When I say Alice is not a classic victim of abuse, she does share some characteristics with what psychologists tell us is a kind of pattern, most notably she herself abuses Sandy's trust. The denouement in which she and Sandy kill Paddy, Alice wielding the shotgun – Paddy, of course, has a collection of expensive shotguns – is, in my view, unnecessarily melodramatic and not mitigated by the last chapter in which Mick replaces Paddy as the abuser, simply taking her in charge because he knows what she has done and therefore has

[5] Unpublished MS in the author's possession

a hold over her:

> 'I remember when you got married,' Mick is saying. He is staring at her. 'Jesus you were a beautiful bride. But you were a lot younger than him. Another few years and you could have been his child. Almost anyway.' He holds out a hand, fat, moist. 'Look,' he says. 'Stop crying. I'm your alibi. The perfect alibi.'
>
> He catches her gently and moves her towards the door. He smiles at her and she catches the gust of whiskey on his breath. 'It'll be our secret,' he says. 'Just the two of us.' (199-200)

1.5.2 This Is The Country

The protagonist of *This Is The Country* is not named until the last sentence ('He said, Fuck you, Billy boy.' (272)) And the character himself is acutely aware of how working class people are anonymised by the rest of society. In the opening paragraph he comes to court to testify as a witness against his tormentor Pat 'The Baker' Baker, a drug dealer and the brother of his late partner Jazz Baker, and takes the opportunity while the court awaits the arrival of the judge, to meditate on the relationship between the poor witness or accused and the system through which he must pass:

> I look around the court and see pale faces I used to know well, people I grew up with, always on the edge of happening, or waiting for something to happen, waiting for the news. Famous anonymous people, witnesses, people known to the police, people who deny the charges, victims, passengers, residents, inmates, eye-witnesses, accomplices, neighbours. (8)

This is how he and his class are reported. But he knows who they are, and in return he anonymises the lawyers and clerks who populate the official part of the court:

> Old people in gowns are drifting about on the floor, talking, smiling,

> making the magic. It looks like nothing is happening but there's not a man or woman in the crowd that doesn't know where everything goes. All this chaos is moving. In the end the people on the floor will put a little something by for their old age and everyone else will wonder where the time went, deciding, maybe, this is the way it is, they better get used to it, it's nothing special. (8)

Towards the end of the novel, Billy, attempting to escape with his daughter in a small sailing boat, finds himself becalmed in an enormous bloom of jellyfish which he likens to 'shrink-wrap'. The jellyfish bloom becomes a trope for the same people and deliberately echoes the tone and pitch of the court-scene meditation:

> I looked all round and the shrink-wrap stretched away so far into invisibility. First I thought they were just floating there, gathering round the hull for their own special intentions, but after a while I noticed a kind of sly pattern, a direction that you couldn't put down to any one individual, but that the whole congregation understood. Almost a purpose. They were headed somewhere, wherever the lowest brands of life go, the assembly-point of see-through beings, ghosts and nobodies and glass animals, and, for the time being anyway, it looked like we were going to that refuge too. (264-265)

Class is crucial to understanding the novel. One of Billy's strengths is a clear-eyed understanding of how the system works. The middle-class 'put a little something by for their old age' while the working class 'wonder where the time went' (8). He knows that the poor pay in time for the privilege of not being allowed to starve to death. The idea of waiting as a disciplinary measure imposed by power on poverty is central to the book and clearly understood by Billy:

> The world is half-full of waiting rooms. All the time I wasted expecting my name to come up, maybe days, maybe weeks, courts and hospitals

> and clinics and places where good money was going on maybe bad product. (7)

He is constructed as a character with a profound social analysis but without the politics to instrumentalise it. The book was written at the height of the so-called Celtic Tiger in 2003/2004 and published in 2005 (the boom would lead to catastrophic collapse in 2008). It attempted to capture the kind of credit-dependency culture being encouraged by government, economists and the media, transposing Celtic Tiger fetishes such as entrepreneurialism, property, credit and luxury cars to the demi-monde of drug addiction/ dealing and petty-theft. Entrepreneurialism and perhaps capitalism in general, are personified in the drug dealers who are treated as entrepreneurs with a valid product line and a business plan like any other:

> Max told me stories to cheer me up. He had all the gossip about who was in the money and which people we should be nice to, and which one of our neighbours was going into the market or showing entrepreneurial skills, and what was affecting the balance of trade. (16-17)

Or:

> I grew up on The Lawn, a famous place of ill-repute. We had a bad name. There were times when the buses wouldn't bring people in. Times when fame reached out and touched us, neighbours houses starring on TV, stories about entrepreneurs and cool people with undeclared income. (42)

The language of neoliberal politico-economic commentary is deliberately rendered in the text. Certain kinds of phrases recur constantly, almost always in relation to drugs: 'open for business' (50); 'how the distribution trade works, the territories and the mutual

agreements and the fluctuating supply and demand and the pressure of turn-over' (147); 'moving up in the world' (63). There are contracts and negotiations, deals, prosperous careers. Pat The Baker has 'an international import and distribution business' (119) and a 'fleet of Mercedes cars and … female employees' (19), and for contrast, all the working class areas are named for patriots: 'Jazz told me her sister was on the game for a while. Down the docks and Parnell Place. Every fucking line in the country is called after a patriot. Pearse Street is another line.' (122) This insistence on the connection between historical politics and the new entrepreneurial economy is intended to set up ironies. The prostitutes work Pearse Street and Parnell Place. Billy grew up in the no-go area of Michael Collins Avenue, The Lawn.

The plot centres on Billy's slow and fatally compromised journey from drug-addled petty theft and violence to love and paying work. From the moment he meets Jazz (Jacintha) Baker he is determined to straighten himself out. That determination meets the ferocity of Jazz's brother Pat who, having risen to the equivalent of the bourgeoisie for a drug dealer, believes that Billy is not good enough for his sister. What suspense the book contains is generated by that conflict and the certainty that even though Pat is in prison towards the end, he is still capable of reaching Billy and avenging himself. Billy and Jazz escape to the country where Billy has been befriended by a lonely and elderly farmer. They find a house to rent and Billy becomes a diesel engine mechanic, more or less by default, and earns a living repairing boat engines. In the end, Pat the Baker's retribution reaches out to him. The contract is botched and the killer ends up killing Jazz not Billy. Their daughter is taken into care and the book ends with Billy struggling to reassemble his life and get his daughter back.

The ending is open, an encounter between two policemen who want to know if Billy will testify against Pat the Baker. But we already know, from the first chapter, that he has

gone to court as a witness. What we do not know is if he ever got his daughter back. That uncertainty is deliberate, and, of course, at the moment of the narrative where the book stops, Billy, or anyone in his predicament, could not possibly know the answer to that question. I rewrote the final three chapters thirteen times, primarily because I wanted to avoid the temptation of the spectacular act of violence that the plot pointed at and which, in my view had marred *Alice Falling*. I did not want to reiterate the classic negative stereotype which would see the working class hero drawn inevitably back into the murderous milieu to which he seems destined. Instead I wanted to depict a young man struggling to come to terms with the cataclysmic loss of his partner and daughter.

This Is The Country is my most intensively researched book. It began when, as a secondary school teacher, I had a Billy-like character in my class, an eloquent funny, story-teller with a bad reputation which included some of the activities I gave Billy. Billy's voice is a development of that young man's, an attempt to catch the rhythms, the self-deprecation, the casual assumption of complicity or understanding, but also the softness he showed when I challenged him about the fact that his girlfriend had just given birth to a baby. I still remember his reaction to my concern: 'We're sound sir, we're together four years, don't worry about us.' As always it is necessary to bury research so that it seems natural, but in the course of writing it I developed a small library on drug-dealing, prostitution and gang-murder in Ireland. Inevitably, much of this is written by moonlighting tabloid journalists whose vituperative and contemptuous tone I needed to avoid at all costs. Working class communities feel intensely the fact that their stories are almost always written by middle-class people writing for a middle-class and prurient audience. I am now middle-class myself (though I grew up in different circumstances), and this appropriation of a working-class character has always made me uneasy. It was, however, the story that presented itself to me.

1.5.3 Grace's Day

Grace declares more than once that what her father wrote about their family was fiction. He was treating them as research subjects, establishing them on a remote island and then observing how they survived, but fictionalising their lives to suit the narrative he wanted. This leads on to the fictionalising of an agreed story for the coroner following the death of Grace's sister Em, laying the blame on Grace, or at least diverting the blame from her mother, and ultimately the development of fictional memories. yet another layer of fiction is provided by Grace's husband Bill, the TV producer who wishes to make a documentary about the father:

> Radical finds peace in idyllic island, the vines, the trattoria, the narrow lanes, you know. He had a whole narrative of how my father's life had gone, from early political activism to a Zen-like composure in old age. (*Grace's Day,* 172)

And this fiction is compounded by the fact that Bill is sleeping with his personal assistant and Grace knows it. In fact, she announces their divorce during the filming of the dinner party which is the denouement.

Begun in 2008, not long after the entry of the Irish Greens into coalition with the right-wing Fianna Fáil party, the novel expresses a deep distaste for green politics, not on the basis of its environmental argument (which this writer supports – significantly the epigraph is from a book by Rachel Carson, one of the founders of environmentalism) but on the basis of its readiness to enter power with the Right, especially a party so tainted by corruption. This is the origin of the animus which I feel is evident in the story towards the father, a green party 'guru' and environmental writer, but in reality a careerist. The ultimate judgement is passed on by Grace from her mother in the lines: 'Ask him if he thinks the Greens are the vegetarian bourgeoisie – that's what mother used to call them.' (173) It is no

accident that the father's name is Tom Newman. The idea that the greens were a new kind of politics and the green man or woman was a new kind of person at one with nature and at peace with the world is ridiculed as Tom reveals himself as bourgeois and not particularly vegetarian.

After the death of Em the family, never exactly nuclear in the first place, falls apart completely. In the process Grace lived with her mentally ill mother who had broken down completely after the child's death, and her sister Jeannie went to live with their father ('In the breakdown of our lives she got my father and I got my mother. She got dark hair and I got fair. She got a perfect complexion and I got freckles.' (74)). It is Grace's view that her mother's breakdown resulted from a combination of the desolation of losing a child and the creation of a fiction which transfers guilt from her to her daughter. Although the motive for that fiction is never fully explained the implication is that a child's mistake is unlikely to cause any legal problems, whereas the mother could easily be accused of neglect. Eventually Grace's mother commits suicide. The subsequent coroner's court is described by Grace with heavy irony: 'Irish poet's love for bestseller's suicide wife, or words to that effect. Another headline was Double Tragedy Environmentalist's Family.' (139) The 'Irish poet', is Richard Wood, first the mother's lover, then Jeannie's. It is clear that Grace blames her father for neglecting her mother.

Grace's relationship with her father is a complex one. At the end of the short first chapter she says 'There were three islands and they were youth, childhood and age, and I searched for my father in every one.' (4) There is, therefore, the 'absent father' motif. Her quest is characterised by anger at his manipulation of the family, his absence, his willingness to abandon wife and children; by jealousy of a Freudian nature (she eventually becomes a psychologist) especially in relation to his two subsequent wives; by hurt; by a rejection of what she sees as his distortion and misinterpretation of their lives; by his

failure to love her. Her sister Jeannie, who narrates alternate chapters, has a different personality, more accepting, more fulfilled, less resentful and apparently more credulous, though these assessments are often filtered through Grace's narrative. She has a more affectionate relationship with her father and seems comfortable in, and even empowered by, her continuing sporadic love affair with the poet Richard Wood.

Differentiating the voices of the two sisters proved difficult. My first instinct was to establish separate imageries and syntax as far as possible. Grace tells her story in the past tense for the most part; Jeannie tells hers in the present and present continuous. Grace's characteristic imagery comes from psychology and mythology; she has a better eye for detail and a tendency to deeper and more sardonic analysis of people's psychology and motives (Of her father: 'Yet I saw that he yearned most of all to be Richard Wood, gliding in on a breeze, anchoring in the lucid water, taking the woman, making the poems.' (53) As an example of the imagery drawn from psychology consider this from Grace's narrative:

> The reality was a kind of foolishness that was like a dream, an existence that had no outside, no edge, that we could never transgress. A dream is a language; it has its own alphabet. But the dream knows that someone somewhere will understand and all communication is founded on that premise. But we grew up without that faith. We never knew that we could be understood. These are the consequences of living on an island…. Of course I believe that the past is not a narrative, it has no beginning and end, even though we survive, we hold ourselves together by telling stories about ourselves. For a practicing psychologist I have a weak faith in consequence. (28)

By contrast, Jeannie, who becomes a geologist often reaches for tropes derived from that science: 'Flakes of memory from a nugget of malachite' (28), 'We lived, in those days, in an iron-bound coast with deep safe harbours, a morphology shaped by folding and fracture as well as by erosion and hydraulic action…' (46)

As a structural device, each sister mentions the other on the first page of her chapter. For example, in the opening of Chapter Five the narrator could only be Grace:

> Then my sister Emily died. She fell from the watchtower. She was scrambling on the stones of the wall.
>
> Jeannie said that Em had taken to following her, that she was always in and out of the tower. (67)

These simple strategies seem to work reasonably well - time will tell when the book is published. In any event, the process of recasting a novel as a set of stories has been an interesting one. By the time the novel is eventually published the work will exist in two distinct forms. As an experiment, it seems to me to give the lie to those who suggest that the writing processes of stories and novels are completely different. That a story 'depends on compression for its power' (Martin, online), for example, is a commonplace of criticism which seeks to differentiate the two forms. But the stories in *The Islands* are not in any way compressed out of the novel *Grace's Day*. It would be more correct to say that they are *extracted*, more or less whole and entire.

1.6 Conclusion

I have not had a straightforward writing career, partly because I am interested in too many kinds of writing. By now they have resolved themselves mainly to fiction (short and long) and poetry, but in the course of searching for material from my early writing I also came across unpublished plays, articles, essays and film scripts. Even the fact that, as a novelist, I continue to produce short fiction and poetry complicates things. A diffuse production has served to create a diffuse public persona. Most probably the roots of this multi-faceted writing practice lie in those childhood flights into stories, plays, poems and songs, an escapist strategy in which I sought as many routes away from the self as possible. Surely

the creation of other selves is the ultimate escape from the trap of subjectivity

I think now of the process of this essay as what Michel Foucault called 'genealogy' (Foucault, 31), a passing behind the 'hiding and veiling' of my present work to excavate, not causes, but how the present came about. I have tried to remain faithful to the moment, not wishing to impose a structured narrative on the past but rather seeking the roots of the present. It has been instructive and humbling. I am struck by how early my present preoccupations manifested themselves, and also by how my obsession with style extends back to that first writing. I realise that in many ways childhood and adolescence are almost definitive for a writer's work - this writer's work anyway.

I began by posing the question of how my writing relates to my illness. The journey of exploration represented by this essay has at least demonstrated to me that, whatever the nature of that relationship, it certainly exists. The body, power, the erotic as a form of power, powerlessness, politics and class, memory and remembering, the construct that is the nuclear family – these are my themes. I think of them as European concerns rather than the typical meat of Irish studies – place, identity, history, religion, emigration etc.. The underpinnings of my work are often more philosophical than literary. The extent to which these themes already preoccupied me as a boy has been a revelation, the clear trace between my adult work and that 'darkened path' that I went down at the age of twelve.

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Grace's Day

Draft

William Wall

And finally one must take into account the remarkable fact that in general men experience the present naïvely, so to speak, without being able to estimate its content ; they must first place it at a distance, i.e. the present must have become the past before one can win from it points of vantage from which to gauge the future.

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*
(Penguin)

A fictive tale even has the advantage of manifesting symbolic necessity more purely, to the extent that we may believe its conception arbitrary.

Jacques Lacan, *Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'*
Quoted in *Critical Practice*, Catherine Beasley (Routledge)

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There were three islands and they were childhood youth and age. I went in search of my father through every one. In the first island the house had two doors, one to the south, one to the north. Its garden looked towards the setting sun. It was a garden of apple trees and fuchsia and everything in it leaned away from the wind. Dry stone walls encircled it and sheep and children broke them down. My mother and my sisters lived there. Boats came and went bringing food and sometimes guests, and there were times when we lived by catching fish and rabbits, though we were not so good at either. Richard Wood came in the Iliad, his wooden yawl, always it seemed when a gale of wind was threatened. He dropped his anchor in the sound and stayed for nights at a time. Mother said he liked his home comforts. He was younger than her, though not by much, and she was younger than father. Father liked to come first, she said. In summer time we sometimes swam naked in the crystal water and saw his anchor bedded in the sand, the marks the chain left where it swung to tide or wind. Many a time I swam down that chain, hauling myself deeper hand over hand until I could stand on the bottom. But he took no notice. In calm weather we could see my footprints on the seabed, as if I lived down there and had stood a long time in one place looking up. Or perhaps that was not the way it happened. Words have that way of invading memory. A vacuum asks to be filled. What I remember and what I forget may be one and the same thing, or they may merely depend upon each other. And what my father remembered for me.

But my father did not see everything. I remember my sister Jeannie ran in to say that she had seen a whale in the sound and we all ran out after her and there were three fin-whales making their way into the rising tide. We heard their breathing. It carried perfectly in the still grey air. It was reflected back at us by the low cloud. The sea was still and burnished. We ran along the rocks watching for their breaching. We decided it was a mother , a father and a calf. They were in no hurry. When we reached the beacon, which was a small unlit tower that marked the western end of the island, we watched them breaching and diving into the distance until we could see them no more. But they left behind their calmness and the unhurried but forceful sound of their blows. We were wearing our summer shorts, and so, once the whales were no longer to be seen, I pulled mine off, threw them my shirt and plunged in and swam out into the rising tide and allowed myself to be carried along outside everything and back to the anchorage. That was how, so far out, drifting like a seal in the tide, I saw my mother kissing Richard Wood against the gable of our house. It did not come as a shock or a surprise but I immediately felt a sickening sense of guilt and shame and I allowed myself to be carried past the anchored yawl and too far out into the sound, so that it was a struggle and a hard swim to get back. By then my sisters were there. They watched me sullenly for a long time. I think if I had drowned they would have watched that too with the same sullen disinterest. When I came ashore I was exhausted. I threw myself down on the strand and lay staring at the clouds for a long time. My mother was wearing her slacks and a jumper. Her sleeves were rolled back. She had put on weight and I could clearly see the bulge of her stomach low down, pressed against his belt. His hands were on her back inside the jumper. They could not have been seen from the shore. At that time my father was already in England. His name was mentioned in newspapers and from time to time when he wrote home, usually sending a cheque, he included clippings and reviews.

It's possible that Jeannie already hated me because while I lay on the sand she prised a large stone out of the shale and brought it steadfastly towards me, approaching from behind, and dropped it on my chest. The shock almost stopped my breath. I think she may well have been trying to kill me, but at five or six she simply didn't have the height to do it. The stone simply didn't reach a sufficient velocity. It landed flat and made a flat sound that I heard in my body rather than felt and I was too stunned to cry. I feel certain she dropped it on my chest rather than my head because she wanted to stop my heart. Had she been older she would have tried for my brain instead.

She was gone for the rest of the day and we had to search the island to bring her home for tea. By then the calm was gone and Richard Wood was talking anxiously about his anchor and declaring repeatedly that he should make a run for it, and my mother was pressing him to stay.

My father's books, and his colour pieces for the Manchester Guardian, depicting a family surviving on an island on the edge of the world, part fiction part memoir, were all the rage when we were children. This was the late 1960s and the world had fallen in love simultaneously with two incompatible mistresses – self-sufficiency and conspicuous consumption. The books represented the former, but my father, I would eventually discover was more given at a personal level to the latter. It is my mother, my sisters and I who held the responsibility of acting out the life he felt bound to follow. We were the ones who lived in what he liked to call the peasant economy.

We called it Castle Island, but there never was a castle only a lonely watch-tower, tall enough to survey the whole island and the sound and the ocean beyond, part of a network of revenue gathering outposts, not to mention ocasional piracy, of a sept of the O'Donovans some time in the fifteenth century, and now just two walls on the side of a cliff where even the crows did not think it safe to nest. He bought the land with the advance from his first book – in those days you couldn't give land in Ireland away – and installed us in what had been the last occupied house on the sheltered eastern shore, near a sweet well, a sheltered anchorage, in the shadow of the apple orchard, a small sandy strand. We were his experiment, he took reading of us as required. We were his instruments and his Utopia.

There were fields where we grew potatoes and kale and onions. Other things too perhaps that I have not remembered. When he was there he set a fixed trotline of hooks across the mouth of the strand and in the morning he often had fish, plaice, dabs, flounder, bass. Our job was to dig the worms at low tide and hunt under rocks for ragworm, and in the evenings to thread the hooks with the worms and lay them out in a special way. He took photographs. The children baiting hooks. We appear in more than one volume. In the morning he pulled the silver creatures ashore and we cooked plaice for

breakfast and had bass for dinner. This was before the fishery had been ruined, when bass were plentiful. He predicted it all, of course: *Living An Island, Loving the* World, by Tom Newman. He was exactly right in his calculations. He said some time in the early twenty-first century there would not be enough salmon in the sea to continue fishing. Already he had calculated the fall in his take of bass. He spoke to fishermen and treated what they said as something more than complaint. Their words too are captured in all their dialect charm, published by Penguin. Another bestseller. The jacket had praise from Rachel Carson.

When he was at home the house was warmer, fuller, brighter; it functioned as a home and a house, and we functioned as a family. When he went away we settled back into our animal existence. After a few weeks without him the house lost its presence. It began to be possible to think of him as a character we had read about, someone of enormous energy and vision whose part had been to bring life to the other characters, a catalyst at work among lethargic elements. But the elements only appeared lethargic. Things happened that no one has ever explained. And the dynamic by which we related was frightening and selfish and destructive. When I think of it now I realise that it was not that he made things happen, but that he prevented things from happening. And when he was away there was no god to stand in the doorway and watch inside and out, and what happened inside the house and what happened in the fields, in the orchard and along the shore were both separate and different, and inseparable and the same.

From an unpublished memoir by Tom Newman

When I was a child we woke to the sound of cocks crowing in our neighbours' gardens – this was true in the country and the city. City people had allotments. Country people had gardens and the definition of 'garden' did not include elaborate flower beds but did, at the least, include potatoes, cabbage, onions, blackcurrants, gooseberries, and apples. City people sometimes had pigs. They collected 'slops' – any kind of cooked or uncooked waste – from their neighbours to feed them. They were kept in small pens and led through the house to be driven to the slaughter. Fishmongers walked the streets with barrows. On fair days cattle, sheep, pigs, horses, donkeys and dogs came in from the country and took bawling possession of the streets. Cities, in those days, were not sanitised as they are now. By contrast, when city people 'went to the country', as only the bourgeoisie could do, they went around meekly enough and tried to absorb as much fresh air and folklore as they possibly could in a short space of time. This indicated the relative power and importance of the land as against the exchange. City people complained that cattle panicked in the confined spaces of the streets and charged their doors or their children. Country sheepdogs or terriers mated with purebred city lapdogs to the horror of their owners. Farmers who sold early sold well and retired to the pubs to celebrate and went home singing and poor. Or they had bacon and cabbage in eating houses. Sometimes they brought gifts of half-hundred-weight bags of new potatoes to their city cousins. Or a pair of rabbit strung together by their heels. This is how the world worked then, and how most of it still works outside our effete and rapacious western economies. We can survive now without any knowledge of where our food comes from or how it is grown. We have equipped ourselves with innumerable barriers to survive the world's simplicity, the biggest and strongest and most impenetrable of which is industrial farming. But the world is not equipped to survive us.

Richard Wood was a poet and my father's friend, but he was of course also my mother's and my sister's lover. He was a beautiful man. He was tall and thin and he moved his limbs with the grace of a man who was at home in several elements. He understood the air and could tell from simply breathing it what tomorrow would bring. He understood the shapes of clouds and had categorised them and knew rhymes that interpreted them. He knew the meaning of the weather systems and could tell by the frequency and length of waves how far away a new gale might be. He understood the compass and the Admiralty chart. He could calculate tides and knew when his keel would scrape over the bar and when it would run into the sand. He knew the changes in the seabed from mile to mile, and he knew what places would be bad on a rising tide and westerly wind, and what would be bad on an ebb or with the wind in the east. He was, in a way, a more primitive man than my father, one closer to the kind of people John Synge rhapsodised about in his Aran Island journals. But he was also more elegant and refined. My father had been born a Catholic, whereas Richard had been born into the last vestiges of the ascendancy class. He had been to a boarding school where he had learned to speak with a kind of English accent, and to write poetry about poor people and to ignore anyone who didn't choose to notice. He was wealthy enough to reject capitalism and live on his farm on the mainland and to travel the coastline in his wooden Iliad. He had a farm manager and labourers and a housekeeper. He fell in love with my mother when he heard her reading aloud to my father in the residents' lounge of a hotel. This is the story my mother told me, although when it took place, and whether it was for my father she was reading, and what the hotel was I never knew. Something about the way she told it years later suggested that it was an invention. He had been asleep in a chair facing the window and they thought they were alone. She had taken a copy of Byron's works from the hotel's bookshelves and was mockingly declaiming The Mask Of Anarchy. That was in the days when hotels kept a store of the classics in case their guests were at a loss for something to do; nowadays they buy their books from interior designers.

He fell in love with her then, over the Mask of Anarchy, but he did not sleep with her until I was thirteen and the whales came to the sound and my sister tried to kill me. That was not their first kiss. But it was the night she first admitted him to her bed and I saw it begin against the gable wall. I saw it from far out in the ocean, my body hanging straight down into the cold deep, carried eastward by the rising tide. And that night I stayed awake and listened to their lovemaking. I heard every sound and every movement. Dawn comes early on that coast and about four o'clock I saw that my sister Jeannie was listening too. I saw her eyes fixed on the knots of the ceiling as Richard Wood entered my mother for the third time. She did not blink.

This will be a simple memoir, a plain unvarnished tale. If there are complications they will be human. A single family is capable, in its duration, of carrying the shame of the world on its shoulders, but it has other qualities. Among those qualities are the beauty of its structure, of the lines of affection and power, of the relationships between disparate elements which every once in a while arrange themselves into something approaching the golden mean. I have seen it too as the incarnation of Walter Benjamin's beautiful description of tragedy – a play before mourners.

So, there were three islands, and of the first there is this to say:

It was less than half a mile long. It was shallow at its eastern end and the strange behaviour of tides left sand in the long interstices of the rocks. Between ourselves and the Calf, which was the next island in the sound, was a channel of about half a mile, ten fathoms deep at its most profound, but also containing a bar of the same sand which dried to a sheet of lead at the lowest spring tides. Seabirds congregated there for the cockles and so did we. They were delicious.

One year the garden failed, more or less. Mother didn't care except that once I found her staring at the salt-burned kale. When I tried to take her hand she pushed me away. Father came for a week to photograph the dead drills and weak potato stalks. He was interested in failure too. He was mulling over the concept of a peasant economy and lo, here was an interesting twist. If we had been really living as peasants this would be a famine. I heard an argument. She was saying, No, no; and he was saying, in a very reasonable voice, Give it up, it's not working. Then I heard her shouting. I'll never leave, nothing would ever make me leave here.

Though, of course, I knew the reason why she wouldn't leave. Or thought I did as children do.

Behind our house the ground rose to a height of perhaps a hundred feet above sea

level. Long ago the land had been divided by dry-stone walls into fields of varying sizes. Now the couch-grass was thick as a cushion everywhere, and wherever the limestone base came close to the surface heather had possession. The man from whom we bought our house still owned most of these fields. He brought sheep here in the spring and so we never owned a dog, although a dog might have been a friend, and might have warned us against trouble when it came. Here on the height, on the cliff that faced towards the mainland was the ruined tower house, and in the shadow of the tower house a cluster of ruined cottages. The ground among the cottages seemed to be always wet. There was a spring there, I think, anyway the sheep went there to drink.

Under the tower was an ancient crumbling pier and slipway. There was an iron bollard and a rusted windlass. We could have recovered the windlass – it was one of my father's projects – the parts were all intact, and if we had done so we could have used the slip to haul our boat out of the way of the sea, but it was never done and instead we hauled it up on the sand at high water and carried the anchor up into the grass. Sometimes we swam here, but I was the only one who would jump from the pier. At high tide the drop was ten feet, but at the bottom of the ebb it was almost thirty. The water was deep in any case and I was always the fearless one. I belonged to the sea as much as the land. My mother said I was one of the sea people and the seals were my cousins. And I believed her. They loved my grey-green eyes and I loved their slow cool appraisal of everything. Whenever I saw one I wanted to take my clothes off and follow. I imagined an inverted life where the wave was my sky, an underwater world of the underside of boats and islands and the mountains of the continental shelf. She told us tales of the undersea, of people who had fallen in love with the big dark eyes of the seal and the smooth body, people who forgot that their element was air. They were lost to their families and friends, and even when, occasionally, someone found one in a net and brought her home, the undersea was always drawing her back especially at the spring tides when the sea was full and round as a

belly. She told us these things at night when everything is more important, and outside the sea snored among the caves and arches and the curlews called. She told the stories from one or other of our beds, with the blankets pulled up to her chin because her toes were always cold, taking each bed in turn. We three children always fought over whose bed was next. She would turn out the light, and sometimes there was moonlight and sometimes there was none. She began every story in the same way: My mother told me. So that we came to believe that only women knew these things. And perhaps we were right. And in addition, we thought that a story so ancient had to be true, at least in ancient times however changed the world was in ours. But one summer there was a fisherman and he would come and drink whiskey after he had set his pots. He told us that the sound between us and the calf was haunted. They had all seen a ship there once, in a place where no ship could go because of the shoal. His grandfather had been fishing there another night long ago and whatever he saw or heard he would never say, except that something put a stone in his belly and he failed away, and his skeleton came through his body before he died. This fisherman was a young man and my mother liked him and his stories but we did not. In the event we were right.

After a small dip that contained the spring of the ruined houses and tower the ground sloped gently to the western cliffs which were, at their steepest, probably fifty feet above the sea. At their base the rocks stretched out like a fissured table. They called these rocks The Grounds. My father put lobster pots among the cracks and sometimes caught lobsters, and when he was away the lobstermen from the mainland fished them. We used to watch them working their boats along the trots, hauling and baiting pots and occasionally throwing a lobster or a crab into the sole of the boat. They sometimes waved.

The northern shore was steep-to and good for deep swimming but the southern was broken and rough and a quarter of a mile off were the Sharrav Rocks, a reef that

disappeared at high tide, and over which the sea broke like thunder in a gale. Seals went there, sunning themselves above the half-tide mark. Their raucous moaning and barking.

Gales came and went, of course, because our home was a tiny island in the face of the Atlantic. Seas came up from Tierra Del Fuego and the Azores, or they came down from Iceland. A fetch of a thousand miles is nothing to a storm. From Pico in the Azores, a ripple in the jet-stream brought the great Atlantic depressions down on Castle Island. There were nights when it seemed the universe was conspiring to drown us all. My mother never prayed, she was the least religious person I have ever met, she had not a fingernail of superstition in her, but on those nights she feared the gods and retribution. I know because she told me before she died. She thought the ghosts of the island and the gods of the ruined hearths of the empty houses had turned on her for her betrayals and they would rear the sea up against her and drown her children and herself. Whom did she betray? In her grubby flat on the Kingsland Road, in the days when she was quietly accumulating morphine sulphate tablets (Warning: taking broken, chewed, dissolved or crushed, slow-release morphine sulphate leads to rapid release and absorption of a potentially fatal dose of morphine), she pointed and said, You most of all. Meaning me. And then she named my sisters, Richard Wood, herself. She did not mention my father.

We three sisters had separate lives. Em was mostly with my mother. She was the smallest. Jeannie liked to build elaborate cities in the sand. She dammed inlets with stones and tried to hold the sea back, anxiously anticipating the rising tide, rushing here and there to stop a hole. I think the moment she loved best was the breach, the water tumbling in, the crumbling sand and shifting stones. She used to watch it in a kind of anxious ecstasy.

When she grew tired of that she went along the shore collecting shells or stones or she spied on me. I had found my father's old store of rabbit snares. Although snaring is mentioned in his first book as a time-honoured way of getting food the outcry from what he called the Cruelty To Everything Except Humans Brigade made him remove it from subsequent editions. Anyway, he had never mastered the technique. Truthfully, he was a poor hunter but he was a good gatherer.

They were little hoops of steel with a seized eye spliced into the strands at one end, and a steel peg for anchoring the trap at the other. He may have made them himself. I set them at places where the runs went between stones or bushes. I experimented with height. After a time I stopped handling them with my bare hands because I would leave my smell on them. I found a pair of white nylon gloves in my mother's drawer. I decided she did not need them. I sat on the highest point of the island in the evening when the rabbits came out to play. The frantic movements of a trapped rabbit. The bucking and tearing and slow dying. I skinned them myself, though I never managed to cure a single hide. Gutted and spread on a plate they looked like dead babies. Their flesh purple under the translucent bitter membrane that must be removed in cooking. Their small mouths.

I used to lie on the old dry walls in the sun. I watched the lark's flight, following them until they could rise no further. I loved the moment of change, the turning point when flying became falling. I swam from whatever side of the island was in the lee. Sometimes I set my father's nightlines and I would get up when everyone was asleep to

check them. I stood in the cold water and brought it in hand over hand. I caught fish too. Once, lying on top of the stone wall I heard someone passing and when I looked it was my mother and the fisherman. They went away over the brow of the hill and down to the beach under the beacon. That was usually where he beached his boat.

My mother was supposed to be schooling us. She spent some hours every day with my sisters, but she just threw books at me. I could read anything in the house; that was their promise because this was 1969 and nobody believed in limiting a child's mind. I read *The Interpretation of Dreams* waiting for rabbits to die. I read *Nicholas Nickleby*. I hated Proust who took so long to say nothing. I brought Dante's *Inferno* to the pier one long month of southerly winds. I fell in love with Francesca in hell, blown here and there without rest. I thought it was a fairytale. I wanted to dream her. At night I tried to think of her face so that it would come into my dreams. I wanted to hold her hand. I thought I could comfort her. I read *Swallows and Amazons*. I read Arthur Hailey's *Hotel*. I read *The Sea Around Us*. I read *Anne of Green Gables,* in which I failed to believe in the idea of friendship. I had already decided that Anne and Gilbert Blythe would end up doing what my mother and Richard Wood did. They too would have a noisy old bed. Self-sacrifice seemed like a waste to me. I thought that dyeing her hair green was not a mistake. The book meant something to me that was other than the author's intentions. It was not the first time and it would not be the last.

After tea I often walked down to the pier because I knew the bus came to the village on the mainland at about seven o'clock. I would wait there awhile in case a boat came out. I remembered that the previous year my father had come that way. On still evenings I would hear the bus changing gear – or perhaps it was a heavy lorry or a car with clutch problems – and sometimes the sound of some kind of game on an invisible playing field over there. But evening after evening no one came from England.

I sensed my sister Jeannie watching me from the tower walls. She went in there. She had my mother's eyes. They were dark and unfathomable. She had nest among the briars and nettles. She kept broken china cups and plates and pieces of driftwood and glass buoys and wooden floats and glass beads and certain stones that had quartzite in them. Her skin was always torn or freaked with red weals. Bees stung her and she didn't care. It is possible that she felt nothing. Sometimes when I was swimming from the pier under the tower she came out and threw stones down. She could not reach me. I never questioned her attacks. She hated me. It was a thing that happened. For all I knew it happened in every family in the world.

Sometimes we all came together. On warm days we stayed in the water inventing games. Mother wore a straw hat. All over the island there would be no cool place but the water. Richard Wood used to write his poems in the shelter of the rocks. We saw him watching us. There were photographs of us like that, in and out of the water, lying in the sand, together and separately. Richard had a plastic Instamatic camera. He bought it in London Airport. When we came out he offered us towels. I saw that he liked my sister Jeannie best of all. He called her Dreamy Jeannie. He had no name for me. He played counting games with her. This little piggy. He towelled her back. He brushed the sand out of her hair. There was sand in the sea. On clear days we saw the grains gleaming like glass. They had their own lives; inside the clockwork of the wave things went in circles. When he had towelled her down she would get back in the water again. Or Em would get between them. She would stand inside his arms, thrust into the towel. Sometimes there was fighting. Jeannie and Em. I remember them rolling in the sand and my mother laughing. Richard Wood separated them, held one or the other down. He was happiest with children. Those were the days when we were all together. Sometimes Richard Wood was not there and mother slept under her hat. Richard Wood had the same eyes as my father. They might have been brothers, except that my father came of middle-class Catholic stock and Richard

was old money Protestant through and through, his ancestors lived on their rent and did the grand tour, whereas my father's were no more than two generations from sub-divided land, arrears of rent and the land war.

In reality Em was the wildest of us all. She was so young she knew almost nothing but the island. She mostly stayed near my mother because there was nothing new or fantastic there for her. She was fearless and careless and heedless of everything. Nothing surprised her, nothing delighted her. She could walk among the sheep without disturbing them. She brought home an injured blackbird. She learned to swim on her own and never told anybody. She might have learned to fly like the shearwaters skimming the waves, but time was against her. She was small enough and her bones were as light as the hollow bones of a petrel we found in a nook in a dry-stone wall. She talked so rarely we never really knew. But sometimes at night she crawled into my bed and slept with her nose between my shoulder-blades. In the morning there would be a damp patch in my nightdress. And she slept with her fists bunched as though she might need to fight.

Words like 'herbicide', 'pesticide' and 'fungicide' hide terrible processes. The 'cide' part comes from the latin caedere, to kill. 'Cide' is also contained in terms such as homicide, patricide, regicide and suicide, except that in all those cases it is a negative concept. Only where it applies to the lower orders of existence, insects, plants and funghi, is it somehow imbued with positive connotations, because we are accustomed to the concept of good and bad plants, good and dangerous funghi, and beautiful and evil insects. So these chemicals are designed to kill herbs, fungi and 'pests'. 'Pest', meaning, nowadays, any insect that somehow lives on or by something we value, comes from the latin pestis which literally meant the plague and came into the English language in the 15th century as a term for the Black Death. This residual association surfaces every now and then in film or literature – those documentaries about 'plagues of locusts', for example. Thus we are accustomed to the idea of spraying expensive poisons as a convenience, a way of controlling the bad side of nature, of taming the dangerous natural forces that inhabit soil and air. We happily devote our lives and contribute our livelihoods to the cultural hegemony of the corporation. We reconcile ourselves to poisoning the well that nurtures us, polluting our childhood bed, taken in by the false-friend who promises to enrich our lives and leaves us poorer, betraying our trust, stealing the very thing we most need at our time of greatest need. This 'friend' is, in fact, our Black Death but we call it our saviour. Are friends never to be trusted then?

We very soon discovered that what I liked to call 'the peasant economy' was a very complex thing, as complex at least as the capitalist one that replaced it. Costs and profits, we realised, must be calculated in an entirely different way if we were to try to live outside of the market-place. To someone in our economy, the word 'free', for example, only meant 'procured by hard work', although it was a consolation that no one else took any cut out of our backs. Such was the case with the seaweed we cut and hauled up to make our potato garden. Standing in the icy water with a bill hook for the want of a more specialist tool, or hauling the wrack up from the beach where it washed up in gales, involved an expenditure that was at once much more satisfying and more costly in human energy than going into a shop and ordering fertiliser. On the other hand, it produced more food and the food tasted better, and so the profit had to be reckoned against all that hard work. And in general it was worth it. And we found we could indeed live like that.

How long did we live there? How did we get there? In some families there are archivists to record the significant events, but in ours there were none. My mother remembered only what she wanted to remember and what she could not forget and my father committed his memories to paper and never wanted to hear about them again. He wrote them in such a way that they became inventions, remote from our experience. We could not recognise ourselves in them. And in time he stopped writing about us. This is the inevitable consequence of writing things down.

As regards my sisters, I suspect they knew as little about it as I did. Certainly, by the time I was old enough to remember things we were already there. I remember that they had a gate across the doorway through which I could see the world. When my sisters came along and I was old enough to come and go I saw that this gate was, in fact, a painted fireguard. Where were my sisters born? It is clear that we did not live on the island all the time. There were times when we lived in the city. My sisters were all born in the old Mother's Hospital in London. I was born there too. It's gone now. Years later, when we lived in London, we went out to see the building. It looked like a private house. It had the words The Mother's Hospital (Salvation Army) on the front. The letters, it seems now, were as big as windows. Why did she want to see it? She told me that her three pregnancies were the happiest days of her life. My father was attentive to her, solicitous, and faithful. He was never with anyone else when she was pregnant, and as long as she was breastfeeding he stayed with her. People were so kind. Richard brought her flowers and fruit. When I was born he took her photograph sitting in a pale pink bed-jacket, holding me in her arms. There were apples and roses. He still had that photograph, she said, but she had lost her copy. She was always losing things. She said that we should have been happy children, because her happiness was in her milk. We should have been happy, secure, loving people

but we were not. She said she could recall each of our faces exactly as we looked up at her from the breast. Each one was different and beautiful and ancient.

We took the bus out and we went past the stop and got out in Hackney and waited for the next bus back so I saw the place of my birth coming and going and on each occasion all I could think of was my mother's happiness and fulfillment, how having a child at her breast made her feel useful. It was a hurtful discovery. I was angry, but I kept my anger to myself. It would have served no purpose.

We certainly lived on the island through several springs and summers, and parts, at least, of two winters. We had a boat, an old salmon yawl that took water at a steady pace, steadily sinking all its life. When we got into it there was always water under the boards and sometimes above them. We baled with Heinz bean cans. The engine was a British Seagull Century longshaft that never failed. It smoked and sounded like a machine gun. We went across to the mainland to buy things, flour and fruit, cabbage which we could never get to grow in the salt air, newspapers, and to collect the post. We went once a week when we could. Sometimes a boatman came out with things she had ordered from the shops. When the weather was bad we stayed at home and lived on short rations. Sometimes we made a run for it and moved ashore for the duration. Crouched in our anoraks, our woolly hats, our wellington boots, our backs turned to the incoming spray and green water, we laughed and thought we were having an adventure. Then we stayed with friends, often with Richard Wood, and watched the rain sweep across the distant rock that was our home. How old was Richard Wood then? He can't have been more than thirty five, but he seemed to us to be old, as old as as the house and its privileges, its ancient arrogant windows. Tiraneering was his house. It means *the land of iron* in Irish.

Once I saw her crying at the top of the stairs there. It was a night of bad wind. Noise invested the house. But above the noise I heard her. I saw her from our bedroom

door, sitting on the top step, her arms wrapped around her knees, her hair draped forward. Where was Richard? Was father there? He rarely came to Tiraneering. I watched her for a long time. Once, when the wind dropped suddenly, I heard what I thought was the sea pounding the pier. Or it could have been the thunder of her heart. I thought, at the time, that the storms frightened her. But she turned suddenly, sensing I was there. Get away, she said. She said it coldly, coolly. Then she said, You're the cause of all my problems.

No child is equipped to understand a statement as absolute as that.

Sometimes father brought us with him to London. He had that Kingsland flat where my mother would eventually die. In those days it was practically in Essex, the furthest bleakest reach of North East London. There was a pub on the ground floor. The railway station was a hundred yards away. There was a kebab house across the street. It was like the centre of the world and we were weary explorers just come from the periphery where we had witnessed marvels too elaborate to tell. We were the sorry end of that peculiar 1960s invention, the jet-set. We lived in several places at once, as they did, but our mode of transport was a salmon yawl, a ferry, a train. We brought the smell of iodine from the sea, and when we came home again we brought London noise and gloom to invest the infinite sky.

What did my father say? He said that when he was a boy growing up in the country ordinary people grew their own food whereas now (ca 1969) they bought their food from middlemen who themselves were buying from middlemen and so on. He said that anyone who couldn't recognise the colour of a good steak shouldn't be allowed to eat one. He said that food that travelled further than the length of a parish was scarcely worth eating. He said that the richer a people becomes the poorer the quality of its food. He said symbiosis was the first principle of existence. He said many other things that struck people then as true and cleverly expressed. He said the world could not live without stones or flies. He said a country that called soil dirt (America) had lost its way and would eat itself to death. He appeared on television as the bestselling author. They asked him questions about his island, his farm, his family. We heard him on on The World Service when we could get it, which depended on the disposition of the atmosphere above our heads, whether we could catch what Richard Wood called the sky-wave or not. We imagined him coursing in on a long swell between the grey and the blue skies, above the clouds. We heard our names.

We thought of him travelling in something very like Richard Wood's Iliad.

It all seemed like nonsense to us. Like a joke. The reality was a few lines of salt-blanched kale. The reality was trying to rot seaweed for fertiliser and having to live with the sour fish smell. The reality was being mostly cold at night and then being too hot. And being alone and not knowing how to behave when we were not alone. Of feeling safe with the world's ocean as our moat, a place where no one watched us with envy. A place that was precarious and fatal and temporary. The reality was a kind of foolishness that was like a dream, an existence that had no outside, no edge, that we could never transgress. A dream is a language; it has it's own alphabet. But the dream knows that someone somewhere will understand and all communication is founded on that premise. But we grew up without that faith. We never knew that we could be understood. These are the

consequences of living on an island.

I remember days of drifting and fishing. Did we go out on bad days? Wet days? Rough days? Was it always perfect? Memory selects its pet days, the rest is elision. But there were bad days. I saw that grey-brown patches had grown beneath my mother's eyes and though I put my arms around her it put nothing to rights. What's the matter mam? Nothing child. Why are you crying. No reason. Because the garden is dying? No child. Because daddy isn't here? No. Childhood means impotence in the face of suffering. She was happiest when Richard was around, happiest in his boat.

One day in particular. The cockpit was almost too small for the five of us – Richard Wood, mother, my sisters and I. It was narrow and our feet crossed in the centre and the huge iron tiller extended two feet, so that whoever sat opposite the helmsman might as well have been steering too. We beat out against a southerly wind and we fished for mackerel all day. We caught only three. The shoals were not in so it must have been June or early July. We hove to about ten miles out and we three children lined the rails and dropped our lines and mother and Richard Wood held their faces to the sun and chatted. When they had enough, he backed the staysail and brought her round and we sailed back, surfing thunderously on the in-going swells. The boat rushed forward, caught in the belly of one, and then, unable to keep pace, slowed and fell back into the next following trough. In the valleys the sails flogged and clapped, and on the crest they were full-breasted matrons shooing us home. Mother and Richard Wood took turns at the tiller. They sat very close. I saw that he held her right thigh tightly between his knees. His body was moving with the movement of the boat. Her knee was in his groin.

Her knee in his groin and the motion of the boat and the scissors of his thighs around hers. It was a slow warm day and I was thirteen and at that point it was an easy thing to fall. In those days I swam so much my skin ached. I tasted salt.

I was holding the mizzen shroud in one hand and my mackerel feathers in the other.

It was simply a matter of transferring my trust from the boat to the line. I fell over the stern. I surfaced quickly still holding the line. I could feel the tug of the lead. Had a mackerel caught the feather he could have towed me away and I would not have cared. I saw the boat disappear in a trough and when it rose again they were looking for me.

Swimming in the deep sea is a kind of letting go. I could do it because I was never afraid of anything. The darkness was between my legs. I lost a sandal. The boat came back. It was an elegant piece of seamanship. His certainty was extraordinary. I know he never for a moment believed I had fallen. But I had.

They made me take my clothes off and sit on the bunk in a towel. My mother put the kettle on. Tea would warm me, she said, as she always did. I had given her a fright, but I was a brave girl. Her innocence burns itself into memory, the most painful of all memories, how she trusted things to be themselves. My sister Jeannie came down to look at me. She said nothing. My sister Em looked in and asked if I was all right. She too had been worried. Richard watched me from the tiller. I saw that I had moved the stone of his attention. Sunlight slanted in from the porthole. After a time the primus needed to be pumped again. I did it. When the kettle boiled my mother made tea. There was barely enough room in the tiny cabin for the three of us. She was stooped because the headroom was bad. Her breasts hung into her shirt. There were times when I could have reached out and taken one in my cupped hand.

They hung my clothes on the guardwire and as we approached the anchorage they gave them back. They were damp and sticky. I put them on inside the towel.

He never looked away.

He said he would have to take me out and teach me seamanship. He said it severely but my mother laughed. He said I would need to learn that there was always one hand for the boat and one for myself. He said I was such an otter that I needed to learn how to stay out of the water. I needed to become truly amphibian. I suspected he was preparing a poem in his head and these random metaphors were some kind of a beginning.

Em let the anchor go. She liked lifting the pawl and releasing the clutch with the iron bar. It was something a child could do and love. Lift the pawl and release the clutch and the chain runs out with a satisfying clatter that becomes a growl. Tighten the clutch again. She loved it. The wind was almost gone. We came to a slow stop, winding the jib on the Wykeham-Martin gear. The mizzen was always first to go up, last to come down. It kept her nose to the wind, he said. The bay was ablaze in the evening sun. There was a seal

watching us. He put me and Jeannie ashore first and then went back for the others. We walked up to the house.

Jeannie said, I saw you, you jumped.

I did not.

I saw you letting go.

I changed in our room up under the slates and when I came down they were all there in the kitchen. Richard had the mackerel. He ran his knife along the membrane of the belly and the guts spilled out red and black. He nipped the stomach where it penetrated the gut and scraped it into a bucket and started again. My mother had her hands in the basin. She brushed soil from the potatoes with her thumbs. They were laughing. They were talking in low voices but still I heard what they were saying. They were talking about running away. My sister Jeannie was watching the seal through Richard's binoculars. Em was reading. Nobody looked at me.

And so there was a scene in our kitchen some days or weeks later. My mother stood with her back to the sink and her arms folded. She wore, I remember, a long patterned kaftan. The pattern was a kind of red paisley like an amoeba on a pale cream. She wore slacks and sandals. Her face was freckled. Her hair was tied back by a band of tortoiseshell. She was never more beautiful than when she was angry. Em was somewhere else. She may have been upstairs. Jeannie was sitting by the window. She was pretending not to be listening. Richard Wood stood in the centre of the room.

She should learn to behave herself, he said. He meant me. You saw what she did. You know and I know that she needs discipline. It was as though I weren't there, but I was. Or at least I think I was. It's true that Jeannie remembered it for me. She told me everything in careful detail many years later. She was able to tell me that Richard talked about their plan. That he had blue jeans with a slight flare. That he had a faded blue fisherman's smock. He could wear those things authentically. It was as though his class had appropriated the entire history of the country and could be what they liked, whatever character from fiction or history, the poor beggar, the journeyman tailor, the wandering seaman, the sailor. We saw them wherever we went, in London, in the houses we visited, these members of the former ruling class who had adopted victimhood as though it belonged to them.

In the end my mother agreed. She agreed, I think, because she could not do without him. If my father had been there it would never have happened. But there were long weeks when we were alone. When we saw his sails – and they were unmistakeable, two headsails, one set on a bowsprit with the ancient Wykeham-Martin winding gear, the tall main, the little stunted mizzen, the classic yawl-rig, there was no other boat like it on the coast at that time – our hearts lifted. Here was news of the main. Here was

someone with stories to tell, with fruit or meat or newspapers or Kiley's lemonade.

All right, she said. I give in. But you must be back by teatime. No wandering.

She meant he could not keep me away after dark. She knew he sometimes drifted up the coast and stayed offshore during the night. That he fished and drank black coffee. That he sometimes found himself among the night trawler fleets, or out where the big companies were prospecting for oil. Or anchored in some cove out of the seaway. She would not stand for that. Not the two of us alone in the boat overnight, the sea and the stars and the two of us in the little cabin in the after-heat of the primus stove.

I don't think she believed in any plan. Childhood was nothing to her. It was just another time.

So I picked up my anorak, my boots, my jumper and went down with him to the boat.

We would sail south for half the day. At midday we would turn and beat back up. At that point we would be twenty five or thirty miles offshore. It would be him and me and the deep sea. A sailboat is all protocol and procedure, he said. And the names of things. He named each rope, each stay and shroud, each of the corners of the sails, each edge, each block and its tackle and parts, the sheave, the cheek, the choke, the cleat. He named the processes of taking in and letting go. In the brutal simplicity of that day he named things I have never forgotten. I remember that unless the mizzen was trimmed properly she sailed like a bitch. I remember that he had stitched a leather cutaway into the clew of the inner-staysail and the threads had worked loose. I remember that in light airs it was necessary to back the jib to make her tack and that unless it was done smartly the boat simply stopped in irons. All this I learned, and so much more.

The leaving and the return are the boat's best time. She feels the anchor coming coming home and she becomes impatient for the sea. She is at her slowest and most sensitive. She turns her head. The wind against her body.

First the mizzen. He showed me how to sweat it up. Even for someone with my light frame it was easy work. We unwound the jib and when the anchor was home and dry he allowed her to fall away to one side and used the backed headsail to turn her to the open sea. Once outside the arms of the anchorage he brought her to wind and I sweated the main and the staysail and we bore away. He told me what to do and I must do it at once. There was never to be time to think. I must carry out each order quickly, precisely, calmly. Mistakes would be punished by the boat.

This is what we did.

It was a brilliant day of northerly winds. The sea in the lee of the land was flat. The sails filled and the boat ran out, and all that long day he drove me to distraction.

Far out beyond the horizon there were only two of us. The wood giving to the wind and sea. Wooden boats move in every way.

My mother was worried about me, he said.

His arms around the iron tiller. There was a knuckle of iron at the end. One hand enclosed it.

Did I know that they had talked about sending me to board at his old school? It was co-ed now. My father had been written to. I was a wild child. My mother had asked him to take my reading in hand and so I might be seeing more of him. He said that my father's theories about home schooling were fine when I was younger, but now I would need to sit exams. I would need to think about the future. It was a cruel world, he said, and wildness was punished without mercy. He had been thinking a lot about me, he said. He wanted to save me.

I had not known I was in danger.

All this as we ran down our southing with nothing but the heaving sea before and the land falling away behind. He watched me. I felt his eyes on my body. In the dreamy running down when the boat ran almost as fast as the wind and it seemed as if we were carrying our own air, the sails full of it, wing on wing. I was long and straight from shoulder to hips. My shorts hung low. I was conscious of the dimpled hollows of back and waist. His arms wrapped around the iron tiller, his cheek on his shoulder. He had long lashes like a girl's. The sinews of his arms. His hair fell continually into his eyes and he brushed it away with a gesture that took five hundred years to perfect.

And coming back he shouted and hectored me. Each tack was a welter of rope and

clattering sail and groaning blocks. We beat up hard-by and water flew in our faces. He worked me brutally, coldly. My muscles hurt. My skin burned from the sheets. Now I know what he was doing. He was loosening my grip on myself.

By evening we were anchored in the Carthys, two broken reefs with a patch of drowned sand between. We were stopping there to eat, he said. In an hour or so the wind would shift and set fair for home. We would coast back on the evening breeze. My mouth was dry. My nails were broken. I was mortally tired. I said I would bathe before eating. I went below to change into my swimsuit. I moved swiftly, peeling things away, dropping them. My shirt, my shorts, my pants.

Use a towel, he said. But it was too late.

Look at you, he said, you're brazen.

He came below. He smelled of sweat and iron. I was pulling on my bathing suit, I think. I stopped and looked him straight in the eye. He kissed me. He caught my head and held it to his. I kept my mouth closed. He put his other hand on my belly. He looked at my face. I saw him look at my mouth as if it would be different. I knew nothing had changed. I had no idea what I had lost. The sound of a breaching whale was his breathing. He slapped me. No one had had ever slapped me before. I heard it more than I felt it, a flat explosion against my cheek. I was taut and supple as a whiplash. I went straight out the companionway and onto the little afterdeck. I thought for an instant of jumping. I believed in swimming away, in striking out for home, five or six miles of open sea. I could trust myself to the ocean. I stretched my arms towards it, arched my back, my toes wrapped on the coaming. Already I was exulting in falling. It would have fixed the moment forever. But he called out.

Don't, he said.

Stop as you are.

I turned to defy him. He was standing in the companionway – this is how I remember it – one foot on the cabin sole, his body in the hatch, one foot on the ladder. For the first time ever I was conscious of my breasts. They were small – they still are – but the nipples were pale, something like the colour of sunlit sand. It occurred to me that there was power in staying as well as running away.

I'm going to jump, I said.

You'll only have to come back. There's nothing on these rocks.

Someone would come. Mum would come.

Who would tell her?

I could swim.

Do you have any idea what you look like? I should like to write you a poem, it'll be a secret poem. I'll make it sound as though it's for someone else, some grown up woman, but you'll know and I'll know that it's about you. I'll be a good boy now. I won't touch you again.

He could do the little boy look. He had that grace and simplicity. And he could be sad.

I shrugged. I didn't like poems. He had left several in our house for safe-keeping at various times. They were memorials of his days here, vignettes of our lives, love poems to a family that was not his. I didn't think they were important. We always lost them.

He said, You could be a boy or a girl.

I didn't know how to understand that. Was it good or bad? What I felt was shame.

I shook my head.

Come and put your clothes on. Let's go home.

I came back.

And in time there would be poems. Part of a sonnet sequence that did his reputation some good.

Put your clothes on, he said again.

I sulked.

My eyes were heavy. Everything went in phases, slow as water. He pumped the primus. The sharp smell of the paraffin. The pop of the flame. My legs felt too long, like an animal's. An eland or a gazelle. And we sat at opposite ends of the cockpit. We had bread and cheese and tea. I folded one knee onto the other as my mother did, slanted my legs away. It was a warm still evening. The breeze that would take us home was slow in coming. He watched me from under his lashes. I felt free and dangerous as though *I* had hurt him. When the night breeze finally blew I left that reef full of pleasure and power and only dressed when our own island came in sight. I remember standing on the bow of the Iliad with my legs spread, braced to the inner forestay, the wire pressed into my skin. Afterwards my arm and side were flecked with tar where the strands left their mark. The breeze was in my face then. If he had asked me I would have given him everything. Everything I did not know. It might have been a world, a universe, a way of life. Whatever it was that I could give him, I knew it was vast. There were no discernible tracks. The mountain sheep knew the way, those that came to the island. The seabirds on the cliffs knew. The seals, the dolphins, the fin whales. Their sinuous bodies found the seaway without pain. But the time when I could give anything was past and that night in bed I regretted everything. Now I wanted to know more than anything what his hand would feel like where he had been fumbling. What would come next? Where would he go?

In summertime the room under the slates was hot as an oven, but it cooled quickly too. Before dawn we shivered in our beds and pulled extra blankets over us. Sex has always

been like that for me. A kind of suffocation. Then the shivering pleasure of dry cool skin. And looking too. Desire enters by eye. A skin of slate between us and the stars. Too fine to armour us, too deep to penetrate, too dark to see properly, a rough old sheet quarried from the silence of a million years.

That night, when I thought Jeannie was asleep, I got up and stood on my bed-end to look out. The window was caked with salt and the iron frame was rusted almost through so that it could not be opened. But I looked out on a starless night. I stood there a long time imagining my nakedness, the wire rigging pressed in my side, my legs spread. And he was behind me always, watching me change from a wild boy-girl to a woman. While I stood on the iron bed-frame in my cotton nightdress with forget-me-nots.

From an unpublished memoir by Tom Newman

That summer there was a great bloom of jellyfish all along the south and west coast. They washed in on the sand and Jeannie collected them and buried them above the tide line. She was curious abou them, as all children are, these aliens, these palmfuls of coloured glass and string. I explained that they have two phases, the polyp and the medusa, and they reproduce by budding; that the life cycle is characterised by pulses which give rise to summer blooms like the one coming ashore on our strand. Information came to Jeannie as a kind of pleasant static, inexplicable, a cipher for which she had no key but which was beautiful to contemplate. Are all children like that? She listened to the scientific explanation as if it were a charming story, a fairy-tale. I told her about *pelagia noctiluca* which glowed mauve at night but which trailed stinging tentacles, beautiful but dangerous and she looked up with bright eyes and her mouth open as if I were talking about love.

I know memory and its tricks of old. Everything in the past seems inevitable. There is only one road behind us and it has no turnings. When we look back we see our purposeful footsteps bringing us, for better or worse, to where we stand now. An illusion. A false conception of time. There is, in fact, an infinity of pasts, all of which we have lived and all of which bring us to the same place at the same time before becoming the next infinity of a second ago, a minute ago, a day ago.

And, of course, nothing is ever as we remember it. I may have dreamed that evening in the cabin. I may have invented it. Perhaps it was something I hoped into existence. Something that happened in my infinity and not his. Perhaps he remembered a different day. I thought of it that way even at the time. I acted as if it were true. This is how children invent the world. How they take control of their lives.

My mother saw what I was doing.

I sat with my legs apart or my shirt rucked up. I brushed close to him. I held his eye too long. I thought I had discovered these things. At first she couldn't believe that it was deliberate. One day she slapped me.

I was standing in the doorway as they came in. She came first. I stood back. Then I stepped back into the door to block his way. He stopped too. I looked at him. He was about to say something. I heard rather than felt the palm of her hand, a thunderclap in my right ear. It stunned me. I turned and looked at her.

Stop, she said.

I thought of hitting her back. No adult had ever struck me.

Her face was red. Her eyes were bright. I mistook it for fear or panic. I thought she was jealous. I thought she had seen the power I had over him. She was pitiful. A grown woman fearing a child.

I hate you, I said.

She slapped me again. I ran upstairs.

Later Jeannie told me they discussed me. They didn't think she could hear. She heard talk about explaining things to me. My mother said I was becoming a woman. Jeannie thought it was all nonsense. She said it was raining outside. Did I want to play draughts. She listed the other games we could play. Ludo, Snakes & Ladders, Dominoes, Junior Scrabble which mother was keen for us to play. We had a wooden box with brass bound edges. Mother picked it up at an auction. When we got it it was full of tangles of string and had a label tied to the key. The label said, Pieces of string too small to be used.

She jumped on the bed beside me. She knew what she was doing. She was always the bringer of bad news. She leaned over my shoulder so that her face was against mine. Her skin was dry and hot. Her breath smelled yeasty.

They're sending you away, she said. They're going to send you to school.

So I watched her for the secrets she knew. I knew it was her body, her beautiful breasts with their sand-pale aureoles, the wrinkle under them, her full straight thighs and the place between them. I wanted my body to know such things. The longer my father stayed away the more open she became. She kissed him holding her palm flat against his heart. What did her hand hear? I watched them lying in a fold of heather facing the sun. She was listening. What was he saying? I would never know. Her summer frock was turned back to her hip. She liked the heat but she never tanned. Her face was freckled but pale. The beacon threw a long shadow. When it reached them they got up.

I listened for their lovemaking all that summer long. But what can be learned from listening tells us nothing about gesture or act. Although what happens is natural enough, no one could invent it exactly. I knew all about whispering and sighing and hushing and the other sounds. Their bed creaked like a boat.

On my birthday, he gave me a poem. Jeannie gave me a stone shaped like a seal with one eye. Em gave me a card with our names in a heart. We were sitting at the table. I looked at the poem as if I were reading but in reality I was watching my chance. When mother turned to the kitchen I kissed him on the mouth. It tasted of fat. Mother never saw but Jeannie did. Her jet black eyes. What was the poem about? I tore it up that night. I never read a word. That night I hated him for sitting there and accepting my kiss and saying nothing to break her spell. When she turned around she was holding my birthday cake on a plate. There were only two candles – I don't think we ever had any more – and he began that idiotic fellow song and they all joined in the chorus. I should have known that he was a failure but children only feel the horror. They have no idea why.

When we had eaten the cake we all went out to see the evening. I remember that the sun was a blood-orange and there were thin lines of horizontal cloud. I remember it more intensely because of my state of mind. If it was raining I would remember it as clearly

because everything I saw and felt that evening had the intensity of sex. We walked to the western end of the island and my mother, with Richard's help, climbed onto the beacon. She was triumphant and a little crazed. Up there, she said, she would have sunshine long after we were in darkness. Em cried because she was jealous. I walked down to the pebble beach with Richard. You must stop Grace, he said. He was thoughtful, and I think, a little frightened. I knew what he meant. He turned to look back when he said it, and I looked too. She looked like some kind of stone against the darkening sky, a graven image as unsafe and uncertain as any false god.

From an unpublished memoir by Tom Newman

Not many people know that potatoes and tomatoes belong to the same family, Solanaceae, and it's a bit counter-intuitive, considering that they belong at opposite ends of the plants, as it were, the tuber and the fruit. But it's an incontestable truth that potatoes grow well in the soil of an island on the eastern edge of the Atlantic at 51° 30' North, and tomatoes do not. To put this in perspective consider that 51° 30' N on the western side of the Atlantic is Newfoundland and the Strait of Belle Isle which is iced up for ten months of the year. Nevertheless, and despite my advice, Eileen persisted in her belief that the children should have tomatoes in summertime to eat with their salads. To achieve this impossible task she set about buying a glass house in bits and pieces, an old wooden glasshouse that was once attached to the southern wall of a Victorian cottage about twenty miles away on the mainland. She had it imported to our island, panel by panel, on the post boat which could spare the time in winter to call at our pier but which was too busy in the summer. Eugene O'-Driscoll the boatman couldn't understand it. I remember him scratching his forehead with his cap held back and saying, 'Jasus now, Tom, divil a glasshouse there was on the islands until today. Sure if it was going to work wouldn't you think the gentry would have tried it before now.' When she had it all unbroken leaning against our gable she began to give thought to how to assemble it. She began to make trips ashore for brass screws and various tools. She ordered cement in bags and red bricks to be delivered to the pier. But she never got around to doing any of it and that was how we ended up with fossilised cement bags that had been soaked in April rain, a million self-tapping screws and stacks of glassy window-frames. Luckily the bricks never arrived. But every now and then we would all parade around to the gable end and contemplate the jig-saw of the greenhouse and make elaborate plans for putting it all together on some fine calm summer's day. She loved glass and often brought a kitchen chair out to contemplate the setting sun as reflected in the greening surfaces. At the very least, she claimed, the glass insulated and warmed the gable which was always the coldest wall in the house because it was turned towards the prevailing wind. It was, I think now, an irrational thing, an obsession. It was a warning that I didn't heed.

My father never came all that summer and my mother never once spoke about him. She seemed to be happy. She was an eavesdropper and loved repeating things overheard in the town or on the bus. She had her favourites: she got a lovely death, is it yourself is in it, she's out with me over it, he's great with her this past two years, I'm not myself at all. They reappeared later in Richard's poems and he was praised for his natural ear.

On one trip ashore she found an article in The Irish Times that said science was predicting a new Ice Age. She read it to us that evening. She seemed to think that it was coming soon. She made a list of warm things we had in the house, woolen vests and sweaters, blankets and coats and bobble-hats and mittens and gloves. Then she made a list of things we would need to buy. She was writing at the table and the electricity was out again, but there was enough light in the western sky. She made her list and she wrote it out fair and said we would go to town the next day and draw down whatever my father had put in her bank account and buy the necessaries. Cold would not catch us sleeping, she said, we would be ready. Then she gathered the three of us and sang us a song her mother used to sing. There were three sisters went to school, all around the loney-o, they spied a lady at a pool, down by the greenwood side o. It was a cruel song and it always frightened us, but we thought of the whole thing as normality, as the way families were, because we had no experience of any other. When the song ended she told me solemnly that when I was inside her she wondered what she would do. She did not want me, she said, but the minute I was born she could hardly imagine how she would do without me. Then she made us all promise that if the ice age came again we would struggle together as a family. She believed that children should be told everything, that they should be treated as adults, that we needed as much information as possible to survive. Next morning there was no more talk of going shopping against the cold. It was a close damp morning and the spider's nests in

the furze were glassy with the night's rain.

She was rolling out bread as I came downstairs and she was still humming the song. When she saw me she nipped a piece of dough and held it to me on her finger. It's for you Grace, she said, because you're mine.

She sang:

There's a river wide and deep,
All around the loney-o
'Tis there the babe and mother sleep,
Down by the greenwood side-o.

And all that time I was crazy with desire.

But then my sister Emily died. She fell from the tower. She was scrambling on the stones of the wall. Jeannie said that Em had taken to following her. She fell down and drowned. Later the coroner would say that she had injured herself on the way down, that her back was broken too. I found her myself. I knew where to look. I brought her ashore. Richard Wood was not there. My mother waited at the pier. I carried Em to her and gave the child into her hands. Then I pushed the boat into deeper water and started the seagull. I went for the doctor and the lifeboat. They got to the island before me.

My mother wanted to bury the child there but it was against the law. Laws of interment are ancient instruments. They are designed to prevent contagion, disease and theft. They only *appear* to be concerned with dignity, love, hospitality. In reality a grave is a piece of property like any other. It is a small piece of land into which a child is put. It has a stone with the child's name. Time elapsed is recorded. It is a complete archive. It contains flesh and bone and memory and the parentheses of birth and death. And in the end, like most property, it is owned by someone other than the occupant. It is a mortgage on the past.

The coroner pieced together a narrative of her death for us.

We experienced it as a piece of fiction, no more credible. It did not touch us.

My memories were useless. They told him nothing about the fatal time. What I remembered about Emily. How she slept with her nose to my back. How she held my mother's hand when she was walking.

My mother remembered. She had been with her in the kitchen. My sister Jeannie came and got a slice of bread and butter. When Jeannie left Em was gone too. My mother assumed they were together. Later everyone looked for her. I saw her. I climbed the tower wall because it was the highest thing on the island. I planned to look in every field, on each and every shore. From the height of the tower I saw her drifting on the submarine

currents, among the white and rounded shale from the last cliff-fall. She wore blue dungarees and a pink and white striped shirt and blue rubber dollies. Her hands were outstretched.

She sometimes slept like that, face down in her bed.

We left the island. From now on the future could only be impossible. I went to school. My sister Jeannie went with my father. Richard Wood published a book. My mother had her first breakdown. These were consequences – but of what? We never knew. Why should we grieving children and parents be punished? Our life on the island was neither good nor bad, it was just another way of living. It consumed us just the same.

2

And so I came to a second island looking for my father and his second wife. I took the train from Waterloo to Portsmouth Harbour and then the Red Funnel Ferry. I looked back on the crossing and saw that I was leaving a vast industrial harbour. There were warships at anchor. It was a summer's day and sailing boats were working up with the tide. There was a yawl there. She had a high-clewed yankee and a staysail. I saw how they trimmed the mizzen hard to keep her nose to it. The man at the tiller wore a blue yachting cap. He was lean and long-limbed. He wore faded red trousers and a blue fisherman's smock. I watched him until he was too far away.

A crossing is always a shiver in space, a moment of otherness. We let go never knowing whether there will be something to hold onto again or whether the other side is the same as this.

My sister Jeannie met me at the pierhead. I hadn't seen her in five years or more. She had turned into a sullen beauty. In the breakdown of our lives she got my father and I got my mother. She got dark-hair and I got fair. She got a perfect complexion and I got freckles. She hardly spoke. She opened the boot for me to put my bag in and left me to close it. Her car was an Anglia. She drove with determination along the waterfront and up the hill past crumbling Victorian summer houses. Then we were among fields and small villages, then a harbour lined with houseboats and a fleet of red dinghies. England looked different down here. London felt like another world, or at least another country. There were Saxon churches and Roman ruins. Someone had started a vineyard, Jeannie said. She said it with scorn that I knew she had inherited. Nobody here would love the wine, I sensed. Nobody believed in it.

I told her about our mother, although she didn't ask.

We had to stop on a causeway with the harbour on one side and a bog on the other. I could see she was impatient. A lorry and a tractor were manoeuvring to pass each other. I had time to see that this was a tamer sea.

She gets agitated, I said, and she worries about her pills all the time. She's always double-checking that she's taken them. Sometimes she empties them out on the table and counts what's left and divides it by the number of days since the last prescription. She fusses about small things. It turns to efficiency at work, but at home it's a bit, you know, strange.

Jeannie wasn't listening.

She's still beautiful, that's the amazing thing. I mean, people who don't know her are always impressed. Her eyes are on fire.

Look at that tractor, Jeannie said, he shouldn't be coming this way.

Jeannie, I said, Mum worries about you.

She put her hand to the horn but didn't blow.

You'll like Heather, she said. She's your kind of person. She reminds me of you.

My father's second wife was ten years older than I was. I can't say I liked her but I thought her temporary and scarcely worth bothering with. She was cool but not cold. I could see she was anxious to befriend me. She must have known what was happening to my mother. He would have told her, and anyway, some of it he must have been writing about at the time. She was kind and, I thought, relieved that I wasn't another Jeannie. She was an attractive woman. I think she wanted me to feel at home. She told me my father was in John F Kennedy Airport; his flight had been cancelled and he was waiting for the next free seat. He was very anxious to see me. He had telephoned just before I arrived. He was on a speaking tour. It was very lucrative. They needed the money because the mortgage was frightening. Did I like Italian food? She had given me a room overlooking the garden. Jeannie would be next door. There was a bathroom upstairs and down. I was not to be upset if Jeannie walked around a bit during the night. She sometimes came into other people's rooms. I was not to wake her. She was sure I would like to freshen up. Did I need anything?

There was a shower in the bathroom. I hadn't had one once since boarding school. It was wonderful. I felt cool all through dinner. We had Heinz spaghetti in tomato sauce and steak. And afterwards there was ice-cream and fresh raspberries.

It was a big rambling house with a long narrow garden that led down to a small copse of elm and some kind of field or park where people walked in the evenings and young people played ball. There were French windows, I remember, and a stagnant almost empty pond. They had fish, she said, but the herons got them. There were striped deck-chairs on the dead lawn. It was the hottest summer in England since records began. They held a party for me that first night, and their friends invested the house and spilled out into the garden. They drank wine and gin and tonic and Teacher's whiskey. There were small things to eat. No one seemed to bother that my father was in New York. I discovered that

he had a collection of Beatles records and some bootleg tapes. This was told to me by a man who turned out to be television producer. We went into the drawing room. The records were arranged in chronological order so we began with *Please Please Me*. It was an expensive Pye hi-fi with a woofer and a tweeter. His name was Bill Langley and he was impressed by the sound quality. He was a very good dancer. People came and went and others danced too. My sister Jeannie came to watch.

She was just seventeen,

You know what I mean,

The way she looked was way beyond compare,

So how could I dance with another,

When I saw her standing there.

We played everything as far as *Revolver*. One of Bill Langley's gifts was that he could do a perfect twist.

So where do you live, he said.

With my mother in London.

He worked for Granada, he said. Had I seen *A Family At War*?

I was drunk by then.

I said I was born into one.

He laughed too loudly.

He said, Jolly good. Until then I hadn't realised that people still said it.

I kissed him at the gate when he was leaving. My heels sank in the gravel. There was a little green and a churchyard, and a parish house and a public library. There was a moon over the elms. The gravestones gleamed silver and bronze. He wore Old Spice. His cheeks

were like a girl's. He would be around for another ten days, he said, then it was back to the mill. Someone was in the shadows by the garage. We heard their murmured conversation. It's the Irish girl and Bill Langley. Yes, I thought so. It's nice they hit it off.

They must have thought that kissing makes you deaf.

He drove off towards the country. He said he would take the long way round in case PC Plod was on his rounds. Some friends had their names taken the night before. He imitated PC Plod. What 'ave we got 'ere then? I must warn you that anyfink you say may be taken down and given in evidence. It didn't sound like an accent anybody could actually speak. He said he would pick me up tomorrow. There was another party somewhere. There was always a party in the summertime. It was a party island.

Conversation was difficult. We sat in the kitchen in the morning sunlight and Jeannie talked. The gravel, she told me, was rolled flint which was why it had the warm brown colour. It came from the seabed off the island. It was washed down during the ice-ages in upland rivers. The island was not glaciated during the Pleistocene period, but was periglacial tundra and there were elephants. Their fossilised bones washed out of the chalk cliffs during storms. People kept them as ornaments. A mammoth had been found. There was a raised beach nearby, if I would like to see it. Other places of interest were the old bombed radar station, the lifeboat pier, the windmill, the museum. She didn't drink coffee because it upset her. Heather, my father's second wife, said it was the drying process which inevitably involved chemicals. She wanted Jeannie to try real coffee but Jeannie didn't want to take the chance. Heather first whipped the coffee and sugar in a little boiling water in each cup. Then she topped it up and a satisfying creamy scum formed on the surface. It was, she said, the correct way to make instant. She boiled the milk.

My father was trying to move into travel writing, she said. It was a natural development, and he was convinced that travel was the future. He was writing a book about Ireland to begin with. There was talk of a television series. She was very excited.

I could see that she would be excited. It was an exciting life.

She asked me about my studies. She wasn't very interested and I formed the impression that the academic life meant failure to her. It did not compare with the acting and doing of a life in business, which was how she viewed my father's activities. I seem to remember that she used the word boffin. You'll be a boffin. Although I may have invented that. I think she thought of the life of the mind as a form of cowardice.

After breakfast they drove me to the raised beach. It was interesting but you couldn't swim there. A vast broken ledge stretched out into the sea. Boats had to stay clear of it. Its rim was marked by perches and lights. Jeannie said the stones were chalk flints, Tertiary

flints and quartz pebbles, all rolled round by the sea a million years ago. But there were also fragments of ironstone, sarsenstone, lydianstone, hornstone. She made them sound like a poem in some unknown language. I saw that she loved stones in a way that she could never love anything else. They said they would bring me to a swimming beach later – Jeannie remembered that I liked swimming. It was the nicest thing she had said to me, and the only thing that did not involve geology in one form or another. I almost cried.

My father's wife wore a summer frock and tennis shoes. She had sunglasses. The frock may have been gingham. I never remember fabrics. The way she spoke astonished me. She said very little and her sentences were always short, but everything was perfectly enunciated and there was a precision about them, an exactness without wasted detail. I fell in love with that particular English accent. Its coolness. Its projection of self-control. Its vowel history and silences, its stops and glides.

We walked up and down the beach talking about stones.

And later Jeannie and I walked a bridle path that led along the backs of gardens and through a beech wood. There was honeysuckle and ladies' fingers, jasmine on split larch fences, roses, stock. In places the path was gravelled in the same rolled flint. Jeannie held my hand. Daddy liked his home comforts, she said. She meant that was why he married. She said she missed me. Did I ever think of home? Of the island? She wondered if the old house was safe. What had become of our boat? Had the tower fallen into the sea?

Do you ever think about Em, I said.

She let go of my hand. Then she caught it again. She squeezed. She had long fingernails. They gleamed, a black lacquer like the polish on a Chinese box. A column of gleaming beetles between my thumb and index finger.

Don't blame yourself, she said. That's what Daddy always says.

Do you remember that day?

No, she said. Never.

She used to have bad dreams. She used to come into my bed.

She was Richard's pet.

No, I said. No, you were Richard's favourite.

No, she said, it was Em.

I'm not sure what I remember, I said. I think I make things up.

She got into the cottages, Jeannie said. We weren't supposed to go into the cottages, remember? They were dangerous. She was talking but there was no one there. I heard her. I said Stop talking to yourself. She looked at me. She had my shells. I caught her by the hand. I pulled her.

When was this?

Some day. I can't remember. She was always stealing things. She was a nosy parker.

Jeannie, she was just a baby.

I blame Mother. She had no self-control. Children need limits. They need to know where they are.

Is that what Daddy says?

She turned away suddenly. She went down a briery path. I could see water ahead. Down three steps, earth faced with oak treads. We came out on a pebble beach. A flayed elm-tree with its roots in the air, its head in the tide.

This is my favourite place, she said. Nobody comes here. I sit in that tree and watch the ships.

Jeannie, what is it like living with Daddy?

He takes care of me. Daddy is the caring type. Em would never have died if Daddy had been there.

Don't say that.

No, no, I'm wrong. The tower was dangerous. If she climbed up on the wall... *If* she climbed up on it.

She fell from the tower.

She looked angry. Her eyes gleamed like her nails.

I don't remember that.

The coroner's court.

What would they know?

There was something. They said something. There was evidence I think.

I just put it out of my mind. It's as simple as that. There's no use remembering. Daddy says not to go over things. Think of the present, he says. Concentrate on what's happening around you.

She looked around. She smiled.

The raised beach is still here, she said. It's under the turf. It runs all along this side.

She pointed at a line of shells and gravel.

There's a shell midden, she said. Iron age I think.

What does he say about me?

He says you're the brilliant one. You'll go far. He says no one ever knows what's going on inside your head. You're the genius and I'm the beauty and Em was our special sister. Heather says she's with the angels. I didn't think Protestants believed in angels. Would you give me a hug?

She moved towards me.

Please, she said.

I put my arms around her. Already she was taller than me. My head was against her breast. She put her arms around my shoulders and I put mine around her waist. The long-legged fly and the stone. I don't know how long we stayed like that. Did we glisten like enamel, mica, oil? From a ship in the channel we must have looked permanent, a realist sculpture on the shore, depicting loss, disaster, exile. A mother and child. A sailor and his lass. But it would have been a lie. After a time she patted me on the head as you would pat a child. We're still sisters, she said. Then she stepped away and turned her back on me.

Daddy encouraged her geology and mineralogy, she said. He brought her books. When he was travelling he always thought of her. She was allowed to search his bags. She was allowed to find things. Sometimes he brought stones. She had a piece of alabaster from Italy, a banded agate from Greece and a moss-agate from America. He hides things from me, she said. I found the alabaster in the lining of his old leather bag. It's a game we play.

She had one stone that she didn't keep with the others. She had a small cardboard box in her pocket, a jewel-box but she wore no jewellery. She must have brought it specially to show me. She opened it. There was a cushion of velvet and a piece of limestone with a ring of faded yellow lichen. It was triangular in shape, almost like an arrow-head. She watched me.

This is private, she said. It's not part of the collection.

What does it mean?

The lichen is dead of course. I used fixative. Otherwise it would be dust.

Is it from home?

It's from the tower. It reminds me.

She laughed.

Funny isn't it? I never show it to anybody. I think it's a sin in a way. It's letting daddy down. I don't like it when he gets angry. There's no going back he says. I have to let go.

I thought: We're going round in circles without either volition or self-control.

Jeannie, I said, would you write to me. I get lonely at times.

You have mother.

I know, but, you know, she can be funny. You know she's not well.

I don't like writing letters.

Even a postcard.

Postcards are the hardest. You never know what to say and you end up saying wish you were here. And making the address bigger.

It's grand, I said, if it's hard, it doesn't matter.

Father is never around. I only have Heather.

She put the stone back in the ring-box. She put the box in her pocket again. She climbed up on the tree. She hooked her leg under one of the branches and leaned backwards so far she almost seemed to be leaning out of the world. She said everything was more interesting upside down. The tide was coming in. I heard it filling between the stones. Don't lean too far back Jeannie, I said. You'll fall. She straightened up suddenly.

I never fall, she said.

She sprang down.

Swim, she said. You can bring me back a sea-man. Do you remember? She used to tell us stories? I was always frightened. Take your clothes off. Daddy says you're brazen. The sea is where you belong.

I swam out into the channel. I was conscious that the water was not very deep. At one point, a long way out, my feet touched mud. At the equinoctial springs, they told me, people walked off the island as far as a mud bank and played a game of cricket there. It was a tradition. It was important that they never got their feet wet. I imagined the mud gleaming in the autumn sun, the people in white walking where now I was swimming.

Out there I got a better idea of the island. There was a low wooded shore. There were homes among the trees, many of which had slipways and boathouses. They were Victorian or Edwardian, seaside architecture, with overhanging eaves, decorative spindles and gingerbread trim. To the west they ran towards a long wooden pier, to the east they disappeared into woods. There was the long sweep of sand at the harbour entrance. On the outer side some bathing huts and caravans, a stone belfry that had no church. The stones that sailors used to scour the decks of the old ships came from here. It's name was Holystone.

I swam back. Jeannie was waiting. She watched me coming ashore. I changed under the towel.

We walked back to the house and when we got there we heard the news that my father would be staying in America for at least an extra week. He had been asked to write something for The Observer about the Nixon affair. He had been reliably informed that something big would break in the next few days. His second wife thought it was exciting. I thought he was probably sleeping with someone. Jeannie went away someplace without saying anything. What could we say to experience it? What could we do to be in the same place feeling the same things? Our present was absent. When we looked at each other we saw exile.

Our present was absent? Where did I hear that? It was a line of poetry, or very like one. I did not like poems. But in the long run poems come back to get you. They inhabit that place that you have vacated. They fill the vacuum that is asking to be filled. I heard it spoken by Mahmoud Darwish, not at the time but many years later. In Paris? Perhaps. And it was not exactly that line. It was different but it meant what was happening in the year of Nixon's impeachment. The year Vietnam became a country. The hottest year since records began. James Callaghan was Prime Minister. I was twenty. That is what the poem meant to me when I heard it, whenever that was, wherever it was. It might as well have been an actual memory of an actual event. What Mahmoud Darwish meant, as he would be the first to admit, was no longer important.

It was the hottest year since records began. England was burning. Coming down in the train I had seen the smoke of the New Forest. We could see it now from the island. They wanted people to put bricks in the toilet cisterns to save water. Hurn Forest burned – or perhaps that was later. And perhaps later too, because these things are always too late, they appointed a Minister for Drought.

Alone in the house in the afternoon I lay on the bed in my underclothes with the windows open. Outside there were sparrows in distress. They stood in the shade with their wings lifted, trying to stay cool. They were silent. The island was silent. People who could, stayed indoors. I got up about four and went into Jeannie's room. It was bare except for a bed, a chair, a desk. There were no pin-ups or photographs. She had a patchwork quilt. In her wardrobe there were hiking boots and a canvas knapsack. There were stones on her window-sill – I recognised some that she had named to me that morning – and a small but perfect fossilised sea-urchin, a slightly irregular dome with five dotted stripes that met at the crown. The piece of paper it stood on said *heart-urchin, echinoderm, poss. cretaceous*. It looked like it was made of mud but it felt comfortable in the hand, a hundred million years

for the living creature to set into stone.

She had Rachel Carson's books. And she had *A Geological History of The British Isles* and *Structure Of The British Isles* and the local section of *British Regional Geology*. It was the beginnings of a collection.

The master bedroom was sweet with scent. A translucent peignoir on a hanger hooked to the door of the wardrobe. A nylon negligee thrown on the bed, the bed itself unmade. Scent bottles and a powder box and a glass tray with a spike for holding rings. There were no rings on it. Gold lamé slippers on a goatskin rug. A paperback of Arthur Hailey's *Airport* open and face down. A packet of Anadin. Sex and scent and analgesics. I could easily have been overcome by it, overwhelmed, the thoughts of bodies and sweat and transparent night-clothes.

The next room was my father's office. I thought it would be his bedroom. There was a large locked filing cabinet. A clock that told the time in New York, London and Tokyo. A mahogany bookcase that mostly contained his own books in different editions and languages. The centre of the room was taken up by a partner's desk with a chair at both sides. On its vast gleaming surface there was a Remington typewriter and a block of blank paper; opposite them, in front of the second chair, a typescript. I listened for any sounds in the house or garden but there were none.

He was writing about my mother. It would not be about travelling. I think my mother's appearances in his books, all of which she read, represented for her absolute truths about her life and personality. They came swift as judgement and struck her to the bone. This other self that we never express. They were first of all ideal forms of her life, potential existences that she always failed to realise. They were myths of happiness and self-sufficiency. Then they were tales of her madness fixed forever in words not of her choosing. They were his narrative of how she fell from grace; her lapses, her comical

aporia, her diatonic weeping. She saw herself. She understood that she was an ex-angel, a pitiful fallen creature with a broken wing. She saw too that he was her imprisoned narrator. His readers would long for his release. Now he was beginning again. The starting point was different. This was memoir.

There was a full account of how we came out of the island. How the men on the lifeboat turned their backs out of natural sympathy. One of them was the fisherman who called to tell his stories and who came and went that night that we heard her screaming. He never looked at any of us. It was a wet day. They wore their long sou'westers, their sea-boots They were rough men. They made their living by farming or fishing but they volunteered to save people. They had seen madness before; the hills and the valleys were full of it. They did not want their eyes to say what they saw. They watched the sea and the boat and tended to it with skill and gentleness while my mother wept and raved and my father held her together and we children could not close our eyes. And there the chapter ended. Chapter two was entitled 'The Mental: Cork.' What I wanted most of all was to burn it. What I did was arrange the paper carefully so no one would know. I left the room and closed the door. I could see why he had taken so many years to write it. It would be a difficult book.

From an unpublished memoir by Tom Newman

During the days between Emily's death and her funeral, which because of the circumstances was longer than is usual in Ireland, we were all wracked by guilt and recrimination. I now understand that this is an entirely natural process after a violent death. Indeed, guilt is inevitable after any death of a loved one, but I should have detected the irrationality in Eileen's pain, I should have seen how she was tipping forwards into that oblivion that had always been threatening to engulf her, an oblivion that would bring us all immense pain, but that would ultimately be her only consolation. I remember, for example, how one day she made me walk with her in the rain to the beach under the beacon. We walked in silence. I felt that in holding myself together I was somehow holding us all, but in truth I have never known despair like it. If I had spoken I would have crumbled. The wind was in our faces and it carried a cold rain. It was as well – it hid our tears.

When we were standing on the shingle she said, Tom, it wasn't an accident.

It was a shocking thing to say and to hear. She looked directly at me as though she were trying to project her thoughts into my head. I saw her struggling to shape words and failing. She looked away and seemed to draw strength from the sea or the blankness. She couldn't fly of course, she said, but I thought there was a hawk or something killing things, even fish, but birds don't eat fish, but this island is an abattoir, really Tom, you never know what will turn up next, my baby died and that's as much as I'm going to say to you or anyone, don't expect anything more.

Then she walked around me and went home.

When I try to think of what happened to us afterwards, all my thoughts begin with those sad, crazy, obsessive words. Somewhere in her embittered psyche she understood she had wilfully brought her children to a place of great danger, that she felt surrounded not by the comfort and welcome of nature but by terrible forces that were bent on her destruction, but, unable to bear her own guilt she transferred it to the children themselves. This island is an abattoir. If it is, I should have said, you brought us here. I looked around me at the sea and the stones and the grey enclosing rain. I was away. I should have been there. I came as soon as I heard but it was too late. I should have taken my children while there was still time. I blame myself of course, leaving them in the care of an unstable woman. Everything that happened to us all is rooted there.

I went up on the downs. I needed to walk and think. High up on the island's back there were larks rising and cow-bells, and people following the bridle-paths. Over the village the evening picked out the green-oxide of the Methodist church, giving it a kind of subterranean pallor as though the saved had somehow lifted the veil to draw a little vigour in. I tried to think about my father. About whether truth was necessary as everybody said, or whether one could live better by illusion. How much revelation was necessary or desirable? Sunt lumina omnia – all things that are, are lights. I came to no conclusions, of course, despite my training. Freud once said that psychology would only be completely possible in a society that no longer needed it. What I felt was a kind of pain, a kind of loss, as though I had been given the wrong life.

Bill Langley picked me up at eight and he drove me across the downs again to a pub where some friends of his were meeting. I remember the names, magical to me, like a story by Thomas Hardy: Culver Down, Yaverland, Nunwell, Morton, Whippingham. He had a new Ford Escort. I drank bitter and Bill drank gin. Then he drove me to a house. There was a keg of beer and a man from the Village Inn to pour it. There were lights in the trees and there was a small band. I never heard what the party was about. It may have been a birthday or an engagement or a wedding, although the bride and groom must have been long gone by the time we got there. People said frightfully and horrid and jolly. There was a club, I remember, to which most of them belonged. We were called the young people, and in return Bill called them the Enid Blytons. Allowances were made for us. When we danced nobody minded. The Enid Blyton people went indoors early and left the world to us. We heard their laughter in the silences between sets. We danced in the light of the trees until the band put their instruments down. Bill Langley drove me home. There was kissing in his car outside the public library. I could see the light in Jeannie's room. There was some

fumbling and touching but not very much. It was too hot. He drove off towards the windmill, going the long way round. I had not told him I was returning to London in the morning.

My sister Jeannie said she would like to come up to London sometime to see our mother. Heather thought it was a wonderful idea. It seems she had been taking advice about stepmothers. She said that it would be good for Jeannie to stay in contact. She wanted to make arrangements there and then. She took a calendar down from the kitchen wall and started counting weeks and asking whether weekdays or weekends would be most convenient. Woodfull Premier Quality Butcher, the calendar said. I said that I would need to ask mother. She wasn't always able for visitors. She had her bad days. The thing is, it was difficult to say in advance. She could be funny about things.

Suddenly Heather understood. I saw it appearing in her eyes like a flaw of wind on a flat sea. I was grateful for it. She did not press me about Jeannie coming up.

You go on and see how things are, she said, and let us know when it suits. Don't you worry about a thing dear.

Jeannie caught the tone.

Oh, she said. She did not look at us.

Then she said, She's my mother too.

What shall I tell Bill Langley if he comes, Heather said.

Tell him anything you like.

Shall I give him your telephone?

I shrugged. Jeannie snickered.

Later Heather took me aside. Jeannie was a dear girl but she was lonely. A trip to London would be just the thing. Meet some of my university friends. As long as it wouldn't upset my mother, of course. In fact she needn't see my mother at all if it wasn't appropriate. One has to be sensitive in these things. But Jeannie was very loving and caring. She adored her father, of course. She was so glad I was able to come down. I must call her

Heather. Jeannie was impetuous, a bit quarrelsome, she didn't make friends easily. One of her teachers described her as sinister, which was a bit extreme but worrying don't you think? She was so glad to have met me, and she hoped now that the ice had been broken that I would come down as often as I liked. To escape the bright lights. I was to look on the island as my home away from home. Jeannie unsettled her a bit, which was understandable, being the new woman in the house, one expects things, but still. And next time father would be there, although, of course, he was always in his office working and of course no one must go in there, god forbid, while the great man is thinking. She never went into his office, she said. It was their only rule.

She shrugged and smiled a tight smile to indicate resignation. I wondered if she somehow knew, if this was a caution. Or if she was simply letting me know.

Writers, you know, they'd work round the clock if you let them.

She likes stones, she said. We think that after her A-levels she may go up to Oxford. What do you think of geology? Now that we have North Sea Oil, geology is coming into its own. There will be openings. Her father says she'd make a fine geologist.

Before I left I slipped into the office and took the typescript. I replaced it with the same thickness of blank paper from the block. I put it in my vanity bag. There was no bin at Portsmouth Pier so I held onto it until Waterloo. Jeannie drove me to the boat. I remember when she was a little girl she had a book called *Aurora The Sleeping Beauty,* it was a colouring book based on the Walt Disney Motion Picture. And in it Princess Aurora became Briar Rose. I remember her sitting in the window colouring the outlines. There is always something extra in the light of an island. It is the presence of the sea, like living in a world where there is always a mirror just out of sight.

My mother's horror was terrible. I remember very little of it. There was a time when I recalled it all but I found it useless in dealing with her life or my own. Memory is an over-rated power. It is most useful to those who need to deny things. I remember she was upstairs in bed and my sister Jeannie and I were sitting in the kitchen. There were night-lights on the table because the electricity cable had failed, as it often did. Boats were forever anchoring on it, despite the warning signs. My father and Richard Wood were upstairs. We could hear my mother's voice. It came in rapid stuttering bursts, like a sewing machine. I remember that an earwig walked across the table in front of us. Jeannie pinched it up and held it to the light. I saw its jaws working, its tail bending and straightening, its antennae. Then she dropped it into the night-light. It fell into the molten wax and settled quickly down. It drowned. In the morning there was the shadow of the earwig in the cold wax.

My mother's horror was also perfectly reasonable. One of the things we forget is that the world itself is madder than anything our heads can make. How should one remember ones child falling into the sea? Sustaining injuries against the cliff on the way down? After that everything is impossible.

My mother's horror was all-encompassing, all-consuming. It devoured the night and the day, the sun and the moon, God and the future and everything in between. It paralysed us. It divided us. I greatly fear it destroyed us.

I remember the night before we came out of the island. I woke to hear running and urgent voices. I stood on the bed to see out the window but I could not see the ground. I ran down and saw that the door was open. Richard had been sleeping on the floor. His sleeping bag was empty. I closed the door and went back to bed. After a time I heard the voices coming back. Richard, my father, my mother. They did not go to bed. I fell asleep. In the morning Jeannie said she had been asleep all night but I knew she was not. She was listening.

Where did my mother go that night? Nobody tells children these things. They hope, maybe they believe that we sleep through every danger; that childhood is, in fact, a kind of sleepwalk through their adult world. And then later they assume we know. As if the simple act of growing up involves absorbing their memories in our own.

I went to see her in the hospital in Cork. There were old people everywhere. They were doing nothing. My mother was an old person too. She was sitting in a glasshouse with a lot of others. Their chairs were against the wall. They were facing outwards to the pale winter sun. She did not look out of place. She said nothing for a long time. Then she cried.

When I went to boarding school I was relieved. Nothing could be as terrible as watching your mother being mad. But at night I thought about her. I could not stop wondering what it was like to be mad among madwomen, to be in a madhouse, to be hurt, to believe that you had caused the death of your own child, or neglected to save her, to have no way back, to always have that absence, that little nose between your shoulderblades, to be able to feel the steady breathing, or whatever memory most troubled her, and to know that it was only madness, that the child was dead. The child is dead. There are few worse sentences in the English language.

That was the commonplace book of mother's madness. My father only knew the beginning, but I saw it right through to the end. That obstinate hurt that diverted her life. It made a fanatic of her. It made her immoveable. It made her irretrievably other. She was still my mother. It was impossible. Yeats wrote: Hearts with one purpose alone/Through summer and winter, seem/Enchanted to a stone/To trouble the living stream.

From an unpublished memoir by Tom Newman

People sitting on the floor, in chairs, their trousers open, the smell of urine, the shuffling, the distant sound of crying or wailing, the desperation, the sunlight pouring in through the Victorian glasswork. Oh, I thought, at long last Eileen, you have your glasshouse. All along the southern wall of the asylum, this vitrified view of the river and the valley, smoke rising from fires, lorries passing on the pencil-line of the road. Does it make their madness worse that all this beauty is just beyond reach? Is it a comfort to be able to see the rest of the world going about its business? Or is the whole world poisoned? Is the mad mind a crypt wherein are buried such horrors that goodness is impossible ever again?

Eileen said, Take me home Tom. You're here to take me home, aren't you?

The doctors, Eileen...

Oh, she said, they're going to keep me here. They have a five year plan.

But what would I have done with her? There was no question of returning to the island.

This is my friend Heather, I said. She's my assistant. We're working on my new book. There will be photographs this time. They're very excited about it. They say it'll be a big seller. When I have a bit of money I'll be able to bring you home. I'll buy a house.

Don't take any photographs of me, Eileen said.

How do you do Mrs Newman, Heather said, extending her hand. I could see that the hand was shaking. Heather was a quietly courageous person. She was the one who had wanted to meet Eileen.

But Eileen turned away.

In our flat in Kingsland we had four rooms and they were two bedrooms, a kitchen living room, a bathroom. It was the third floor of a Victorian building. At night we heard the trains of the Northern Line. Sometimes there were sing-songs in the pub on the ground floor. Oh Danny Boy, the pipes the pipes are calling, Daisy, daisy, give me your answer do, There'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover, Love, love me do. We came to know the voices two floors down. I would look up from my books and catch mother's eye and groan and she would make her tight-lipped gasping face that meant, Not again. And the same cracked-voice old Irishman would sing, Come Back to Erin mavourneen, mavourneen, come back aroon to the land of thy birth. We could imagine him standing at the bar with his hands turned up, his eyes closed, his Guinness settling on the counter beside his Trilby. We knew he would never come back to Erin. And mother would say, Put the kettle on, there's a dear. I don't know if those old songs meant anything to her. If they brought the island back. If she ever wanted to go home again. If, when he sang Come in the springtime, mavourneen, she thought about the spring winds scattering the apple flowers, the first boat-load of sheep coming in to the pier and their mad scattering, the barking of seals on the Sharrav rocks, the evenings lengthening into long twilights, the light in the northern sky, the holly, the hazel, the elder and the late scrub ash with its black matchstick-tips. I did. In my mind it was the antithesis of London which stood for people and concrete and smoky nights and long days in the British Library and chips. I imagine the man downstairs thought the same way. I thought the difference between us was that I had the power to go back and he did not. I was wrong.

But what I want to say about it is this: Mother and I were happy there; she had her work, her obsessions, her bad dreams, I had my studies. Nobody, certainly not my father, not my sister, can say otherwise. There were times when her old self came back, chance phrases: How are you this morning mother? I'm not myself at all. And then that smile that said I know where I am and how I am and I remember where I heard that first and so do

you. She used to say, Typical me to get it in the head; anyone else would get something normal, piles or kidney stones, but I would get insanity wouldn't I? She could make me laugh. Sometimes she called it insanity of the brain, as if there were several varieties of which she got the most embarrassing.

I understand that we had both sacrificed a lot for such a tenuous happiness – I was over-ambitious, a perfectionist, repressed – but we had achieved a modus vivendi. And though at times I was bored, exasperated, frustrated, stubborn, angry, spiteful, I understood that I was paying a price, and that the price was not too high. It was, I, after all, who insisted that she must come out of the mental home, and since the only other home we could live in was here in this miserable east London street, this is where I brought her. Later I would look on it differently. One must in order to survive. Since then I have often thought of the famous saying that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. The truth is that liberty and vigilance are opposites, as perfect a dipole as black and white, and as the wise man understood, equally necessary to each other. Eternal vigilance is what I had in our flat in Kingsland, but I thought in my innocence that I had both.

My sister Jeannie came to London to read Geology at King's College. It was the long Winter of Discontent. The tube didn't work. There were strikes. It rained incessantly. Callaghan was patching coalitions with anyone who would vote for him and Margaret Thatcher was sharpening her teeth. The bin-men were on strike, the gravediggers were on strike, the train-drivers were on strike. Where did the dead go? One expected to see them protruding stiffly from un-emptied bins or travelling infinitely in the same seat on the tube, just going round and round the underground.

We saw very little of her at first. I assume she had her own social life. It turned out that she was a member of some society that visited the sick and did many good works, to judge by things she said. She had five ladies whom she visited once a week, leaving her weekends free, and when one died she added another from some sort of list that someone had given her. They were all ill and her visiting mainly took the form of keeping them company, giving them a meal and their medicine, giving whoever was looking after them a night out. Some of them went to bingo or the pictures or the pub. What they did with the free time she gave them was, she said, none of her business, but she didn't like it if they came home drunk because it embarrassed the patient and put her care at risk. It was the kind of precise transference that Jeannie was good at.

In her second year she decided that visiting my mother constituted a good work under the terms of whatever catechism her group lived by. She began to take the bus out to Kingsland on a Saturday. I never found out if mother was lady number six, or whether she had taken her place in the gang of five. I made a point of not being there. When I came home afterwards she would have cleaned the flat and cooked mother a meal. My mother was always happy after Jeannie called.

Bill Langley was courting me at the time. He had moved to the BBC, partly, he always said, to be near me. We used to drive out into Essex and watch village cricket matches.

When he discovered the joys of the sea he kept a tiny plywood boat boat on the Crouch and we used to go down for weekends but he got tired of it after a year or two. We got married in Islington Registry just after they awarded me my doctorate. I don't know which my mother was happier about. She said I was the first person in the family actually qualified to talk about something. She was working at the Hackney Hospital then, a clerk in the pharmacy, which is how they said she came by the morphine sulphate. If that was the case, she covered her tracks exceptionally well; there was no discrepancy in her accounting. In those days it took two signatures to draw a controlled substance, and in every case the signatures were authentic. The coroner was frankly puzzled. Neither Jeannie nor I could testify that we had ever seen anything in her pharmacopoeia resembling it, and besides she could as easily have done it with Valium which she had been taking for years.

At the time of the wedding our lives inverted. Jeannie moved in with mother and I moved out with Bill. I remember that my mother welcomed the change with some sort of fatalism. I knew it would happen, she said. I asked her what she knew and she rambled about Em and the tower and how I had dived in fully clothed to bring her back. She could be guarded when she wanted to be. But I think she meant that she knew I would leave her eventually. I think she felt abandoned. There was nothing I could do about that.

Father came to give me away. He and Bill already knew each other, of course, although the television series had not worked out. He was charming to all of us and solicitous too. Heather came. She looked cool and delicious. Her clipped consonants and broad vowels falling among our bastard brogues. She and mother had a long conversation. Bill's uncle was there, an old soldier whose back was ruined when a landmine blew up under his jeep somewhere near Salerno. He was our best man. Nobody cried. Afterwards we had a meal in the restaurant in the Post Office Tower. My father paid. We had champagne. We toasted each other heartily, revolving above London as slowly as the world.

None of us felt it but we saw that everything outside the windows was moving on. In those days one did not say where the honeymoon was to be, but I told Jeannie and gave her an Italian number she could contact me at. In case of emergency.

In Naples we had a room that opened into an orange garden. It was February and a cold wind was blowing from the Apennines and beyond that from the mountains of Greece. They called it the Grecale.

It was a surprise to us.

We had imagined a warmer place. We told ourselves that we were getting away from the damp gloom of London, that a bit of sun would do us good, that we would warm our bones.

On our first day we went into town and bought warm underwear and socks. The oranges were as cold as stones but they were the brightest thing in winter. We walked a lot. I fell in love with the place, Bill did not. He was impatient with everything outside our room, he thought the people unreliable, the food too oily and sloppy, but when we closed the door on the orange garden and turned out the lights he was as happy as a child. I might have been worried by his cunning sensuality, the perfection of his pleasure. I was not much good at sex then, but he didn't care. He created my body. He imagined my arousal and my satisfaction and they happened as he imagined. It may have been his experience in television that gave him this power. I was grateful for it anyway. It gave me time to learn both pretence and pleasure. I was happily full of him, rosy cheeked at dinner, pale at breakfast. The man behind the desk approved. The girl who served us our coffee approved. She looked at us with longing. She had no ring.

The man behind the desk told us that he was a child when Vesuvius erupted in 1944. He described the strange hallucinatory effect of the eruption. It was as though the light were distorted by the magnetic discharge from the fault. Did I think that was possible? It was at the end of the war, he said, and there were English soldiers sailing away to defeat the communist partisans in Greece. One English officer being taken from an ambulance, a very tall very blue-eyed man with an enormous smile gave him money. His father

photographed the ash-plume but the film did not survive. He used a simple Kodak Brownie Junior with a meniscus lens sent to him as a gift by relatives in New York before the war. It was still in the house. In those days there was famine in Naples. People from the *bassi* were eating dandelions and cats, and his family had to get everything on the black market. He had never been to see the cone because his cousin had died in the village of Massa that was drowned in the lava-flow, and it seemed impious to go to the mountain after that. When he told me this he laughed and turned his hands up flat. It is ridiculous, I know, he said. She had been ill and was asleep and her parents thought she had already escaped. She was his little cousin. They had played together.

I picked up a piece of pumice-stone on the beach. I thought it could well have been from the eruption that was photographed by the concierge's father. On the other hand it could be a million years old, just now worn out of the the cliff. I kept it for Jeannie. It was as light as foam.

And a piece of basalt, black as the coals of Jeannie's eyes. I kept it for her.

One evening I went into a shop to buy postcards. The moment I opened the door the lights went out and I was momentarily blinded by darkness. A young man spoke to me. He gestured towards the street. *Il lampo*, he said. He turned and rocked a switch back and forth and repeated himself. Then he looked upward and shrugged. The gods, I said, if they do nothing inconvenient they are not gods at all. I was quoting Mallarmé. He smiled but he did not understand. *Lampo* meant lightning I would discover. Of course, it was a perfect metaphor for every step of my life. Outside I could preserve at least the illusion of insight, but no sooner did I enter than I was blind.

One night, while we were away and she was in my sister's care, something happened and my mother crashed through her Valium and had to be sectioned. Two doctors came and certified that she was unfit to remain at home.

Jeannie had everything under control by the time we came back. She never phoned us.

It was a second breakdown. She had terrible delusions, she was paranoid, she refused all food and water, she heard voices and noises. She made accusations: we each of us were criminal in our own way, according to her, my father was a thief, I was a poisoner, Heather was a witch, Bill Langley was an adulterer – she was right about that at least. When I went to see her in the Hackney Hospital she laughed in my face. She had escaped me, she said, I couldn't touch her now. Why didn't you run while you had the chance, she said. You were the only one with a chance. Then she said, This is the poorhouse you know, I shouldn't be here at all. She was right about that too, the building used to be the Hackney workhouse, and she often said my father's dreams would ruin us.

I went to see Jeannie. She showed me my mother's room where everything that was made of glass was broken: perfume and pill-bottles, wine-glasses and looking glasses, picture-glass and a little glass seal she had brought from Ireland. Only the window escaped. I knew it was because breaking the window would have let the outside in, because she lose herself in the world, she would dissolve in the vastness of outside.

Why did Jeannie not clean it up? She said she closed the door the night mother was admitted and didn't have the heart to face it again. I saw that she was trembling. I sent her out to get food and, like every big sister in the world, I set things in order again. I was comforted by the thought that this tidy room would somehow speak to mother of me, of

love, of care, and that she would return to it. I imagined her listening again to the broken Irish tenor downstairs and remembering our calm evenings, our happiness, if I could dare to call it that.

My mother died in Jeannie's arms. She heard, she said a glassy barking that turned out to be my mother trying to breathe. It came from mother's bedroom. At first she didn't want to go in. She said my mother was a private person and needed a little cry from time to time. Morphine sulphate represses, in the first instance, the respiratory response, the coroner's court heard. She was drowning. Jeannie called the ambulance but by the time it arrived she was already dead. There was some confusion about the time of the call. Typical NHS, Jeannie said. And the ambulance drivers were on and off strike anyway during that winter.

Morphine sulphate is a long-acting analgesic which should not be broken, chewed, dissolved or crushed, according to the medical expert at the inquest. The consequences of any of those things, even with a normal dose are potentially fatal. My mother had the equivalent of two daily doses. Analysis of her stomach showed that she had taken them with, and probably mixed in, an antacid preparation called Gaviscon. It was peculiar, the coroner said, even unique in his experience. Perhaps she didn't want to upset her tummy.

I said that she had been very unhappy for a long time. I told them about my sister Em. I told them, without naming names, that she felt she had betrayed a lot of people. Richard Wood gave evidence. He wept. The newspapers described him as the well-known Irish poet – Faber had just launched his fourth book – Irish poet's love for bestseller's suicide wife, or words to that effect. The word unrequited occurred six times in his evidence. There was something too about the Courtly Love tradition. My father explained the financial arrangements he had made. The coroner, in a nice turn of phrase that my father would wish to have thought of, described them as a complicated mess of kindnesses. He meant my education, the flat, various gifts and the fact that the island house belonged to her.

What troubles us is the nature of existence – not the void. We accept every form of evasion that does not confront us with the everyday. And so we are poisoned by images, an endless sinister fallout of metaphors, full of purpose but devoid of meaning. Like any addict our means of escape is our prison, the remedy is, in fact, a deadly numbing toxin. When the time comes to feel we have lost the neural pathway. Things touch us without our knowing.

She never told me.

And by her will Jeannie and I were to share in it.

Jeannie called me when the solicitor's letters arrived to inform us that we had become the proud possessors of less than half a deserted island. You'll never go back, she said. I think she wanted me to sign my part away. You have your career. But I kept my key.

3

And so there was a third and last island and it was the island of his old age. I went there for his seventieth birthday and to meet his new wife. The children were at school and Bill had finally got around to making something with my father in it. He was bringing a documentary crew. They would arrive a few days after me. Jeannie would come later. She was newly divorced. Her husband had a heart attack, a triple bypass and fell in love with a woman he met in recovery. He was a stockbroker. Richard Wood would be there. But first there would be a few days with my father. Alone. His new wife was visiting her parents. They lived in Forlì, far to the north, several train journeys away.

Berlusconi was back in power. He was the man to fix things, they said. He knew how it all worked because of his businesses. I passed through the suburbs of Naples where the pavements were blocked with refuse. The taxi driver apologised. He's taking us back to the Middle Ages, he said, the fascists are back. At a seminar in Rome I had heard the fascist Alemanno talking about fixing The South. Now he was the Mayor. There was a lot of talk of a return to importance. Nobody was whispering it. There was talk of Mussolini's abortive expedition against the Sicilian Mafia. They were saying that pulling out of Iraq was a mistake. They were bombing gypsy camps.

The little island ferry came through the entrance and immediately began to slow down. She made a slight turn about three hundred metres out and dropped an anchor. Then she pulled against the anchor-chain and that resistance turned her so that the stern was towards the land. It was a graceful and gallant manoeuvre, a curtsy. There are three islands, he told me on the phone, take care that you don't fall asleep in the ferry or you'll end up visiting all three in turn. It was late morning and the ferry was quiet. I could easily have slept to the beat of the engine and the sea.

He met me at the Port Captain's Office. I scarcely recognised him. He had a grey beard and his hair was white as Formica.

He drove me up through the narrow lanes of the island and came to a place where he could park his car. We went in a gate and there was the garden and the house. It was not what I expected.

He brought me upstairs and showed me a room. Come down when you're ready, he said, and we'll have a drop of wine.

There were two windows. In the distance was the sea, the haze of the mainland, the old broken back of Vesuvius. That old mountain had done enough damage in its time.

The house was plainer, older than I thought it would be. It was emptier too. Quieter. Open to the air and the sky. The road below my window was narrow and across the way there was a lemon grove, a single old kitchen chair in the shade. An old woman walked through it carrying a watering can and a hoe. She wore a straw hat. Among the distant gardens, the cicadas were bitter about the heat. The geckos waited for evening. They looked on human existence as a temporary interruption in the hegemony of stone. They stopped for hours in one place and then on some geodetic sign shifted like a clockwork toy. There was no difference between the new station and the old, no difference in light or air, no obvious reason for change. At night they cavorted after insects and made weird upside-

down leaps onto cornices or street lamps. The metallic song of the cicadas could be heard for miles offshore. That afternoon, when I swam out I heard it. If I had gone blind I could have followed it home.

The table stood under a square frame over which the vines crossed. In clusters the pale grapes caught shafts of sunlight. The shade was delicious. A wooden ladder stood against the frame at one side. The table was of some kind of wood too, rough-hewn enough, a country table, but the chairs were plastic. He brought a tray containing two glasses of wine, some olives, some bread. I said that all gardens are magical.

Yes. They all have one. The island of gardens.

He made a gesture that was intended to encompass everything.

There's an old lady across the street from my bedroom watering her vegetables.

They do that. There's never enough rain.

I was glad to have seen her. The earth is important still.

So tell me about you, he said. How are you? How are you faring?

Without ever having thought of the idea before, I said, I'm shipwrecked.

He laughed. Then he frowned. Bill?

Bill, yes.

So how are you managing it, he said.

I took a deep breath. I said I was coping but things were coming to a head.

And if you don't mind, I don't like talking about it.

As you wish.

The children are a terrible complication, of course.

Of course.

Something lapidary in the light, every shadow edged, exact, more itself than before. I had the feeling that he too was on the verge of revelation but that he turned away at the

very last.

Instead he said, Come and look at Salvatore's rabbits.

He was up again, leaving the wine and food. He looked unsettled. There was something nervous and disturbing about him. He led me out under the grapes. There were walls, shallow steps that led nowhere, wisteria, bougainvillaea trailing everywhere, the thick tonguey leaves of the magnolia, the grapes, the lemon trees, the chipped statue of an armless Venus surrounded by cactus. Only the blue sky suggested that there was a world beyond. So this was his new island, his walled paradise. Once there was sea now there was stone. He was always longing to be outside.

We went down to where the vines spiralled onto old branches slung between posts and tied with rags. Salvatore kept them, he said, and had the grapes. They made wine with them. It had to be drunk young, a small wine like all the locals, but quite good. Then in a slatted shade there was a stone oven big enough almost to get my shoulders into. Again Salvatore built it. The Centane stone was famously hard. Then an orchard of stunted lemon and orange trees. The fruits were last year's crop and not good for eating, they had been on the tree over winter and the cold spring winds dried them out, and the new fruit was small and hard and green still. I remembered those winds.

Through a gap in the wall he brought me to where his neighbour kept rabbits and hens in cages.

He looked at me ruefully. They really are almost self-sufficient, the islanders. They have to be.

Food that travels further than the length of a parish isn't worth eating?

It's a funny thing, people quoting your own work back at you.

I know.

I don't like it.

There were pumpkins growing in the floor of a half-finished house and basil plants and rosemary, a fig tree with tiny hard fruits and a twisted olive tree whose trunk had split in two maybe a hundred years before; the ghost of the second half seemed necessary to sustain its precarious balance.

It was the kind of garden that could be found in any house on the island that had the space, he said, as all the older ones did. Everybody grew their own food, if they could.

He picked a half dozen eggs and I made a basin of my shirt and he put them into it. And standing there, holding the eggs and looking at him I said, The children will be home at the end of the month. It'll happen then.

I never bother to remember dreams; despite my training I don't really believe in them. They have always seemed to me to be essentially trivial, housekeeping for the brain or at best an exercise in poetics. But that first night on the island I dreamed that I was looking in the windows of a car and it was like looking into a fish tank. My father was there, floating like an astronaut or a baby in a womb. The light was green and uncertain. His head was too big and his eyes were pearlescent and unresponsive. He might have been blind, like a puppy. He was wearing the ochre coloured canvas trousers that he used to wear when we were children; it was wet and the thinness of his legs showed through. Why had his legs become so thin? His arms too. I felt a surge of terrible pity. It came to me that the glass would not break because of the pressure – I had seen something to that effect in a film or television programme, people trying to break out of a car underwater – so I simply looked on as he floated. He moved with wonderful grace, in slow motion, without any sign of pain or fear. I knew, as I watched, that I should be happy for him. If I broke the glass he would wash out into our world and things would begin again. But, in fact, when the first pity vanished it was replaced by revulsion and anger. I was the one who felt pain, who felt suffocated. I was drowning for him. I had to break the glass or die. I began to look for a weapon.

There were two coffee cups a little jug of boiled milk and an espresso pot, a copy of yesterday's Telegraph folded to the crossword. The curdled skin on the milk like a drift of burnt plastic. There was a little bowl of white butter, already losing its shape in the heat, a plate of bread, two pieces of cake. They were called *lingua di bue*, he said, which means ox tongue. They were a speciality of the place. They looked lascivious enough. We sat down to breakfast. I had seen photographs of him sitting here. I remember one page-length feature; the theme was, Radical critic finds peace at last.

He looked thin and I thought there was a pallor in his tan, something chemical, and a dry slack skin. Are you all right? Yes, I'm all right, I'm fine. Whether it was true or not I felt excluded. When I was a girl they spoke to me like that and in the end everything turned out to be wrong.

So he told me things about the island instead of himself. That it was formed in the eruptions of the Phlegrean Fields, twelve thousand years ago, and is really no more than the joined rims of three volcano craters. Jeannie would know all about that, he said, if we could risk getting her going. He said it was the most densely populated rural area in the world; that the walled village at the southern end used to contain a penitentiary, now a community centre, and that consequently it was a closed island until 1967, and that it was one of the places that Mussolini exiled communists to; that the architecture of the houses was remarkable and unique, more Africa than Europe; that the dialect was impenetrable.

It was a hollow kind of knowledge, I saw, a tourist's precis. It told me nothing.

A language is a world, I said, the unconscious is a language without a grammar. You can never dream their dreams. You can't even feel the same sun on your face. You can never feel even partially at home.

I don't, he said, I never have. Have you?

There was a ticking sound in the garden but everything was still. I knew that

whatever happened now had already happened before, that every moment had its double, that in fact every moment was dual, containing both directions, both positive and negative, yes and no, that everything had both happened and not happened. It was true I had never been at home, but I didn't want him to know know, him of all people. I wanted him to feel homeless. I wanted him to believe that we all had anchors and he was the restless one, drifting through our moorings, alone.

Yes or no?

Once there was an island, I said.

I meant we had a home once. We had lost it, but it was there in memory.

But he shrugged. You imagined that, he said, you were an exile, we all were, except maybe Eileen.

You never wrote that book about my mother? The one you were working on.

He looked at me for what seemed like a long time. Then he looked away and looked back again. There was something fierce in the second look.

It was you, he said.

Yes.

I thought it was Heather. I thought she was jealous of Eileen.

I thought you would.

Now he was looking down at his lap.

It would have been my best book. My only honest book.

He looked at me again and this time there was an appeal in it. I said nothing.

He said, I thought she was lying. She blamed Jeannie. It was the beginning of the end. I couldn't bear her lying to me. I fell out of love with her because of that book.

Because she destroyed it.

I nodded. I said she wouldn't have lasted anyway, that she represented apostasy, abandoning everything he stood for, hardship and self-sufficiency and the peasant economy, she stood for expensive perfume and consumerism.

But he was still thinking about his book.

What did you do with it?

I put it in a bin at Waterloo.

Did you read it?

No.

God.

I knew what it was about, I said.

His lips and the tip of his nose were white. His breathing was fast. He was sitting very straight.

I poured a cup of coffee. I like to pour the coffee and the milk at the same time. I learned to do it that way in Paris. I bit into the ox tongue. It was filled with lemon, bitter and sweet at the same time. He watched me.

You're a vicious little bitch, he said. A sinister little bitch. Jesus Christ. Just think for one minute what you did.

Oh, I said, it could have been worse.

Fuck.

You have to let it go, I said. Think of the present, concentrate on what's going on around you. There's no going back.

I smiled. It was a true smile. I was happy. Sometimes life presents us with a manifest symmetry. It's the solution of an equation. The perfect synchrony of truth and beauty. As the poet said.

On a wire that ran from a pole to the roof of the house I saw a sparrow with its wings slightly open. Sometimes it was so hot here that the sparrows died and, hot as it was, the day was long before us yet. I always expected to encounter him in a garden. When I was a child I wanted him to find me among the apple trees in spring. How long did we sit there at his table?

All my childhood he was the one who put us in words. He had the copyright of our most private thoughts. Because he owned our utterance we performed it. In the book that never was he said my mother was a careless woman who brought her children up like animals. He wrote that she was a big-boned handsome woman, generous in everything, gentle in nothing; copious, unpredictable, like a happening in nature, a storm or a flood or a downpour. It might have been a form of praise unknown to me. She took men when she needed them.

He wrote that a parent never forgives herself for the death of a child. There was a long passage about blamelessness that was really about blame. He forgave her but she was lost forever in the interstices of guilt and desire. His forgiveness could not pass to her. And there was no return. Yet I saw that he yearned most of all to be Richard Wood, gliding in on a breeze, anchoring in the lucid water, taking the woman, making the poems. He wanted more than anything to be an itinerant maker, like an old man we used to see beating old copper cylinders into pots and polishing them, who came and went in the country on some calendar of his own imagining. My father was continually handling beautiful things, exquisite phrases and ideas, but they were borrowed. He poisoned them and they passed from hand to hand, elegant but dangerous devices. Slogans not poems. When my father wanted to talk about remorse it was unbearable, in the book that never was, it was an obscenity, a human organ grafted to a stone, a pieta stitched with a bleeding breast. Sitting in the train in the burning waterless landscape of 1976, between Guildford and Woking, I

saw that he had cut me off from her, that I could never be in her thoughts again, that he had waved his witch's wand and made her an émigré in the islands. He had reduced her voice to a babble.

His children? We only wore clothes when we were told to. We fought like spitting cats. We killed birds and fish. In the night-time echoing island we prowled and pried and discovered everything. We inherited her casual sexuality. I was beyond help, but younger Jeannie could be saved. Our mother's madness lay before us. He might have said, Intemperance is naturally punished with diseases. He might have said, What good were eyes to me?

Yes, I read his book. It was fiction. I rejected that past. It was not true for me. It was a tissue of signs. It was, as always, himself. His tortured ego. In a moment, in the sunlight from the high glass roof, in beautiful Waterloo Station, I held his life to be burgled. It was mine to dispose of. All I remember is joy. The bin was full. I remember there was the bottom half of a dried up ham sandwich. The yellow of the mustard.

I said, The simple truth is we all hate you.

He smiled. It surprised me. He wore a round-necked t-shirt. When he smiled the scalene muscles hung like ropes from his cheek to his chest. His skin was mottled and cracked. There were purple shadows under his eyes. Only his lips seemed to have become fuller and richer and more sensual with age. They were red now, like a girl's. Only the tip of his nose had not regained its colour.

No, he said, you know that's not true. It's what you felt at the time, but you of all people know that the opposite is the case.

I shook my head.

We got over all that.

No, he said again. I gave you a childhood like no other. Eileen and I, we created that island, a colony of peace and strength in a world that seemed about to annihilate itself. You never feared the bomb, like other children. You never learned the commodity fetish from television. You were free spirits. You are what you are because of that. It was a gift that few children of your generation were given.

Hippies, I said. What did you give us? Look at us, we're the unhappiest family in the world.

He smiled again. You say that, but you know it's not true.

It's true if I say it's true.

He shook his head. He moved the cup on the table. He looked down and up again.

None of us is a whole person, I said, our hearts are broken.

Child, he said, you have no idea.

I saw that his hand was shaking. He moved the cup again and I saw the slightest tremor. He was controlling it as best he could. I might have pitied him. At his age pity is the same as love. Or it's enough. But I wanted to kill him.

Why did you never have children with Heather?

He looked away.

I already had two.

Three, I said.

He was silent for a time. Then he looked at me. His eyes were pinched and dry. What was he afraid of? Now, I thought, there will be more lies.

One died, he said.

I walked the island lanes, thinking it through, thinking about him. It meant I didn't have to watch him sulk. I climbed through streets that turned into private roads that forced me to retrace my steps and start again; that wound in and out and then stopped unpredictably; that ended in gates, in doorways, in views over the sea or over the edge. The houses crowded down on each other, built across the path, overhanging me. There were external staircases that climbed sharply or doubled back on each other like tricks of perspective; low roofs that I could look down on from the road, rounded half-barrels; doors that seemed let into cliffs, doors set at an angle to the street or the path; square, round or trapezoid windows; elaborate shutters, door-knockers, gates. Nothing was straight. Nothing was simple. It was a demented geometry. It was as though the inhabitants had built outwards from some conception of the interior, of the placing of furniture, of opportunities provided by shade or by an irregularity in time or space, as though the world did not exist except as a shell for the inside. There were stagnant pools, a smell of stagnant water and detergent. A smell of other people's food. If I went in I would emerge in someone else's life. I only needed the courage. But when I looked down the narrow corridors I saw old women and men impassive as troglodytes. They belonged to an underworld that stubbornly remained attached by life or love and through which doors and light and gifts passed forward and back.

I walked into evening.

In the lengthening shadows everyone was out of doors. People greeted each other as though they had not met in years. It was a parable of concord. So many people lived here on this little heap of black and pumice stone that if they did not meet for a day they considered each other lost. When they embraced it was an affirmation that existence could

be continued invisibly, that one could not imagine everything that might befall a neighbour. Every one of them was part of a web of tensile cousinships, adulteries, parishes, friendships, districts. The relationships stretched backwards to the names on gravestones, forward into putative births and laterally into the remote distance. I thought: This is how the island makes itself the world; complexity is its signature; without it no one could live here; it would become like the empty islands of home, places where life had become too simple. This was the mirror of our island. There was never an undisclosed action, never an empty gesture, no secret.

The island was heavy with sound, every happening had its equivalent in the air. I remember bells, birdsong ending exactly at sunset, talk, calling, conversations carried out over long distances, window to window or across streets, indiscrete conversations in gardens and backyards and kitchens, the sound of cutlery or delft, chatter on the overloaded buses, mobile phones ringing, dogs watching my approach, barking. Mysterious fireworks somewhere along the shore. The sudden cessation of sound after midnight. Cockcrow in the morning in every garden, each choosing to recognise a different dawn according to some archaic system of calculation which is a family secret.

Family secrets are my profession.

Somewhere my father was brooding, waiting. In his island paradise at long last.

Death too. That gentleman was patient. He waited for the next comer in his best suit.

But not for me this time. Fathers do not live forever. We wait our turn, but they go first.

The bus home was the pleasure of bodies, of crowding into an already crowded space, of hanging from a strap and feeling my body pushed this way and that by the contrapuntal sway, the press of people; the pleasure of smiling, the chatter, the music of happening. There was a space beneath my skin that wanted compression, that felt the

absence of another body. In those interstices there were ghostly figures of lovers and children, half-memory half-possibility; there was, at times, a fluttering that terrified me. I was thinking of severance and rupture and letting go. I was thinking of falling and jumping. I was thinking that this was the last time. I was thinking that Bill would arrive with his camera crew and his questions and his false bonhomie. I thought of an insect trapped in a net, a butterfly or a mosquito – the spider's web is five times stronger than steel, weight for weight, the insect no more than an unlikely combination of down and wire.

I felt emptied and filled by this crazy music, this cantata of community, of being together.

I felt I could face anything. Now was the time to act. Now or never.

My father's new wife came. She was a delicate courteous woman. She spoke English in a limited way. She fed me olives and cool wine. She had heard about my trouble. These matters were so difficult. She hoped everything would be for the best. When I said something long and important about marriage she asked to have it translated. My father, I noticed, spoke in two tenses, the present and the recent past. A lazy grammarian. I could have translated as well myself. He did not look at me. Later when he had gone to bed she asked me if I had said something to upset him, he was sad, he was very sad. And angry too. We saw the light come on in their room, we saw him close the shutters in. I said we had disagreed about the past. She shook her pretty head. The past, she said. She made a puffing sound with her lips and a small explosive gesture with her fingers. It meant the past was gone. I saw its plume blowing away through the lemon grove. She made it sound so easy. I loved her for it. But I knew the ash would settle in the shadows. It would be there to mark us when we had forgotten it.

Jeannie came next. My father didn't want to go – he wasn;t feeling well, he said – so I met her from the ferry and drove her to the house. Where's daddy? I don't know Jeannie, he said to collect you. He always meets me. Well not today. Her hair seemed blacker than before. She had my mother's eyes black as jet. In the sunshine she had the simplicity of a statue. She was wearing an Armani dress. She picked it up at an airport, she said, Paris, or maybe Rome. Her toenails were painted lime. They looked like precious stones.

Then came Bill. He was in tropical kit, he said. He wore his white linen suit. The camera crew were staying at the Hotel Riviera and he thought he should stay with them but I knew it was because his researcher was there.

He stayed with us.

He told me in our bedroom that Jeannie looked as mad as a hatter and he wasn't surprised old Geoff walked out, he probably saw his life pass before him when his heart

stopped. He said, Imagine thinking you've died and gone to heaven and then you wake up in Intensive Care with Cruella De Vil holding your hand. He was excited, he said, about the prospect of finally doing something serious. The old man was a talker and the island would make a great setting. Radical finds peace in idyllic island, the vines, the trattoria, the narrow lanes, you know.

He was bald and fattening. In bed he looked like a dead seal. His skin smelled slightly smoked. I told him he would have to stop wearing slimfit shirts but he didn't listen to me. I told him he needed to get out of his car and walk.

Look at you, he said to me, you need to think body-image.

This was how we expressed our hatred. In metaphor. We disgusted each other now. But we still slept together so we fought in parallel lines.

Where was the old man?

I said he was probably in his room.

Don't tell me you upset him, I could do without family issues, for god's sake.

He'll get over it, I said.

Then came Richard Wood. He kissed me and looked at me. You haven't changed at all, he said. He put his arm around my waist as we walked to the car. I carried his laptop bag. It's a memoir, he said. I finally abandoned the pen for prose but I'm a two-fingered typist. I don't type so much as peck. I feel like a blackbird stabbing at worms. Do you think a great poem could be written on a computer, for God's sake? Never. It won't be about me, of course, that'd be a failure of taste. It'll be about all the people in my life. All the people who've meant something to me, my influences, all that.

He was excited he said. He was hoping to have a long chat with my father. He wanted to double check things. He didn't want to write anything that wasn't true. Of

course he knew all about the memoir-is-fiction-debate. He waved his hand dismissively, as if the matter had been settled to his satisfaction in the recent past. He quoted VS Pritchett to the effect that it was all in the art, that you don't get any credit for living. He talked all the way to the house. Jeannie met him at the gate. I had the impression she was waiting just inside. He kissed her too, but he didn't tell her that she hadn't changed. Perhaps he saw too much of her. I saw my father at the window watching us.

Where was Bill?

Jeannie said he left shortly after me. She said he mentioned research.

She couldn't stop herself.

Richard Wood wanted to know all about the film. In the space of four sentences he used the terms *mise en scene*, *montage* and *level of immediacy*. Of course documentary film has a level of immediacy that a book can never have. I had never heard Bill use any of them. I saw that he wanted badly to be in it. Jeannie said Bill was sure to interview him. She suggested that he might read some of his poems. I didn't say that even if he filmed them they would never make it past the first edit. Bill didn't get poetry – or friendship. Richard said he was thirsty and very hot. Jeannie went and got him a glass of water. He sat at the table under the vines and drank it in sips. He looked grey and tired. He was old, I saw. Old age was coming to him as even greater thinness, a stringyness, a revelation of bones and sinews.

It's been a long day, he said. Jeannie brought him to his room. She took charge of him. They went into the house, into the silence. I heard no more.

Bill and I were the strangers, we were the only ones who had never been here before.

The lines of things were becoming clearer to me.

I felt wired into reality, attached by luminous filaments to actual objects. I thought I

might understand the flight paths of birds, the permanence of basalt and its long impenetrable night, the random vectors of a bundle of vine clippings.

From an unpublished memoir by Tom Newman

Richard was my best friend but he was in love with Eileen. How did she feel about him? She pitied him, I think. She often said he was a charming young man, and touchingly, he dedicated several poems to her – to us really. Privately she laughed about them. They were, she said, popular because they were easy, the most ordinary thoughts expressed in ordinary language. They had a predictable pattern – three or four verses of utter banality capped by a well-expressed line or two. Because most of the poem was so banal one felt somehow relieved at the end that there was some point to the boredom. Sometimes they rhymed and this too was a relief. Neither Eileen nor I were much taken by modern poetry, but Eileen was particularly cutting about it. He would leave poems with her for safe keeping and she kept them in a large carpet bag in the wardrobe in our bedroom and one year the mice got in and made a nest among the poems reducing them to shreds. She laughingly suggested we assemble them in random order and pretend nothing had happened. We never told Richard, of course, and when he asked about them we said they had been burned by mistake. I suspected anyway that they were copies. I doubt very much that Richard lost anything. It was not in his genes to be spendthrift. But Eileen was fragile. She was easily persuaded into love and Em and Jeannie were accomplices. Eileen created an entire edifice of deceit in which I was the outsider looking in, the snooper, the peeping tom, my own children united in hiding things from me. And, of course, the effort unbalanced her. Richard was attracted to what he called 'her spirit', but what anyone else would call her instability. She was the tornado in his life, the whirlwind that left nothing the same.

But when Eileen did actually go mad Richard lost interest. He had written poems about madness before, but never in the presence of the actual article. I felt sorry for him, faced, as he was, with the ruin of his muse. He struggled for a while but in the end discretion got the better of him and we lost contact. We didn't meet again until the inquest. Afterwards we had a drink together and our common loss helped us to remake our friendship. It was an ugly, huge pub called The Rat & Parrot, part I later noticed of a chain all over London. The television above our heads was showing a football match but there was no one to watch. There he confessed and we were reconciled and ordered double whiskeies. We were equal in love and loss, brought together by the death of the beloved. A classic redemption, Rat & Parrot style.

After breakfast we all went to swim at a place called Chiaia. Paola didn't come because the water was still too cold, she said. She didn't want us to go. We would catch pneumonia. The mad Irish, she called us. I saw that she was unhappy. We went down a hundred steps into the cool of the morning sea. There were boats at anchor. Richard spotted a yawl. He wanted to swim out to it but he didn't speak Italian. Come on Tom, he said, let's have a look at her.

You go Richard. You'll find a way to communicate. Didn't you have that theory about inarticulacy being so expressive? You got it from Freud I seem to remember. All that about the secret word being everywhere, what it was I can't remember now, but you were always attracted to secrets.

We were five pale corpses against the dark sand. A few locals, lying on sprung beds, waiting for the sun to look over the cliff, watched us with interest. I was first in. Bill followed me out. We swam out beyond the line of buoys that marked the closest the boats could come. We swam out of the shadow and into the sun and suddenly we were warm. When I turned to tread water I saw Jeannie and Richard following. Their strokes matched exactly. They swam out to us.

Listen, I said, the cicadas.

And we listened to the island for a time.

Its brassy clockwork. It might have been time.

Richard had a snorkel and mask. I wanted to see the bottom so he gave it to me. When I bit on the mouthpiece I thought of his mouth. It was warm. I put my head in the water and saw white bellies, legs moving slowly in the dream of the sea. I allowed myself to

float and swam away. There was only sand. Even when I went down to the bottom it was empty, as sterile as glass. When I came back Jeannie and Bill and my father were racing and Richard was waiting for me. He took my hand. The band of the mask was tangled in my hair. He freed it. He floated against me to do it. I remembered his long hands, his long fingers. But his legs were slack. The muscles of his arms hung loose like paps. His skin was whitened out by the water.

There, he said.

His hand was in my hair.

You slapped me once, I said.

I wouldn't do it now.

My father won the race. Bill was last.

You hurt him, Richard said. Why don't you make it up with him?

I turned away and swam out again. Out further than the boats. Out to where I could feel the current of the Tyrrhenian sea sweep around the headland taking me south towards Africa. Out in the deep sea you take a larger view of things. Continents come to mind, rivers of ocean, rivers of wind. I saw the broken lines of the island, the old volcanic ridges. I saw that there was an islet at one end joined to the rest by a bridge. And at the other was a walled village. I remembered my father saying the name – Terramurata. I saw the fire and ash of a million years frozen in time, the island thrust from the earth, the great maw and the smoke and the bubbling stone. I saw Jeannie and Richard towelling each other. Bill was there too, watching.

There were a hundred steps to be climbed. My father was first to the top. Richard was behind me, two steps down. His laboured breathing. I wore my bikini and a fine muslin shirt. I was long and straight and fit still. I could climb faster than my father or anybody

else but he always liked to be first.

In the afternoon the air seemed to settle in my room, a viscous fluid slowly reducing in a hot pan so that the slightest stir left a visible wake. I slept and woke naked and covered in a slime of sweat, sore and slightly panicked, conscious of having passed a troubled hour or two but unable to remember anything other than the feeling of anxiety. In other circumstances I might have called it desire or fear. I took a cool shower. Afterwards the water dried on my skin. The silence of the big hot house. A feeling of fullness, secrecy, intensity, mourning. There were moments, instants really, when I thought someone was about to cry. It might have been me.

I saw that they were friends, father, Jeannie, Richard Wood, and that somehow in the wreck of our times I had drifted out of the way and Jeannie had found a comfortable inhabited place. I was the odd one out.

I heard snatches of conversation. Bill was with the camera crew in the garden setting up for the first interview. Sound, light, colour temperature. The shadow of the olives and the vines and the lemon grove. I heard him say that he was aiming for something biblical, a Caravaggio effect. He had no idea what he was talking about, of course, though it all seemed to be a common language. He could say it and they could make it happen. The terms, properly understood, made the world. The interview would be tomorrow, the morning of his birthday. Bill sometimes talked in terms of restoring my father's reputation, but he was talking about his own.

Richard and Jeannie were somewhere.

The geckos were still as stones. The cicadas called. There was no birdsong in the sun.

Across the way the old woman moved through the shade with her hoe and her can. There was a chair by the lemon tree and the ground looked like dust.

It was time to get rid of Bill.

But not here in this birdcage of a house. Not where Jeannie could see.

A long time ago on the island I saw Jeannie climbing the tower wall. She was holding her arms out like vestigial wings, staring down at the cliff-face and the sea, crazy with fear and daring. Was it before or after Em died? She reached a narrow window with a musket loop underneath and she had to step over it to go on, but instead she panicked. I thought she might jump that instant. The briefest of inclinations, a shiver in the air. I saw she was crying and trembling. But she sat down carefully. She moved slowly using the flat of her hands to lift herself from stone to stone. The moment was past and I became aware that I was disappointed. What would her fall have brought in its wake? My legs were weak. My hands were hot. Even now I can remember the swollen moment when I realised her uncertainty, that she would never step over that window, that in a moment she might disappear. It must have been before Em, because I imagined her falling straight down to the water, her perfect child's body, her fading call like a bird dipping below the cliff edge.

I would never allow Jeannie to see me on the edge. When I think about falling I will be alone.

And then another time she was sick, but I did not experience the same furious joy or disappointment; it was just a long wait, sitting by her bedside with my mother and Em, and Em was sleeping.

They told me the little islet across the bridge was a reserve, but it was possible to get out there. I persuaded Bill to come. He hated walking but I made him think I had something important to say that could only be said far away. It was a reasonable proposition. It was true.

When we got there we saw that the gate in the middle of the bridge was open, the rusted padlock hanging open on a rusted chain. There were huge sloped steps of basalt that looked like they were still in the process of becoming. There were last season's olives underfoot. An early evening wind was blowing somewhere. The trees were moving. Once there had been neat terraces, now the groves were a wild mix of olive, myrtle, fig and scrub oak. I rested my palm on the crusty skin of an olive tree and felt its endurance. It has a heart.

We passed through a ruined gate-tower in a wall that enclosed an inner courtyard. There was no birdsong. No leaf stirred in here, the day vitrified under a slanting sun. There were farm-workers' houses on our left. On our right were outhouses. The doors were gone. There were three huge olive presses, enormous screws with vats underneath, the vats tiled in blue and white, the same tile I saw everywhere still on the island. In the centre of the room was a stone wheel with a long cast-iron axle that could be pushed around by hand. I touched the handle. A scattering of whitened olive-stones in the vat. The walls had once been painted turquoise but the colours of the mould that glazed everything were electric and intense: acid green, jade, sea-green, cobalt-blue, indigo, russet-brown and yellow, the brown blood of wine-dregs in a glass.

We climbed the steps to the ruins of the main house. There was a vestibule with some rotten planks thrown into the corner. The ceiling was a cupola that once had some kind of fresco. The next room had an elaborate marble fireplace, the next an altar. We walked through from empty room to empty room until we came to a covered loggia that

ran as a balcony along the entire length of the far side of the house. Rotting chairs and a sofa with its stuffing ripped out. The sea was a sheer drop down backlit like some precious stone in a glass cabinet, hundreds of feet below. The afternoon was moving on. My eyes were seared as though I had been looking into the wind. But the wind was gone, as quickly as it had come. It may already have stopped before we reached the courtyard.

Bill, I said, it has to stop.

He looked frightened. He said nothing. Faintly on the still air, the bells of the island were ringing. But not for me.

I'm tired.

Nothing is going on, he said.

I laughed. What's the little researcher's name? You're like a happy puppy when you have someone. I knew it the first night of our honeymoon. I knew you'd be like him.

He put his back to the balustrade and folded his arms. You knew I'd be like him. I knew that was why you married me.

What do you know about me? You and your little whores. You know nothing.

More than you think.

What's that supposed to mean? Am I supposed to be impressed?

You and your mother.

What?

He put his finger to his lips. I'm the soul of discretion, he said.

I want a divorce.

And you're welcome to it.

That's it then.

You brought me all the way out here for this? You could have said it anywhere.

You needed the exercise.

He pointed at me. Look at you, he said, you're like a stick insect. You're sick. If you'd seen a doctor years ago we wouldn't be like this now.

Is that what you think? Or are you just saying the first thing that comes into your head?

Your whole family is screwed up. You picked the right profession. You're the worst of them all. All these years I've put up with your nerves and your fucking obsessions and your moods. You're the maddest of them all, Grace, that's what you are. I could have had you certified but none of your doctor friends would do it, would they? I should have tried though. Once or twice. I know all about you.

And so on. It was a brutal affair but I knew what I was doing. We were wrestlers but I was the only one with my feet on the ground. By the end he was the wounded one. There were tears in his eyes. He didn't want a divorce after all. I said, You should think about that when you're screwing the next one. He said, I'll stop, I promise. I said, You've disgusted me for years, if it weren't for the children... He said, Is that your excuse?

Afterwards I walked away back through the ghostly empty house. Back through the olive groves, down the pumice steps to the basalt shore. The sun was setting. Air, ash, stone. The pumice cliff was solidified ash laid down by the volcanoes. At the base of the cliff the basalt underlay was petrified lava. Fire dying. The lights of the island. Fields of fire.

At my father's birthday dinner I sat with the little researcher. She had the body of a child and the eyes of a hungry dog. My father sat at the head of the table with Paola his young wife at his right hand and Jeannie at his left. The dinner was catered by the hotel, he told us. Everything we would eat was local. Even the wine was from the next island where the *biancolella* vines grew, an ancient stock, a wine that had to be enjoyed while young. The people who did the cooking were neighbours, islanders all.

We were to feel virtuous because of all this. Never mind that his royalties alone would have bought half the island. We were to feel we were making a contribution. That this humble repast would make a difference to the world. In his heyday he was good at this. You were excoriated and affirmed at the same time.

We had fried flowers and little fish and mussels marinated in lemon and little parcels of cheese. Then we had a risotto bianco. Then we had chicken.

Anyone who had walked down through the grapes and the lemon trees might have met these fellows, he said. They had lived in this very garden until their death. He took pleasure in the reactions of the camera crew, their protests. Their relish was none the less.

Bottles of young wine went round and round and afterwards there was grappa. People took photographs. It was one of those perfect evenings. They wanted to know where Bill was. There was disappointment that there was nothing in the can for that day. They had set up in the garden. Father had prepared himself by revising some of his early ideas. He wanted to talk again about the intensity of small, how the world needed it, how thinking big meant thinking energy, how rapacious capitalism had done for the world. He wanted to talk about Marx and Adam Smith and about low-energy, high-intensity production. These were emerging ideas. I was surprised that in all this time he had been

thinking and reading.

So where was Bill.

I didn't know. I said he had a habit of sulking, that we had quarrelled, he could be anywhere but most likely he was in a bar or a bed with someone else. Nobody laughed. I saw that I had frightened the little researcher. I saw her drink a full glass of wine in two quick gulps. I said I would like to take the opportunity to tell them that we were to be divorced. I stood up to say it and raised my wine-glass towards my father. I said I was happy about it. My father said congratulations. Paola was shocked. She had to have the whole thing translated before she would believe it. It sounded sweeter and truer in Italian. It sounded like poetry. Then she cried. She was one of those people who believed in marriage despite the evidence. Richard Wood watched me, tilted back in his seat, turning and turning the wineglass stem between two fingers. I was the first to propose a toast for my father's birthday. I wished him long life and happiness in his island paradise. Everyone blithely echoed my words. Irony glistening like broken crystal in the soft night. Then I recited a poem for him, or at least a stanza and a line. It was Sylvia Plath:

So I never could tell where you

Put your foot, your root,

I never could talk to you.

The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.

They didn't do toasts like that in the BBC.

He stared at me. Paola wanted a translation. He put out his hand to her, but it was a gesture of control. She stopped.

I held my glass towards him. Everybody watched one or other of us.

You are a guest at my table, he said. It seemed to be a threat. He pointed at me. Things were unconnected, rash, stuttering like a clockwork gone wrong. First there was what he said then there was the pointing. He stood up too. Paola looked up at him.

I may have been a little drunk. In my small frame even a little alcohol is enough.

Stop it, Jeannie shouted.

Lights camera action, I said. Bill where are you when we need you?

You don't belong here, Jeannie said, can't you see we're all one happy family? You're the odd one out.

Paola stood up too. Now we were all on our feet. Some of us held glass, some did not, according to our place in the ancient pledge.

No more, Paola said, please, basta.

She was a delicate woman. Those ideal forms that Italy makes. Her dark eyebrows were charcoal lines on the face of pity. Her lips full as cherries. Her perfect breasts. Her boy's hips. Everyone at the table was in love with her. When she admonished me I sat down.

Jeannie comforted her. She held her hand. No one translated my poem. Everyone else made a toast. They were drowning me. I allowed them to hold me down. I let the evening go. Darkness flooded in. It flooded the lemons and fireflies appeared. How long had I waited for this night? There would never be another. I felt empty, distracted, ruined. I felt as though I had absolved him against my will.

We went up to the Terramurata, the little researcher and I. I saw that she wanted to go home but I kept her going. We walked past the hotel and continued. I had her by the arm. More than anything I wanted to be with someone. I made small talk. I asked about her education. I knew some of the people in her university. She hoped to move into producing. She had hopes and dreams. She had ideas. She kept a notebook. She had dark red hair, almost chestnut, and a sweet small mouth in perfect proportion.

Not for one moment did I detect in her the mistress' secret triumph. I saw guilt in her, pain, uncertainty. I liked her. She was a child in the universe of other people's rules. Old Bill could be a talker when he wanted to. He could talk art and poetry and ideas. He could be funny too. It's just that he gave up easily.

Cats watched us from every doorway. We walked out to the parapet and looked down at the sea. Tiny fern-skeletons and grey coins of lichen hid in the niches of the wall. The ground was uneven, basalt slabs canted at dangerous angles. Darkness hid in them. And the square itself followed the contours of the underlying mount so that the church seemed to have been deliberately set above the houses, the street spiralling into it.

The Terramurata, the citadel, the island within.

We looked down on the lights in the bedrooms of frightened children, and those of insomniacs and sick-rooms and bakers who are up when everyone is asleep so that the populace can have bread. We could see all the long back of the island. We could see the little islet at the furthest end outlined against the rising moon. I pointed it out. I said I had been out there some hours earlier with Bill and that I had told him it was over. I said he was prone to sulking fits. Look, I said, he didn't even come to my father's party. That's the kind of man he is, a big child with an ungoverned desire to be the world's phallus. That made her laugh. It was a nervous laugh but it was a good sign, a sign of intelligence.

I was kind. I did not say that she had ruined my marriage, not least because it would

not be true. On the contrary I told her that it had all happened a long time ago. I told her about the sex. She too had seen the happy puppy in him. I held her hand. I told it as a story, Once upon a time there was a little girl who lived on an island and she was long and straight and free as a boy. I told her about Richard Wood sailing his white boat. About the storms and the tides and the whales. About my sister Em. About my mother. I told her the law of the father. I was quoting but she didn't notice. She heard it as an absolute truth. We both saw in the end that Bill deserved his punishment. In all such tales the good prosper and are rewarded and the wicked or feckless suffer.

I embraced her by the light of the moon and she asked my forgiveness.

Then we walked down again. By the time we got home everyone was asleep. I could hear my father snoring. The sound filled the house and came out through the open windows and filled the garden. It was his innocence, his carelessness, his nescience. It was a machine grinding the darkness down. It was the law of the universe. It was the death of meaning.

Jeannie stayed on after the party but everyone else left. There was thunder building over the mainland. It moved north from the Sorrentine Peninsula. It crackled over the old mountain. Dry lightning that brought no relief. There was no gaiety at our departure.

Richard came with me.

The boat was crowded. We leaned on the rail and looked at the sea with our different eyes. He told me that the sea meant both liberty and challenge to him. The sea was a woman, an unconquerable beauty full of sudden rages and perfect submission. I suggested that the terms he used were better related to children. Not having any, he said drily, he could hardly concur. I told him that for Freud all dreams of water related to the womb and birth; and narrow places, channels and narrow waters and caves referred to the birth-canal. What Freud called the intra-uterine life, I said, and the sojourn in the mother's womb. I doubt, he said, that the sailor thinks of his mother when he looks out of his porthole. We laughed about that.

Women, he said, have nine times the pleasure that men have. That's something I learned a long time ago. If I could live my life again I would like to live it as a woman. Everything would be more important, everything would be more meaningful. Men are the poverty of the senses.

It sounds like a new poem. Will there be a book called The Poverty Of The Senses?

He was going to America, he said. He was flying but he would like to have gone by liner. He thought that in a ship you had at least some control over your destiny.

His laptop was stolen while he tried to attract the attention of a taxi-driver in the bustle of the Molo Bevorello in Naples. Everyone said it was the worst place for thieves. The coming and going of boats and cars and trams, every kind of waiting. I was on guard over our bags but I could not watch them all at once. He was angry at my carelessness but at least he had a backup, he said. He would only lose what he had written on the island, a

thousand words, no more. And he had insurance. I saw that he was a more careful man than I had known. He was annoyed too that Bill had disappeared and that the film had not been made and that he had not been interviewed. He had a significant contribution to make. He said that Bill was completely irresponsible and I was right to leave him.

Besides, he said, I always thought he wasn't worthy of you.

It was a surprising thing to say.

Oh what I mean, he said, is your intelligence. The man is a cretin, a buffoon. What did you see in him besides safety?

Don't you worry about Bill, I said, when the dust settles he'll pop up again. He's here somewhere lying low with some Italian bitch. If I were you I'd hide in the lemon grove for a few days. Do you think he'll lose the chance of making this film?

He caught me around the waist and held me close.

Come away with me. Come back to our island. I'll make up the bed for you. I'll light the fire and warm the house. I'll be waiting there for the boat to bring you in. I'll take their lines and hand you ashore. I'll feed you on mackerel and salt apples. I'll warm your body and I'll write poems for you and you shall have nine times the pleasure that I have and I won't begrudge you any of it.

I kissed him. I hadn't kissed a man who wanted me in a long time.

I said, If I took my clothes off in your boat now would you fuck me?

Yes, he said.

But what would Jeannie say?

He pushed me away. I saw the sweat gleaming on his forehead. It would have been two o'clock on a summer's day. People were waiting in the shade to make the crossing.

They stayed out of the sun. I understood then that Jeannie was his snare. He was bound to her by invisible wires, as birds soaring or sinking in the distance are tied to the Mozart aria playing on your stereo whether they know it or not.

I've been watching you and Jeannie, I said. And thinking what it must be like on the island now. Is the tower still there or has it fallen into the sea? Do you still have the same boat? I remember how clear the water was then, how we could see the anchor in the sand. Do you sleep in my father's bed?

How did you know, he said, about Jeannie and me?

His grey-blue eyes were the same as my father's, as cold and deceitful as a winter sky.

I said: You're the only person I have ever seen her at ease with. I watched you around the house. She took you to your room the first day and she never came out again. She went in but she didn't come back.

She loves you, he said. She talks about you all the time. It's like an obsession.

She loves me, she loves me not – it's a game we play.

A taxi stopped beside us then and we got in. We told the man about the laptop and he said that Naples was a city of thieves. We were early for the plane and the heat in the terminal was unbearable. As we were waiting to board he told me that his sight was failing, that he was losing definition around the edges. It was age-related macular degeneration, his doctor said, and there was nothing to be done.

Disease is a corporeal metaphor, I said.

Aren't you ashamed, he said.

Of what? There's nothing to be ashamed of.

Of everything, of what you've done to Jeannie and your father.

Jeannie hates me, I said, no matter what she says. She's dangerous, a compulsive liar. Heather once told me she found her sinister.

He shook his head and looked out the taxi window.

And when I got home there was a message on my answering machine from someone at the BBC who wanted Bill. She had been trying his mobile without success, she said. It was a matter of some urgency. I sat down and cried.

Bill didn't come home. I heard he was living with someone in Putney. I heard she worked in a fashion magazine. I didn't care. I told the children and they were not surprised. It is difficult to surprise young people nowadays, whatever goes on afterwards in their heads. They seem so self-contained and resilient. Isabel was wise. She said she would prefer to have two happy parents who lived apart than unhappy ones who lived together. Although it is a conventional thought and one which, no doubt, she frequently reads in whatever magazines they all read. I heard through mutual friends that the documentary was made after all, that it was full of beautiful images of my father. Orange and lemons and the bell of whatever the church was called. It was scheduled for the spring or summer season, I can't remember which. But Bill's next manifestation was a Form D10: the petitioner therefore prays that the said marriage may be dissolved, etc., etc. He cited unreasonable behaviour as the grounds for divorce; it seemed a bizarre choice to me, but my solicitor assured me it would make no difference. Having called the children I went out to dinner to celebrate, but afterwards, coming home on the busy bus, I felt my life had somehow darkened, that a shade had fallen or perhaps a filter that eliminated certain characteristics of the light. For a long time there was something tenebrous even about morning, and nights were bleak. We are to think that the departure of someone who has been part of our psyche, no matter what role they played, must inevitably be felt as loss, and I suppose I was bereft in some way, even if at the conscious level I was happy to be rid of him. Anyway, I survived. The worst night came at the time of the *decree nisi*. I stayed up late working and just before one o'clock I turned the radio on. It was the shipping forecast. They were giving Lundy, Fastnet, Southwesterly 6 to gale 8, occasionally severe gale 9 at first. I don't know why it made me cry. Perhaps I wept for time and its prisoners. I thought of the wind driving over the island and children sheltering in their beds. All that is lost. Life blows through like a hurricane stripping everything from us, leaves from a tree, old washing from a clothesline, illusions, dreams, affections, hope. The slightest error is decisive and the

shipwreck of our days.

And then I heard of my father's death. It was one evening just before meeting a colleague. We were to eat together and this was in London where I worked and where I still lived. I left my flat hardly knowing what I was wearing. It never crossed my mind that I should stay at home. I had on my black leather jacket, I think, and a green skirt. It was ridiculous. I remember the restaurant was in the ridiculously named Lamb's Conduit Street where I had once heckled a meeting of the National Front. My colleague was waiting at his table with a bottle of red wine. He was good at wine. But the table was too close to the door. When I opened it he had to lean away. Something else that was ridiculous. Tragedy is always underpinned by farce.

Frank, I said, my father died.

He was surprised. Frank lectures in logic but he is an ex-priest. Rumours abound, but the truth is he left because he was lonely. There was a woman, of course, but it could have been anyone.

What did you say Grace?

My father died. I read about it in the papers this morning. Death Of Noted Environmentalist.

Your father?

Exactly.

But that's terrible.

For him possibly. He wasn't looking forward to it.

He shook his head. What are you talking about? What are you telling me? Your father is dead. You should be devastated. Your father is dead.

That's an accurate summary of the situation.

Jesus Christ.

I said, I assume it will be an eco-friendly funeral. Cardboard coffin. Tree plantings. All that. Some pathetic pantheist service with meaningless crap about karma.

He was staring at me.

I shrugged.

I didn't get on with him, I said. We had issues.

Issues?

Going back a long way. Unresolved conflicts. I rejected him. I hated him. I cut off all contact. I'm like him of course. There are all sorts of unresolved conflicts. And aggrandised ideals. And identifications. Parental narcissism.

He stared at me and I stopped. In that moment I heard my previous speech replayed. I rejected. I hated. I cut. I'm like him. Then the encryption – unresolved conflicts, aggrandised ideals, identifications, narcissism. I felt sick. For a time I thought I needed to go to the toilet. I wondered where it was. I looked around and realised I had eaten here a hundred times, I should know. Then it passed. I looked down and Frank was holding my hand.

I'm all right, I said, I'm fine.

And the funeral?

It'll be in Ireland, I said. I remember he wanted his ashes scattered on the strand.

He grinned. No tree planting so?

Well, I said, nothing much grows there. It would have to be a thorn.

Good karma, he said, the fairy-tree.

He began to hum a song. Then he sang it, smiling as he sang. All night around the

thorn tree the little people play, and men and women passing turn their heads away. He was a baritone, a strong clear voice. People looked at him. He took both of my hands in his. Bless you, he said, and bless your father, may his crossing be an easy one and may he be greeted on the other shore by those he loved most and lost. May you inherit his best qualities. May his worst be pardoned him.

I have his eyes, I said.

I did not say, You are a priest, forgive me. Even ex-priests can do that. Or bless my fatherless state. Or tell me where he is now that he is no longer simply elsewhere, my absent father. I did not say that my father has always been a hole in the universe, a place where light falls in and never escapes, a place where time and tide meet and destroy each other.

I had lied of course. The first news I had was a text from my sister. It read, Daddy dead. She'd been living there with him since Paola left. I knew he had been ill. The irony of a non-smoking environmentalist with lung-cancer. Secondaries too. He had it all. Two wounded birds sheltering each other. Daddy dead.

After that I went looking for an English newspaper. The Guardian had it. Well known environmentalist Tom Newman dies at Italian home. Former Guardian columnist. Controversial author. Daddy dead. Heart failure the Guardian said. Nothing new there. His heart failed us all years ago. Of heart failure after a long battle against cancer. So he had been spared the horrors of a slow death. If the newspapers may be believed. People would say it was a blessed release. They would think of what might have been if he had lived to die of what was killing him. I looked at the stock photograph. It was a publicity still from the distant past, a moment when, perhaps, he had the potential to save something. A younger man.

My sister texted me the details two days later. Death business done. Cremation complete. Ashes to Ireland. Meet me at the house Monday.

That was five days away.

I once saw an exhibition of drawings of miniature coffins. The artist took his model from a South American people, the Tlingit, who believed that the world is in equal measure present and absent. The coffins and other seemingly useless objects create a temporary field of stability between both states. I think of my father's cardboard coffin as another such object. Like looking up from the deep sea and seeing the water and the sky but also the surface. It can be penetrated, broken. But it must be returned to. There is always the return.

My text reply to my sister: Tx c u.

Then I cried.

I told Frank.

You are not to be afraid, he said. At funerals we weep for our own deaths, t*imor mortis conturbat me*, as the old poem said, but we never die because no man can be present at his own death.

Frank's godly comforting. And after all, every man to his own trade.

He put his arms around my shoulders.

I won't pretend to understand, he said. But I'll listen whenever you have something to say.

I said that now he was really playing the priest. I made him take his arms away. I pushed my chair away. He thought it was disdain, but the truth is he was right about fear. So after that I prepared for the journey. I packed few and useful things. And on Monday morning early I left London, climbing into a grey sky, out of a grey city.

My mother was capable of anything. She wanted freedom according to her own definition. It was a strangely powerless position; perhaps because responsibility makes you strong. Or perhaps I say that with the benefit of hindsight, knowing how she failed in the end, how she found herself with no island to run away to.

Once I saw her kill a hen by wringing its neck. This was in Richard's house I think.

There was a terrible moment of stillness when she had pinned the bird's wings, a moment when it seemed she would reject action, a moment of repudiation. I saw that the bird was paralysed by fear. The eyes brown and black, black at the centre. I was frightened to be so close. This frantic mechanism, this heart and talon and feather construction. It smelled musty and domestic. She clasped the bird to her breast and with her right hand she found the neck and, holding the skull in the cup of her palm, twisting her hand in advance so that the movement would be completely natural, she stretched it out and she killed it. There was some fluttering afterwards but nothing much else. The ghost of a life. My mother did that without a thought.

And I could do it too.

I was late in coming. A series of delays beginning at Heathrow, as if the gods had determined that I would be safer at home. I landed in a drowned countryside. There was an eery stillness over everything; still water in empty fields, leafless trees polished like wet slate. The winter sun shone on valleys of lead. Time and again my path was baffled by water. Lastly I found it difficult to get a boatman to take me across in the dark. There was no one there who remembered me. It was a still, close night, a capstone of cloud settling ever lower on my head. They said there was a bad forecast. They said I should go back to where I came from. This is no night to spend on a deserted island. All the boats are in and double-moored. It was a night for the fireside. And so on. In the end I got over in a small potter. The smell of rotting mackerel was the smell of childhood. The lights of the village stretched out behind us.

I landed at the pier. I paid the man. Lichen was the only light. It was acid-yellow. Coins of it on every stone. There is no such thing as complete darkness, except in a cave in the belly of the earth. I walked the old road until it fell into the sea, then I tramped through the fields. There were no sheep but at times I could smell the wool from fences and briers. My heart. I was hurt by the sameness and difference, the absence and memories. To be here again in such circumstances. Daddy dead. In childhood I used to save things to tell him: I learned how to swim, I saw a dolphin, I learned how to work the snares, I can hold my breath for a minute, I saw the first swallow, the apples are sweeter this year. Things I never told him.

I passed the ruined tower and its empty cottages. Below me I saw the old house. Candle-light.

I stumbled down the hill. The grass and heather and briers and bracken competing to bring me low. It was a wilderness of traps. When I got closer I heard the chiming of blocks and knew that Richard Wood had sailed here in the Iliad for old time's sake; she was

anchored off the strand, and a slight swell was rolling in. Probably the forecast was right. I knew these swells of old. Forerunners of the wind, the advance guard of catastrophe. A thousand miles away the sea would be terrible. It was coming in our direction. People would die tonight in Iceland, Faroes, Hebrides, Rockall, Malin, Shannon, Fastnet, Lundy. Distress signalled in the air. I don't think our family suffered in any special way; parents die, children too, in every family. Time demands it. Every family wounds itself in various and interesting ways, children sunder, parents quarrel, memories linger on the ridiculous and painful, like a clock sticking on certain numbers, hesitating then moving on, the hours turn onwards, we remember, we forget, we live our lives as if nothing happened and then it all happens again – this is how families work.

Through the orchard, the skeletons of the apple trees leaning north-eastwards.

Who would plant apple trees on an island this bare?

It was a woman, of course, some island wife hopeful of sweetness.

It had to be.

I heard the swell rising and falling on the sand and among the rocks. Then I heard voices. There were three.

When you came through the front door you were immediately in the kitchen. This was the biggest room in the house, with the chimney-breast at one end and the stairs to 'the loft' at the other. Long ago someone had installed a Stanley no.8 range in the chimney and when it was hot it heated the entire house, but that first day it clearly hadn't been used in a long time and mice had been nesting in the open oven. They scampered out of our way when we looked in. The timbers that held up the floor above us were solid oak, they looked like ship's timbers, and the floorboards above were oak planks too. There was a long tradition of harvesting shipwrecks along this coast, and an equally long one of searches by Coastguards, Revenue officers and bailiffs trying to recover the plunder for its rightful owners. Most seafaring families here can tell of an ancestor who buried timber or brass or furniture or brandy to hide it from the Coastguard, and who had then forgotten where it was, or who had recovered it heroically under the very noses of the law.

Up the narrow stairs and there were two bedrooms, each with a 'light', a window set into the roof that mainly looked upwards at the sky. We gave the larger one to the children. There was the frame of an iron double bed and Eileen said it would be bad luck to throw it out so we simply moved it into our room. It was heavy cast-iron with brass knobs and where it had stood there were four hollows in the oak. Although the windows were set into the slope of the roof still by standing close to them one could look down to the shore and across the sound at the sandbar where oystercatchers and turnstones, curlews and sandpipers lived their intertidal days. Wading birds featured strongly around us. In winter time the fields filled with lapwing and golden plover. Their cries were our nightsongs.

Although the house was damp and every surface had mould or layers of dust, it didn't take long to clean and the bags of turf and coal we had brought went into the range shovelful by shovelful until the whole house was warm and we were able to boil a kettle and eat some biscuits. We sat there in the dark glow of the fire, the room bare of furniture, and listened to the sound of the sea falling on the rocks. We congratulated ourselves on having found the perfect house on this perfect island for the lowest possible cost. Then we unrolled our sleeping bags and lay down on the earthen floor and were instantly asleep.

In the next week we would scour the auction rooms of the coast. In those days, the 1960s, a new-found prosperity was causing Irish families to throw out their old mahogany and oak and pine furniture and buy in expensive new stuff veneered with Formica for ease of cleaning. Thus we would have a ready supply of what people eventually began to talk of as 'antiques'. To us, on the other hand, they were just the cheapest, strongest, most functional things we could furnish our house with. We would eventually have a deal table and beech chairs, a pine dresser, an oak log-box and coal scuttle with a tin lining, a mahogany arm-chair and rose-wood lady-chair, a bevelled mirror in an art-deco frame, a mahogany sideboard, a brass-bound barome-

ter, a ship's clock in which the bells had been disabled, and so on. We never thought of it as anything other than furniture, but later I would recognise it as a political position. We were rejecting capitalism, the conventions of rising consumerism, the faith in the new, in favour of the products of un-alienated labour. Even though we did not see it in those terms, that is in effect what we were doing. Even now, despite everything that would happen to us, I cannot see it as anything other than a noble cause.

This is your sister Emily, Jeannie said. Then she laughed. Her laughter was a staccato. She was brittle and burning. The American woman took my hand and shook it.

I've read all your books, she said, you know it's a real pleasure to meet you finally.

Who are you, I said.

There was a cardboard box on the table between three candles. I guessed it was my father. Every now and then Jeannie touched it. Lightly, lovingly, proprietorially. They had lit the range. Smell of smoke and dust.

Don't you know about me, the American woman said. I know all about you.

I want to sit down.

Jeannie laughed again.

Richard Wood didn't look at me. He said, Sit down, why don't you?

I used to collect newspaper cuttings about all of you, the American woman said. I have this humongous collection. Jeannie and you and Daddy. Like maybe nine scrapbooks. In my attic. I used to call you my family across the ocean. All my girlfriends knew about you. You were famous in our high school.

She lives in Seattle, Jeannie said. She pointed at the box. Imagine, she said, a second family in America. He used to visit them.

He visited with us every time he came to the States.

Which was several times a year, Jeannie said. She looked at me when she said it. Then she said it again. Several times a year.

He never came near me, I said.

Jeannie said, Richard sailed over, just like in the old days. Isn't he incredible?

The blind sailor, the American woman said. That's just incredible. Everything is

incredible.

I'm not blind, Richard Wood said. I can see around the edges. And I can see remote things quite well. It's just macular degeneration, old age of the eyes.

He's not blind, Jeannie said.

I sat down. Jeannie sat down. The American woman sat down facing me.

I'm Emily, she said. I'm your half sister.

How old are you?

She was fifteen years younger than me. I worked on that a little. She was born after Em died.

She was the garrulous kind. She told me her mother met my father at a seminar. On biodiversity. Her mother was a huge fan of his work. She was practising self-sufficiency. She was totally into the environment. The American woman still had the paper my father delivered. It was in her attic. She had a regular archive up there. She just kept everything, she never threw anything away. One day she would give it to some big library. She guessed the universities would be interested. It'll be the Rueff Bequest. Rueff was my maiden name. My mother's name. I changed back after my divorce.

Who were you called after?

She was named for her grandmother. Oh gosh no, she knew the story of our little sister. Everyone knew that. Her mother would never trespass on the feelings of the first family.

I liked that idea of trespass.

No, it was her mother's idea. Did you think I was called after your poor dead sister? She hoped she hadn't upset me. She was just so thrilled, it was really just incredible. She

couldn't believe she was here in this famous house, even though it was a sad time, of course, but it was a happy time in a way too, all of us getting together like a family reunion.

What happened to your mother?

Nothing. She works for the Parks Service. In the Olympic Peninsula. She manages native plants.

Land of the silver birch, Richard said.

Jeannie said, Emily's a psych graduate, aren't you Emily. Just like you, Grace. She reached over and squeezed the American woman's arm. You're a psych graduate too, aren't you honey? It's a family failing.

University of Washington and proud of it, the American woman said.

Jeannie laughed. Just what we needed.

Can you stop laughing, I said.

I'm not laughing, Jeannie said.

Richard Wood said she was just nervous.

I told him there was a bad forecast. That the fishing boats were all at home and double-moored, that it was a night for the fireside. We shouldn't be out here on this crazy bloody journey, on this island. Anything could happen. There's your Iliad. If it's as bad as they say...

Let it come down, he said. I want her to die.

Well it's nice and warm in here, the American woman said. Everyone looked at her. The house smelled of mould and damp. There were black patches on fabric surfaces. Nature colonising from the inside out. I was a child here once. Everything looked smaller and less intense.

I can't believe it, the American woman said. A week ago I was at home minding my own business, then there's this letter. I'm thinking, A letter from Italy? From Daddy's lawyer?

Daddy, Jeannie said.

I just sat down and cried. I was just doing stuff. I never figured I'd wind up here on the island at the edge of the world.

Isn't that a quotation, Richard Wood said. I always know when people are quoting because they put on a different voice. It's the vocal equivalent of parenthesis.

That's wonderful, the American woman said. I'm going to put that in my journal.

It was his first book about this place. *The Island On The Edge Of The World.* My father liked to describe it as the edge of the world, but really it was only the edge of his. For us it was the centre. The publishers fought tooth and nail to get the title shortened. In the end it took up most of the cover.

I saw Jeannie looking at the cardboard box.

I'd forgotten that book, Richard Wood said.

Well, I said, when do we dump the ashes?

You really did hate him, didn't you, Richard Wood said. I didn't. I loved him. He was my best friend.

Well don't get sentimental, Jeannie said.

Are we waiting until daylight or could we throw him out in the dark?

Oh my god, the American Emily said, it's like a play.

Jeannie said, You even look like our Em. She had your colour hair. And your sallow complexion. Look at her, she has Em's eyes even.

I don't remember Em's eyes, I said.

I do, Jeannie said. They were almost as black as mine. Everyone in our family has those eyes except you, Grace. They were always watching people. She was a nosy parker. But they were afraid too.

She fell off a cliff, I said to the American Emily, or off the tower. She hurt herself falling but really she drowned. You should watch your step. We don't want history repeating itself.

Jeannie said, That's funny, history repeating itself.

Her nails were broken, she said to Emily, as if she tried to hold onto the cliff. Her little nose was broken too. Several ribs. A foot. Oh it was a terrible fall.

You know I do believe in the spirit world, Emily said.

I'm not surprised, Richard Wood said.

But Emily wanted to know why did we all hurt each other like this?

I knew then that she would never belong. It was a relief.

I said, It's a family custom and it's customary because it's a custom.

The wind began suddenly. The old house always felt it first. It sucked air through gaps and cracks. When it came through an upstairs window doors moved elsewhere in the house. Everything fitted badly. There was always more air than we needed, and less silence, less privacy, less warmth, more in the old house than we could count. The range backed and filled. Suddenly there was smoke in our eyes, the taste of it. Old dry driftwood burning, salt burning, something like seaweed, the smell of a burning ocean. Then we could hear the sea. Already the swell had turned into a wave.

Jeannie was at the window looking out at the reflection of the inside, as though she could see through it. Richard whispered to me that she was under a lot of stress. He wanted me to be nice to her. I said it was the other way round. Then a wall of rain fell on the house. We heard it huge on the roof and against the glass. It stunned us all. Jeannie recoiled from the glass. We listened in the candle-light. It spat in the range. Water bubbled under the door. How long did it last? A noise so engrossed. It devoured our silence. I saw that Jeannie couldn't stop moving. Some part of her. Her feet tapping. Her right hand scratching her left hand. Nodding. Shaking her head. Blinking. Licking her lips. She was as restless as a wren. She was beautiful once, the only beauty in the family. But something had eaten it out and left a collection of features that didn't work. Lines falling. Circles. Ovals. She had fine breasts once, beautiful breasts, whereas I could have been a boy. She had every man she wanted.

When the rain was gone Richard said, That was a bad one.

I said, When I left London it was just a dull day. You always think you're flying to someplace where everything is better. I expected to land in sunshine.

We knew about the forecast all right, Jeannie said.

We should have booked into a hotel and waited until it blew over.

There's no hotel.

Gosh no, Emily said, this is perfect.

Gosh no, Jeannie said, this is perfect.

The American woman laughed. Jeannie laughed. It's perfect, she said.

The rain began again.

You know, Jeannie said, I had a lot of trouble with the doctor. He was supposed to certify the death. He didn't want to do it. I had to pay a lot of money otherwise there

would have been a delay. You have no idea how the Italians can delay things. There's a *permesso* for everything. Twenty offices to give the word.

What kind of trouble Jeannie?

He didn't believe the heart-attack theory.

The heart attack theory?

Richard said, Be careful Jeannie?

Jeannie picked up the cardboard box and cradled it in her arms.

I defunti they call them, the dead, she said. They have a feast-day for them. I think that's a good custom. They have picnics in graveyards. They do love their food. Ash and bone fragments, that's what we have here. The crematorium makes every effort to collect all the ash but it is not possible to guarantee it. He was everything to me. You never understood that. He was wasting away. The cancer was eating him out. You could see his bones under his skin. The heart attack was a blessing. I nursed him all that time. All that time.

She pointed at me. Then she pointed at the American woman.

And you tried to come between us.

Hey, Emily said, count me out. I wasn't there.

You know what happens, Jeannie said, we find substitutes. Isn't that what your beloved Frenchman was always saying? What's-his-name? I remember when you were writing your thesis on him. It was all about fathers. It was really about how you couldn't love him. Do you love someone, Grace? And father said you stole his book. He said you were a vicious little bitch. You wrote about finding father substitutes. It's not much of a theory is it? A dirty little secret. You didn't exactly save the world. You couldn't even save mother.

That's enough Jeannie, Richard said.

I killed him, she said. I broke his heart. But at least I loved him enough to do it. Look now.

She tried to open the box.

Don't Jeannie, I said.

Richard reached out and caught her wrists. No. Let him be. He's at peace. Don't call him back.

I saw that Richard was crying.

Emily tried to take the box from her hands.

Get away from him, Jeannie shouted. Don't you touch him. Who are you?

He's my father too, Emily said.

So you say, Jeannie said. You could be anyone.

Richard put his arms around her. He drew her away from the table. It's all right, it's OK.

Jeannie, I said, take your fucking tablets.

I have a kedge out, Richard said. We were standing in the deep doorway, sheltering, looking towards the sound. I couldn't see it but I could feel the chain running through my hands. I could feel the marks running out. I let everything go. A hundred and fifty feet of chain. The more chain the better the holding.

What could he see?

There was a tunnel of darkness at the centre but he could see things around the edges. If he looked sideways. It meant concentrating on the periphery. It was a different way of seeing. He told me that there were hallucinations. They came with the disease, a kind of compensation. You can't see the real world but the imaginary is more intense and useless than ever before. He mainly saw colours but he was told he would see people too in due course. An old man told him that. The old man called them his visions. He saw people, even dead relatives, and sometimes whole scenes involving people in nineteenth century dress. It's something to look forward to, I suppose. But I think of them as signals, like a bad morse sender, the letters garbled, the brain working to shape them. It's like the world in the beginning, or how a poem begins, he said. We are capable of incredible synthesis. Nothing escapes our organising.

How did you navigate?

Here? I could come here blindfold. The old Iliad could come here on her own. But actually, I can see distance still. It's the last thing to go I think. I take her far out into the offing, I stay away from the shore, I keep open water under my lee as far as possible. Out there it's just you and the weather. No complications. But I wouldn't like to be out tonight. I put out a kedge anchor as well as the bower but if it's as bad as they say nothing will hold her.

You don't sound worried.

I'm not. I thought about sailing out about twenty miles and opening the seacocks.

But then I would drown too, and I'm not ready for that. If it blows southwesterly she'll drag out into the sound. Then she'll fetch up on the bank out there and she'll be pounded to death. I'd like to see that.

I thought you loved that boat?

Exactly because I love her.

Is this going to become another poem?

No more poems.

I've been writing something, I said.

Oh yes?

A sort of a memoir.

I tried that once, Grace, remember? It's a trap. A waste of spirit. You can't tell lies and you can't tell the truth. And the public expects scandal and revelation. Best keep your mouth shut and say nothing.

The truth speaks, as someone said. It's not so easy is it?

Oh the truth speaks all right, but not necessarily out of our mouths.

They were making tea inside. The kettle blackening on the range. Frank had our sandwiches. He was offering them around like communion. I heard the American girl say, I think I'm good. Which meant she didn't want to eat them. I heard her say, Actually he was a little nuts from the beginning, but hey, what does a twenty something think about that, not much, I went right ahead and married him anyway, in one year he ran through all our savings, I got to thinking about divorce pretty early on.

Jeannie said, Close the door, it'll put the fire out.

We pulled it closed behind us.

He put his arm around me and folded me against his side. Enclosed in his arms I felt, for the first time, how small I was, how thin, how insignificant. I liked it.

You know, Grace, jealousy will eat you up.

I am not jealous. I was never jealous.

I think the storm is getting to her. And the tension. She's been on edge since she found him, of course. And you're not helping.

She goes too far. She's always pushed things to the edge and beyond.

He chuckled. I thought she was going to throttle you.

She never touches me.

Yes, he said, that's true. He sounded surprised.

What do you think of little sister Emily the American?

She's an idiot, of course. And a garrulous one.

I don't think my father was ever a Daddy – for anyone. It's ironic when you come to think of it. He used to go on about the need to limit human reproduction for the sake of the planet. Who'd have expected him to have unprotected sex with someone who works with native plants?

He was very charismatic.

I laughed. Is that what you call it?

It's what all the newspapers said.

I can't believe he was someone else's father. He couldn't manage it for us.

I moved away from him. He looked uncertain. Suddenly I could imagine him with a white stick, with dark glasses. At some future stage waiting patiently at a traffic light for

someone to cross over with.

We used to watch for your sail, I said. You were always welcome.

He laughed. The vagabond comes when he's least wanted. You know the island was Eileen's idea not his. She wanted to escape – it was hippy thing we all had, but she was a real radical. He was a convert at best. I wanted her to leave him. You know that Grace. You could all have come away with me, one big family at Tiraneering. It almost happened too. Then Em died and everything came apart.

You tried to kiss me on the boat, I said. You wanted to get into my pants.

In that moment I wanted to hurt him. Why was I so angry?

No, it wasn't like that at all.

But you remember, don't you.

Oh yes, I remember it. You were a shameless hussy. You you thought it would make you powerful. But I never told your mother. I don't know what she'd have done.

You tried to fuck me.

No, I tried to dress you. You were a child.

I found that I was shaking. I was calm enough in some place so that I could observe the distress of my body, its preposterous fleshy shame. A body like, a symptom, no more.

You could have had me, I said.

Let me tell you Grace, he said, between memory and invention there's hardly the thickness of a blade of grass.

You're an old blind goat Richard.

I wasn't blind once.

I went down to the sea, bright with phosphor at the edge. It is pointless to be angry at the past. The waves curled white and green. Richard didn't follow. The wind was impossible already. I found myself leaning into it. I took my shoes and socks off. Water rushed in and out, sweeping the ground from under me. It was drawing me on a long rope. It's windlass was far away. The submarine world. My mother standing here. Her old kaftan, her long hair, her jet-dark eyes. To watch and to wait here on this western shore with only the broad Atlantic before her. Her feet in this sand. Her husband a thousand miles away far over the sea.

It was my mother I wanted to bury. Not him.

Her broken restless unhappiness was rooted here, her heart, her unsure mind, her brief hopeful impulses belonged on this broken shore.

They could throw my father's ashes on the fire again.

We tend to think of the mind as a simulation of the body. We touch something, someone, and the finger in the brain registers the sensory perception. If we break the link between the finger and the imagined finger, interrupt the process at any point, the results are unpredictable. Disease, despair, self-mutilation. Equally there are the affections. There is the imagined object and the process by which the mind models it. We have certain expectations of people that are as firmly wired as touch and pain. We know them because we invented them. They have their exact simulacrum in our heads. So every encounter is a remembering. My professional life was built on this premise.

Even above the wind and the sea I heard the screaming. Like gulls. I felt it first, then I heard it.

But there were no gulls on the coast that night. When the glass falls the gulls go away. They would be sheltering on some boggy ground to the east or north where the sea could not penetrate. Then memory. My mother. The child is dead. Never so terrible a night. Before my father came there was only Jeannie and me. Richard came early the next morning. But until then.

We were cold. None of us knew if the roof would stay on, or if the windows or doors would keep it out, or if the sea would rise and drown us. Richard had a bottle of whiskey. We drank it in china teacups. I watched him. I was ashamed. After all these years I still felt his hand on my sun-dried skin, the taste of salt, I wanted to be that child though I never could be again. I could have cried but I didn't, even though I felt at that moment the press of age and time and loss and possibility.

He said these storms were never as bad as people predicted. These old houses were built to withstand everything. He told us the story of the Big Wind, a terrible hurricane of 1839. It killed three hundred people. I thought he might have been talking about what happened to us against the wall in the wind, the poet in him, wanting to tell the metaphor, to make a narrative of the inexplicable. He was telling me that this night the wind would sweep all before it.

Jeannie was angry about it.

Don't be afraid Jeannie, I said. I put my hand on her arm. This old house has seen worse nights than this. The wind will blow away in an hour or two.

She looked at Richard, then she looked away.

Richard laughed. Jeannie's not afraid, are you Jeannie?

Don't be afraid Jeannie, I said again.

So Richard recited his poem about the night of the Big Wind and it was all about cottiers and labourers and nothing at all about his ancestors secure in their manors keeping their spirits up with port wine and a warm fire. It was a short poem and Richard looked like someone issuing a warning. His head thrown back. His face made those shapes the blind make. Already he was taking the part.

The noise around us was incredible, a physical thing, an animal, an intruder. It was compound of the sea crashing against the island and the wind screaming through every opening and rumbling in the chimney. The house felt like an old tired boat pounding into a head sea. We made polite conversation over all, hoping thereby to keep our fears at bay. Richard's eyes, the lamentable state of poetry. We snuffed the candles to save them and kept the fire bright with driftwood and wind-fall branches from the apple trees. The American woman had been dozing. Something woke her. Jet-lag was getting to her, she said. She felt like she was living in a parallel universe. She refused whiskey. She had a bottle of water that was almost empty.

So what are you writing about now, she asked me. What's your next book about?

Castration, I said.

Richard thought that was funny.

Nobody knows how men work, I thought. What can we do but despise them?

Like actual castration or castration in the psychological sense?

Both

Oh my gosh.

I told them about my study of the subject so far. Then because it was a night for metaphor I told them about the the afterlife of Peter Abelard, my first chapter, in a monastery called the Paraclete, offering his severed sex as a sacrifice for pride. The rumours that Heloïse, his lover, was a whore. About chapter two: the castrati who sang for the pope, the tongues of angels, their balls cut off in Norcia where they specialised first in castration and later in pig-killing, where the best ham in Italy is made now. How the angels were neither male nor female, perfect untouched forms, untroubled by sexuality. The book would be called *A Severed Sex*.

The American woman thought it was all terrible. She could see why people called the pope the whore of Babylon. Richard said he would like to have heard those heavenly voices. Surely a little sacrifice on the part of a few teenagers was worth it? What's a few balls when it comes to the tongues of angels? He looked at me even though he couldn't see me.

Emily said, I don't believe you're actually saying this.

So what do you do Emily, Jeannie said. You're a psychologist?

Well, I was but I changed direction a few years back. I'm more into the psychic side. Like psychic healing?

Faith healing?

No, no, it's more scientific? It's me teaching you how to draw on the wellness within. Chinese medicine has been doing this for thousands of years. And before drugs came along we did it too.

Remarkably unsuccessfully, Richard said. I seem to remember a lot of people dying in the old days of things we can cure now.

So are you psychic?

You know, yes I am. I use intuition to help people toward optimal wellness.

I knew it, Richard said, I knew you were psychic the minute I met you.

You did?

You have an aura or something. You give off tremendous power.

You sensed my chakra. You could be a shaman. You could really help people.

I went up to our old room and stood at the end of the bed under the roof-window, but all I could see was the dark. Dark was the colour of the wind, the noise of it.

Everything smelled damp and sour. Empty houses die. At least there were no rats on the island. I could hear a drip somewhere. Water whispering into something soft and wet.

When I came back they were laughing. Richard had his head thrown back. His laughter was almost at the same pitch as the storm. With his head thrown back and his mouth open and his bright blind eyes.

I think there's a leak in my old room. On the bed.

I wonder what's happening to the boat, Richard said.

I need to use the bathroom, the American woman said.

There's no bathroom, I said, you'll need to go outside. Or there's a bucket you could use.

There's no bathroom?

This is an island. The water comes from a well.

Did you go earlier, Richard asked.

I didn't, she said, I held on. I need to go now. I really need to go.

Well don't go outside. Use the bucket. We'll look away.

I said, Take the bucket up to the bedroom.

Will you come with me?

I think you'll be safe on your own.

Jesus, Richard said, the sea is coming. He had been down to look at the boat again but he couldn't reach the strand. He couldn't see it. I wasn't there to look for him. He saw that the waves were breaking well beyond the tide-line and he found himself walking in water. Then a wave came into the field and surrounded him. The clouds were breaking and there was moonlight from time to time. He said the sea looked like hell. The boat was certainly gone.

How do you know it looks like hell, you're blind?

So we all went down except Jeannie. She was asleep by the range. I saw the white ghost of the boat still at anchor. We saw the sea in the field. It was exhilarating. When the moon came out I saw that all our faces were shining. I kissed Richard.

The anchor is holding.

Are you sure? Jesus, in this! Good old Iliad.

I said you could hold the world with that anchor. Many a time I had seen it go down into the sand like a plough.

Although the sea-level was rising the wind seemed to be falling off. Richard thought we were over the worst of it. The sea came up, he said, because the weight of the atmosphere was what kept it down, and in a storm the atmospheric pressure fell fast and deep. If it fell far enough it might drown the island. There were clear patches overhead. There was a moon somewhere. It silvered the edges and in the eastern sky there was the slightest paling so dawn could not be far away. We had weathered the night. It was colder than before. I walked back between Richard and Emily. We were excited. In that moment I felt generous. I wanted to say something to put her at ease. I wanted to say, I think, that I forgave her. As if that made any sense. Some atavistic impulse to make her welcome.

And when we got to the house Jeannie was gone. I went upstairs to check and she wasn't in her bed. Or anywhere else in the house.

We waited for daylight or twilight anyway, an hour, no more and then we searched. Two of the apple trees had come down. There was seaweed in the branches. Blisters of salt spume. The ditches were littered with things from the water. The sea boiled over the rocks consuming and retiring, consuming and retiring, bright green and white and iron-grey. The surface, as far as the grey uncertain horizon, was fretted with spume, broken and chaotic.

My father's ashes were gone too. Richard and Emily came to the conclusion that she had gone out to scatter them and been caught by a freak wave.

But I found her at the furthest end of the island, the strand under the beacon, the place where I had gone into the water to swim with the whales. On this island it is always Grace who finds things.

She was sitting with her back to the eroded ground, faced into the worst of the wind, wet through and freezing. We found the casket washed up onto the grass. The ashes were gone and so was the lid and the cardboard box it came in. The casket was cheap plastic. I looked in. There was water and a piece of bladder-wrack in there and maybe some sand. I emptied it just in case. Then I filled the casket with stones and threw it as far out as I could against the wind.

She said, I emptied him into the wind. He blew back in my face and my clothes.

She laughed.

I think I swallowed, she said, oh god.

It was an accident, wasn't it Grace? I can't remember things. You know. You remember.

No Jeannie, I said, it wasn't an accident.

No, she said.

You pushed her. You remember that. She was standing on the edge and you pushed

her over. You were just a child. These things happen. Children don't know about consequences.

No.

Yes. That's what happened. I remember it exactly. You remember it too, Jeannie, even though you say you don't. All your life you've remembered it. It's why you are as you are. Why we are like this.

We were children. I was a child. Children get mixed up.

But still... It was you. I've never told anyone.

She stood up. Her coat was wet and caked with sand or ash. I saw what I not seen before, that there was grey in her hair, one side of it almost completely grey.

Stupid bitch, she said, you're not his.

I could make nothing of that. I waited for more. I was trying to assemble the parts, to make sense of it.

You're Richard's. Richard doesn't know.

What are you talking about?

She had a letter in her handbag. Mother. It was always there. Maybe she meant to post it sometime or maybe she thought she might get knocked down. Walking around London full of Valium can be dangerous. Grace Newman and your address, I forget now. Dear Grace, I've got something very important to tell you but I've never had the courage.

What letter?

She smiled. She actually put her hand on my arm for a moment.

A letter for you Grace. She said Richard was your father. She never told him because, I quote, it would complicate things even more. She wanted you to do that. She was never

any good at accepting responsibility, was she. But father knew, Grace, and he's not leaving you a penny. He told me so. You're the reason he was never home. You're the odd one out. And he couldn't stand her because she kept you.

You're a liar.

He wanted her to have an abortion.

Fear twisted in me like an eel. *I already had two*. He said it that day in Italy. He meant Jeannie and Em. Then he covered it up by saying that one died. Jeannie was telling me the truth for once. It was her revenge for my silence.

I thought of my mother lost in Kingsland High Street bringing home linen towels from the hospital and kebabs from the Mangal Ocakbasi across the street and multi-coloured woollen hats and grapefruit from Ridley Road, everything jumbled in her mind. Forgetfulness was a blessing. She craved it. Look what I bought? Or when she came home with nothing she would say, Here I am with my hands hanging. I'm not myself at all, she would say. Or she might say, She got a lovely death. Someone who died at the hospital.

I went up to the tower but I couldn't go in. Briers and nettles and love and fear combined against me. They look the same at any age. Jeannie's old cabby-house would be there, her stones, her shells, her bells, her broken china and clay pot. From that height I saw Richard leaving, the noise of the chain coming home, the grey jib cracking and filling, the boat slipping away over the bar on the rising tide, a white ghost in the mind's eye bound away across the ocean. I wanted to call him back.

I cried and the wind in the walls said, Lonesome child go away, go home, childhood is a shadow on the floor.

There was the cliff that my sister had fallen down. I went to the exact edge, the pencil line between earth and air. I saw the green sea surging and sucking in the runnels and clefts. Spume and weed and plastic bottles and a dead gull. I saw a crow breaking a mussel on a ledge. He had the shell trapped under his claw. I wanted to fall. But when I tried to fall I failed. I would try again.

Later, at the airport I phoned Frank. I said, You have the keys to my flat, Frank, don't you?

Frank is my key-holder.

Grace? Where are you?

You have them don't you? I don't know what might happen.

What? he said.

Just tell me you know where they are, for Christ's sake.

In my flat in London, on my first night back, the heating chuntering and failing, that dead cold of a house that has been empty in winter, I got a call from an Irish journalist who was, he said, trying to piece together the story of our tragic family. They were his words. It was a formula, like something from the folk memory: the story of our tragic family. He remembered seeing us coming and going when we were children, exotic outsiders, the children of a famous writer. My mother was beautiful. I was moved when he said that. He had grown up on the mainland in sight of the island, he said. They all knew about us in the village. The fishermen and boatmen carried the news. He called us the hippy children. He wanted to interview me. He was working up an article but he thought he might write a biography of my father. I warned him against it. He would only make enemies. Well, he said, I've come this far, I can't go back with my hands hanging.

All families are tragic, I said, life is a play before mourners.

Isn't that the truth, he said.

He wrote an autobiography, I said, or part of one. I had it until recently.

Brilliant, he said, did you donate it to a library?

I put it in a bin at Waterloo.

What?

Look, I said, in the end of the day there was nothing exceptional about us. Nobody knows what goes on behind another's hall door – my mother used to say that – nobody knows how families work or fail.

I told him that I never believed in badness, only different psychological states, and this was because of my training as a psychologist. But now I had come to believe in it. I had brought myself to believe in it, in fact, through my own actions.

He sounded shocked. I don't think he was taking notes.

I couldn't help it then, I never could, I said, after all the silence, the words flowing out of me.

The only thing that held me together was emptiness, I said. A vacuum held my sides together, kept my mouth closed, pumped my blood. I never grew up. I never had breasts. For years I never menstruated. I has half-woman, half child, a hybrid, a monster. I was a poisoned sea, a dry well, a not-child, not-woman, not-wife, not-mother, not-lover. I was a listener. I made no sound. I was the guilty party, the defendant, the condemned. I gave; I had nothing to take. Silence. There was never a word where I was myself. I was nightmare. I was the daughter who tried to fuck her father. This was my professional life. My training. All wasted, pointless.

I stopped suddenly, aware that none of this made any sense. All those nots, that soundlessness, that judgement. I caught myself putting it to one side like a set of notes. Something to come back to later. It came into my head unheralded that I was the sort of person who would miss my own funeral. Someone used to say that. I laughed.

Are you all right, he said. It sounded pathetic. It sounded like normality, a hollow sound from inside a barrel in a house that was on fire.

Who is to blame, I said. Nobody. Not I.

Tell me, I said, what will I say to my father?

You're father is dead, he said.

You're a good man, I said, I can hear that.

Take it easy now. Will I give you a ring back in an hour or two?

I told him that it would not be necessary. That I was going to ring a friend. He thought that was a good idea.

I'm not myself at the minute, I said. That's all.

Take care of yourself, he said. I thought he sounded anxious to go.

Don't trouble about me, I said. I'm not myself at the moment.

I put another sweater on and poured myself a whiskey. I would have to stop repeating things.

I called Frank. The line was bad. It was raining in London. It was raining all over Europe I think. We were drowning.

Are you crying, he said to me.

Frank, I said, I've done a terrible thing.

We're all guilty of terrible things. There is such a thing as forgiveness.

I was a child myself.

Of course.

Frank, I said, can you absolve people? Are you allowed to do that?

I'm an ex-priest, he said. But I'm empowered to do it in extremis. You know, in case of emergency break glass.

Well at least they didn't take away your licence to absolve.

What are you saying? Are you asking me to hear your confession.

I shook my head and then I realised he couldn't see that. No, I said, there will be no confession.

You know, he said, whatever it is, if you just think about it, if you're sorry for it, I can absolve you.

Over the phone?

Even over the phone?

It sounds too easy.

The hard part is feeling sorry.

Oh, I feel sorry all right.

Then, it's all right, there's no more to do, Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti amen.

I hung up. I was finding it hard to breathe.

The phone rang almost immediately. Heartbreak must be like this, I thought, something definite and incomprehensible. A telephone ringing in a madhouse.

Are you all right?

I didn't know what I was doing. I was always a child. I'm ashamed. Forgive me.

Are you alone? You shouldn't be alone tonight.

You know the book I told you about, Frank. The memoir my father was writing? The one I stole? You know why I stole it?

No. You never told me.

Because I wasn't in it.

It was a first draft, you said...

A memoir is supposed to be about memory. Not revenge. How can you have revenge on a child? Anybody's child?

You have to let go, just let it go.

I'm putting the phone down now, Frank.

Don't, please. Don't do anything. I'm going to get a taxi. I'll be there.

I put the phone down.

It rang again.

I had the computer screen open in front of me. I scrolled back to the beginning. I read the first sentences. There were three islands and they were childhood youth and age. I went in search of my father through every one. Even that wasn't really true. From the moment we can speak we invent or misunderstand. All words are lies in one world, truth in another. They have that way of invading memory. What we remember and what we forget are two faces of the same god. What my father remembered for me. I put my name to it. I pressed the print button. When the machine started it's ritual of throat-clearing and shrugging, I went into the bedroom. I drew the curtains. The moon over the city. The rag-tag roofs of east London, its merry gables and hips and saws and skillions and mansards and pavilions. Far below an ambulance was trying to edge between two badly parked cars. It's lights were winding silently. Down the street a red man changed to a green one but no one was there to make the crossing. There were pools on the road. I opened the drawer and ranged my pills under the light. There are counting games. There is a game for every eventuality. We used to count stones. There are enough stones on an island. There is no end to them. The stones are the place.

Appendix

Works by the author

Novels

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