GriffithREVIEW
— SELECTIONS —

Intimate distance

Katerina Cosgrove

New fiction from
Edition 38: The Novella Project

GriffithREVIEW38 SUMMER 2012
GriffithREVIEW is published four times a year by Griffith University in conjunction with Text Publishing. EISSN 1839-2954

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Typesetting	Midland Typesetters
Printing	Ligare Book Printers
Distribution	Penguin Australia

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Details: www.griffithreview.com

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books@textpublishing.com.au www.textpublishing.com.au

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Within Australia: 1 year (4 editions) $111.80 RRP, inc. P&H and GST
Outside Australia: 1 year (4 editions) A$161.80 RRP, inc. P&H
Institutional and bulk rates available on application.

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Queensland Government

This project has received financial assistance from the Queensland Government throught Arts Queensland

Australian Government

Australia Council for the Arts

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its principal arts funding and advisory body.

GriffithREVIEW38

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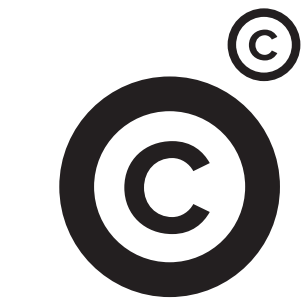
An initiative proudly supported by



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FICTION

Intimate distance

Katerina Cosgrove

INTIMACY

'Keep me,' – I said to him –
'let me be only one – even half – the whole half (whichever it is),
not two, separate and unmingled, for nothing is left to me
but to be the cut – that is, not to be –
only a vertical knife-slash and pain to the core –
nor will even the knife be your own. 'I can't resist,' I said to him –
'keep me.'
Persephone, Yannis Ritsos

1

EFES, WINTER 2012

NO MATTER HOW tired, we always had sex. Zoi's room was fragrant with woodsmoke from the surrounding hills, black with rain, his shutters closed against the svelte noon light of winter. I was exhausted by nightshifts and travel: the terrible, smiling politeness of new love. Still in my sweater, I held him loosely, afraid to show too much need. We made-believe it was late at night with not a glimpse of the sky outside; the teeming streets far below, washed clean of meaning, blurring any distinction between here or there.

I had no clear concept of where we were, tracing my finger in a crooked line on the map as I walked from my hostel to meet him. He wanted to go home to Athens as soon as his contract ended – for the family, if nothing else. He was the primary breadwinner, and they were struggling without him in the new Greece. I didn't fully realise then, refused to understand, how his background defined him. I felt only the slight chill of how much father, mother, brother in the abstract counted for. Tribe, clan, cabal, bathed in a rose glow. It made me stop to examine his motives, and in the very next breath banish the thought like a blasphemy.

He still called the city Ephesus the way his ancestors had, or so he said; ancient Ephesus Paul wrote epistles to, admonishing its inhabitants like naughty children. I always laughed.

'Don't be such a wog.'

'What's that?'

'Aussie slang. You wouldn't understand.'

I tried to soften it, lighten up. 'Why are you so mean? Why does everything have to be perfect?' I didn't know how to answer, except to be vaguely ashamed that making him wrong somehow made me feel more right. I'm a stickler for names, places, dates – I couldn't bear it when he forgot or just didn't care. I have a fierce memory for birthdays, numberplates, phone numbers, can recite long passages of poetry by heart. Rumi, Hafiz, Gibran, Cavafy: all the clichés. And Ritsos, though most people haven't heard of him. I called the city Efes for the ancient part, or Selçuk for the new. It wasn't until

I got here that I felt Turkish at all. In Sydney, I'd automatically sided with my Greek mother, not the Turkish father I could hardly recall. Yet Efes it was. Our conversation would end in laughter or a fight if we were both in that sort of mood. Either way it remained insubstantial, unresolved, ephemeral.

I didn't think Efes was like Greece at all. Oh no, Greece was infinitely better. But then again I'd never been there. I'd never been anywhere. This was the first time I'd been out of Sydney, drawn to this ancient coastline in some inchoate need to find out about my roots, make peace with my father, show myself I could survive on my own. The survival part was exhilarating; I loved counting my millions of Turkish liras, doling out daily rations of lamb kebab and buying a few *kilim* saddlebags to take home in my backpack. It was the other, deeper needs I hadn't yet mastered, or even entertained in any serious way.

And there was the guilt. I'd left my mother behind in a nursing home. Her Alzheimer's had been getting worse in the past two years, and it got to a point where I couldn't look after her anymore. I packed up our home and left, trusting a neighbour to water the miniscule garden. Of course Zoi, with his old notions of loyalty and respect, thought I was heartless. Part of me felt that too. But I was used to being called that, even by my mother in the days when she could still remember my name.

I stopped in this little town south of Istanbul, perhaps because I was afraid of going onwards to Greece, meeting relatives my mother had long since lost contact with, explaining my presence. And the Greece of the past two years was something I'd only understood through news items and editorials: burning buildings, enraged protestors, lootings, torched streets. It felt like a country with nothing to lose – a lot like me.

In Selçuk, where my father was born, there was nothing to see, no relatives to meet. They all left for Australia or Germany in the seventies. I didn't even know where the house was, or if it was still standing. I strolled around lanes and alleyways, wondering if any of the buildings I passed were once his childhood home. I longed for some connection: smiled at shopkeepers, tried out my Turkish phrases, saw my own sharp nose or eyes in another girl's face. I ached for that sense of rightness again, wanted to escape into the fantasy of belonging, being whole. But I was already tired of being alone. It

was only an hour-long boat ride from the Turkish port of Kusadasi to the Greek island of Samos. There I could find my mother's sisters, her many cousins; gravelly voices I'd never met or touched. Or I could stay in Selçuk and manufacture some remnants of my dead father's life. Journey among the shades, be a character in some mythic drama. So I stayed. I waited at the hostel for somebody to travel with, read and re-read my Ritsos poems, dared to hope for a union with the idealised homeland. One day, in a fit of disgust for my dreams of rescue, I traded the book with an Irish backpacker for the latest Dan Brown. He was the only person I'd spoken to all week. The other backpackers – tanned, lean, almost-twenties like myself – came for only a day to make a whirlwind tour of the ancient sites and didn't even spend the night. I envied them, puzzled by their ability to belong anywhere and nowhere.

I found a job opposite the station, working in a café where most of the regulars were tired and disgruntled, wanting to drink thick coffee and smoke *narghile*, not talk to me. They liked looking, though, commenting with their raised eyebrows on the sun-bleached tips of my hair and my exposed arms, at the quick way I set down saucers and cups without a rattle. At first I squirmed at their combined attentions, then used it to my advantage, moving around them with the air of someone in charge. I worked long hours and convinced myself I enjoyed it: the obscurity, the physical exertion, those late nights when the owner put harem music on loud with the tourists all gone.

I met Zoi there. He was a regular, I'd serve him coffee on breaks during his shifts. He came in three times a day, a man who always looked tired, and in demand. It gave him an air of nobility. That and his unshaven face. One day, after puffing on a cheap Turkish cigarette and gulping down a short black, he gave me his mobile number. Wrote it slowly on my workpad: Zoi Caras, in careful English script. A Greek doctor; working for a year in Emergency at Selçuk's City Hospital. Fleeing the unravelling of his hometown: Athens in flames. Now the IMF and big banks had stepped in, and with a return to the drachma looming, life at home had been ill-paid, unpredictable. He was treating his stint in Turkey as a holiday, he said. If he'd wanted to make some real money, he would have gone to London or Berlin. I found it hard to believe him, but he intrigued me. So the next night, after work, I decided to call him. Somehow I wasn't nervous. I stood at the window of the hostel

lounge looking out at the only park in Selçuk. Trees with bare branches, naked, shameless. Dusty earth illuminated green and a loud game of soccer whooping and circling in and out of the light.

Selçuk was a part of town rebuilt now in drab grey stone, honeycomb buildings. Zoi lived in what was once the old Greek quarter of Sirice, a lush hill village not five minutes away. He didn't know what it had been called when the Greeks were still there, and the Turks affected not to remember. The villagers still lived in the manner of their Ottoman ancestors: balconies of timber fretwork, no running water, terracotta roof tiles threatening to topple onto the cobbles below. In the population exchange of the twenties all its Orthodox Greeks were shipped back to the stony mainland and replaced by Muslim Cretans. The problem was the Greeks couldn't speak Greek and the new Turks didn't understand a word of Turkish. Who was Greek and who Turkish? And how could anyone really know?

All that was long ago, and the abandoned villas and desecrated churches didn't hurt me the way they did him. Sirice was the saving grace of my travels, those few narrow streets he and I spent our time in together, perfumed and redolent of old familiar loves, old Levantine joys; a small vivid box of gold and blue in an otherwise unbearable city.

2

ATHENS, SUMMER 2013

WE MAKE LOVE in our last few days together, no matter how late, no matter how tired we are. Or so I tell myself. We don't merely have sex. It's still different with us. It is. He's not like this with everyone. But am I? Lately I've come to watch us more intently in the mirror on the dresser; not with wonder and amazement as before but with a growing unease, shame, a faint conviction that our frenzied movements against each other have become futile and even ridiculous.

I remember Efes: when he was different, loyal. When I was, more to the point. Our love was simple too, like a good landscape, the arid hills of his ancestral village, hiding nothing in the Greek glare, in the white summer

light that flays doubt away. When I look further, most of my doubts aren't to do with him at all. It's all about me; the dithering, lack of emotion, absence of trust. I don't even like using the word trust, smacking as it does of psychobabble and cheap spirituality. I prefer to use the word love, covering a multitude of sins. I love you but I'm leaving. You love me but I can see that you hate me, too. Do you love me? And then, how much? At a loss to quantify it, to understand, to allay my fears, Zoi replies, 'Why do you ask such stupid questions?' Then, relenting, 'Yes, I love you. I love you more than anything.'

Now it's early evening and twisting light rains over trees I don't know the names of. So many things I can't name, although I've been in Athens almost a year now. I'm a child learning to speak for the first time, feeling my way in this foreign, yet achingly familiar, country. The trees fascinate me with their whitewashed trunks and thwarted branches. The way they're pruned does that to them; stops them from growing, following their natural form. Their leaves are dusted with soot.

We're high on a bluff overlooking the city and the sea. This suburb, once sleepy and discreet, has become fashionable. Our café table is wedged among dozens of parked cars and mopeds. Even in post-crisis Athens, after the riots of the past three years, people still like to drink, and dress up, and be seen. The strident music, the screech of Vespas, make it hard to hear what Zoi's saying. He's talking at me, his mouth moves in the ugly way it crumples when he's upset. He brings his hand down flat on the table and my glass jumps and topples, making a dark cherry stain on the tablecoth.

'Won't you try to understand?'

He's talking to me. I turn the glass upside down on my palm.

'You don't understand,' he says again. 'You don't have family, a father, brothers.'

I'm distracted by the waiter. He leans too close and changes the paper tablecloth for a fresh one. Zoi glares, impatient for him to leave us alone.

'You'll never understand.'

He's shaking his head at me.

'You have no sense of these things.'

'What things?'

I'm not really listening anyway. It's all been said before. Instead I worry

about our son. It's the first time I've left him since he was born seven months ago, and only at Zoi's repeated insistence that we needed to talk, alone. Every day he badgers me, 'Look, Pan's so happy with my mother, he'll never even notice you're gone. You're too attached, Mara, too clingy. You're spoiling him, making him a crybaby.'

My breasts ache. I hope the milk I expressed yesterday and this morning – slow, painful drops hitting the side of a sterilised bottle – will be enough. Is Zoi's mother looking after him properly? Of course she is. At least it can't be said she doesn't do her duty. But is she looking after him the way I want? She's probably sitting in the apartment now giving him raw eggs and honey. Propping him up on cushions in front of Greek soap operas while she washes her hair. It's way past his bedtime. I hope he goes to bed without distress, without any screaming. I look down; two spreading circles continue to widen.

'No sense of responsibility, of duty.'

I'm perturbed Zoi has just echoed my thoughts, instead using the Greek word for duty – *kathikon* – weighty, bowed down by time. He sighs, as though despairing, and I can't help but think this is a theatrical sigh.

We should go back now. I want to say it, lean forward, casually suggest it's time to go. But I don't. Zoi seems to be waiting for something, waiting for me to speak, to make some sense of what's happened to us. A wave of pain comes over me as if from very far away.

'Zoi, I'm going in a week. I need to see my mother. And I'm taking Pan.'

I watch for his reaction, wary. He doesn't reply, merely turns his head to look at someone else, a woman crossing the road with a cigarette dangling from her right hand, gold cross blinking from between her breasts. Then I see him smile and am surprised as he stretches his hand all the way across the table, now so clean, so white. He crinkles the smooth paper in his attempt to come near me. I surprise myself too as I put my hand out to him, fingers spread wide, and allow him to rest his palm in mine. We stay like that for a moment, no longer. I become embarrassed and unloose my fingers from his, tenderly, so as not to hurt him. The waiter brings me another drink and I clasp it in both hands, glad of the excuse.

At other tables most people have gone. For a place like Athens this must mean they've gone to a nightclub, to while away the hours until

morning. We've been here only an hour and already we're drunk. We can't go home to his parents like this. I clap hands at the waiter to summon his attention.

'Coffee,' I call to him. 'Two, no sugar.'

A quiet settles over the café, a noisy quiet of stacking chairs and resinous rustling from the pines and the low mournful skids of cars. Then I realise the silence is in my head and it's driving me crazy. Still we sit opposite each other and don't talk. We sip coffee with concentration and look away over the water, black now, with no distinction between sky and waves. We don't know how to say goodbye, so we smile at each other with strained lips, and huge white seabirds startle us with foreign cries.

3

SYDNEY, SPRING 2017

AS I FINISH my shower and hang damp towels on the verandah, far away over the rooftops comes the sound of wind chimes from someone's garden, voices in an unknown language. My water-tank is full, swelling with the unexpected downpour of last month, torrential rains that flooded the coast and broke the drought that's gone on for too many months. Though amid the rejoicing there were casualties, deaths, houses sinking under water.

I look out over the park – wild now with thigh-high grass – and watch a young couple keep to the narrow path under the Moreton Bay figs, heads bowed into each other. His voice is loud in the silence, her laughter diminished. I suppress a pang and go inside.

Zoi's in the spare room down the hall; no doubt still asleep since dawn, when he arrived off the plane from Athens. He'd been irritated, jumpy, when I met him with the car. My son was overnighting with a close friend of mine and we were alone. When I was seated in the driver's seat, I asked for the package and he handed it over without a word. I drove a little; my window was down, soon we were on the freeway. Then his voice, suddenly loud in the car.

'Is that all you wanted, Mara?'

'What? Oh, please. If you didn't want to do it, why come all this way?'

'It was put to me as a bargain. Bring me the stuff then you can see your son. If he is my son.'

We drove back in silence. I kept the crinkly silver package of drugs wedged between my legs.

Now he's snoring on his back as he always did, arms folded, mouth wide open. He can sleep anywhere, even in Sydney, here in my house. Under any circumstances – unlike me. I can hear Pan talking in my mother's room, and I detect her voice above his lisping murmur, though she's not answering. She's mumbling some nonsense, and a clear word emerges here and there – yet she's been speaking less and less in the past few weeks. I've brought her back from the nursing home, with no real plans for her care. Now I feel as though I'm hanging on by the skin of my teeth. It's getting harder to lift her, feed her, change her nappies. She resists eating; I have to force mush down her throat three times a day. It takes more than an hour each time. She's rigid and flailing when I wash her. I fear the homecare nurses who come regularly will force me to take her back. But I need her to die at home, otherwise I won't forgive myself. Well, I need her to die. There, I've said it. I need to help her die. And Zoi is my only hope.

Pan goes outside into the garden; the back screen-door whines as it's opened. I press my fingers to my eyelids to cool them, plunge myself into complete blackness. In my mother's room I lean forward over the bed and hug her, lifting her arms, dead weights, and placing them around my waist. Her mouth crushed against my ear, she murmurs something I don't understand. The skin of her neck and cheeks like muslin against mine; I press lightly against the fragility of her ribcage, her tender spine. I could snap her in two. I can still hear Pan's voice outside; it seems to carry so far in the early evening air. He's repeating an invocation of names in English and Greek: jasmine, lavender, jacaranda, wattle. I wonder how much of this he'll remember: when flowers have been replaced by survival gardens, with erosion and regret – and how much of his grandmother he'll cherish when she's gone.

At seven, after I've fed my mother, I open the packet. Inside the plain packaging are three vials of fast-acting liquid morphine, the barbiturate Nembutal and a large packet of sedatives. Zoi has brought them into the

country with a prescription he's written himself, and a formal letter forged with a fellow Greek doctor's letterhead and signature. It claims that he has terminal cancer of the prostate, and that he requires the pain medication for his brief stay.

I tiptoe into the spare room. The setting sun has made a stripe of red across Zoi's face but he seems oblivious to the light. He's on his back, hands flung out over the sides of the narrow bed, mouth open. He's not wearing anything; I see his black nipples and furled penis where he's kicked off the sheets. I cover him. His eyelids are thin, inscribed with blood vessels close to the surface, hieroglyphs I can't decipher. Lashes gemmed with tears, from sleep or emotion, I can't say.

'Zoi? Dinner's on the table. Want a shower?'

He opens his eyes. Watches my face in the dim light. I can feel he's at a loss to explain how I've changed. With a gesture so slow it's almost not happening he puts his left hand between my breasts, rests it there. I let him, and my shoulders relax.

'Lie down with me. Just for a minute.'

I'm lying on the white bed. He brings his hand down to my legs, touches me, tentative.

'I'm bleeding.'

He lifts my dress to my thighs, makes his careful way down my body, mouth open, eyes closed, as I lie immobile. I concentrate on the walls, cracked and discoloured in places, the tiny slit of a window where I can see the sky, lemon-pale on the edges of trees. I can't move, rendered motionless by his desire.

'Pan?' he asks.

'Outside.'

Pan's happy shrieks stab the air between us: excitement, yes, but also something akin to unease. The light twists and weaves and turns as day collapses into evening. The bloom of spring wearing away, flattened by hot winds.

'Mara.'

The way he says my name, drawing out the first vowel and rolling the r, reminds me of how it was in Turkey. 'Mara,' he would say, 'Mara, my love.'

My name would linger between us, a third person, a mirror image, the breath of flowers. I remember Efes: beneath the whiff of charred timber from old orchards, of peach and plum and pear-wood, was Zoi's cheap Turkish tobacco, his skin's sweat, the marine scent of semen growing cold on the sheets.

'Don't, Zoi.'

'What?'

'Let's not. I'm sorry.'

He turns away in a rough movement and I'm presented with his back. Part of me is regretful, close to tears. I put out my hand to comfort him, stroke his shoulder. Yet another part of me reviews my actions, floating above these two figures on the bed: me in white and him naked, taking in every detail with a precise, calculating eye. There are three mosquito bites on his nape like kisses. As though he's here with us, I hear his brother say: You won't find anybody again who will love you as much as he does. Zoi still loves me too much. I caress his back; bury my face in it. He keeps very still.

4

EFES, WINTER 2012

ONE EVENING IN the café Zoi told me he was going home. I looked away out the windows, past swift, moving people. He noticed my grim mouth.

'It's not that bad. You'll come with me, of course. See Greece. Not that it's at its best. But that's what you came for in the first place, isn't it?'

'I'm not sure about leaving yet. You know I planned to go to Istanbul – '

'By yourself?'

He put his hand out to touch me.

'Well, if I have to.'

My voice trailed off as he ran his hand up and down the inside of my arm. Up and down, to the rhythm of his words. The hairs on my arms electric.

'We can go together, it's a cheap flight from Athens. Maybe I'll even come with you to Australia.'

I pulled my arm away, watched his hand come out of my sleeve like an act of magic.

It was late when we left the café. In the night markets we dodged battered Mercedes, gypsies in roving bands, beggars, men with one palm outstretched and the other covering their faces so nobody should witness their shame. Children, some with open wounds, others with stumps for legs and arms. I watched Zoi's face in the intermittent light, searching for some assertion of trust, some guarantee that life wasn't so bleak. His skin bleached white under the fluorescent lights. The rise and depth of his voice as he spoke about the way Greece used to be, his parents, the excitement of Athens, the amazing people, didn't make any sense to me. I felt the shape of his mouth against my ear, the warmth of his breath tinged with mint and *raki*. As he spoke, I watched the muscles in his cheeks move with the opening and closing of his jaw. He told me Athens hadn't changed that much: there were still pots of basil on grimy windowsills and glossy citrus trees on all the city streets and he laughed remembering childhood mornings before he knew me. I watched his tongue flickering between his teeth. He would pick a mandarin on the way to school and scratch the clean-skinned rind, its taste icy and dark, acid and sweet, sticking to his tongue, making him close his eyes. I watched him mime his pleasure, squinting tight. I looked away. His voice merged with the odour of cut gardenias, exhaust fumes, the sound of bells strung on the roof of a teahouse nearby.

AT THE PORT of Piraeus we were greeted by a phalanx of relatives clutching wilted chrysanthemums. Heavy gifts, burdensome. Whisky. Foil-wrapped chocolates. Tall bottles of ouzo, in bags the shape of the Acropolis. Pecks on the cheek, pursed lips in the air, twisted smiles. Clucks of appreciation as though I were a little better looking than they expected. I was struck by their lack of tact, the baldness of their responses.

We were driven to Zoi's parents by an uncle, one of the many who thronged around us. Nameless faces with white moustaches and black shiny hair, large noses and wide mouths, slashes of laughter. Embracing the golden boy, insisting he sit in the front seat, exclaiming at how handsome he'd become.

We passed mandarin trees on the city streets and I leaned forward in my seat. All I could see was the back of Zoi's head, his hunched shoulder.

'Look, Zoi, your trees.'

He merely nodded, looking elsewhere. We passed more streets, concrete apartment buildings, blackened shop fronts, burnt out cars. In Syntagma Square the façades of neoclassical buildings were made vivid by graffiti. *I am Greek and I'm not lazy. Merkel Out. We didn't deserve this. Unity Makes Power. We are all Greek. Fuck big business.* On one building, a beautifully rendered picture of hands clasped in prayer. Close by in the square were tangerines and twisted lemons, whitewashed halfway up each trunk. None bore any fruit. Zoi's childhood trees were sickly: grey leaves coated in dust and the fumes of cars, doing their best to survive in the city.

EXILE

We were glad then, certainly. A move then
Seemed somehow to be a move upward – something was always happening:
and for all that we feared even then that it would be lost, we did not yet know
the secret sally of the boat from the other side of the horizon
Persephone, Yannis Ritsos

5

ATHENS, SUMMER 2013

IT'S TWILIGHT AT nine o'clock. We sit at a table, which has spindly baroque legs covered in plastic, and we cough and smile, pretending politeness. The television swears to itself in the corner, whining about pay cuts and falling pensions.

'Mara, this is your place here,' Zoi's mother says.

His father nods. He seems to be a man of few words, has hardly spoken since I arrived. I smile, not catching Zoi's mother's eye. Don't know what to call her, know Kiki is out of the question and decide Aunt is a neutral choice.

She serves and the men don't speak. They sit and contemplate her slow, fussy handling of the food, the handing of damask napkins, the heavy placing of bottles at each elbow. Generic cola, homebrew.

'Mara?' Zoi indicates the others have already started eating.

I balance the crystal salad bowl with difficulty as it passes from hand to hand, each person careful not to take too much, not to appear too greedy. I decline olives, bread. Kiki smirks.

'Your fiancée is very petite, then, Zoi? Or does she not like our food?'

A statement, not a question. She's used the word for betrothed. *Aravonas*. The betrothal, or, in older times, the negotiation of chattels back and forth from house to house. Forging alliance through property, the passing of women from hand to hand.

I'm valiant. I force down cubes of brown meat, red sauce congeals on my plate. There are pots of flowers far below in the courtyard. Bold geraniums, sunflowers. A fig tree, before ripening. Huge elemental leaves, knobbly branches. I wish I were down there among the shadows cast by trees. I watch a young man, foreshortened, watering pots in the cool of the evening. He holds the hose down low on his body, indifferent, musing, and his movements make the round muscles in his forearms glisten and strain. I turn again to the conversation. Coffee in a small china cup. Liqueur-filled chocolates. Kiki places them in the exact centre of the tablecloth and this somehow disturbs me more than anything else.

I watch Zoi; he's alert to the open door, running from the table and embracing the young man who stands on the periphery of the room.

'Look at you. Been working out?'

He feels his brother's muscles with open palms. Dimitri doesn't answer. He's surveying the table with puzzled, tired eyes, and he's the same young man who was watering the flowers. I rise from my chair and the tablecloth pulls a little with my sudden movement. I wonder why he didn't join in the welcome, the meal, why he's only just arrived. The way in which he holds Zoi, at arm's length, the veiled hostility. I look at him without smiling, answering his frank curiosity with my own. He shakes my hand, glancing almost imperceptibly at Zoi. When he's near me, I can smell the skin of his hands and neck: strong Greek tobacco, salt. He couldn't be more than twenty, youthful except for his tired eyes.

His mother ladles food onto a warmed plate she's produced for him. She seems to think he can eat enough for three men of his size. She places the salad bowl at the side of his plate and bread for him to dunk in the dish of olive oil with vinegar at the bottom.

'Ma.' He covers the plate with his hand. 'I'm not hungry.'

Nevertheless he begins to shovel food into his mouth.

'Mara – how you like Greece?'

He speaks English, pronouncing some words with difficulty. There's an intimacy in his tone I don't know how to respond to. I open my mouth to reply but Zoi cuts in.

'Mara's mother is from Tinos. She is Greek. Her father is – was – a Turk, I think.'

'He was from Efes,' I say. 'But I never really knew him. Ephesus, don't you call it in Greek?'

Kiki doesn't seem to be interested. She begins to gather up plates and cutlery, stacking them in a neat pile at the end of the table. I motion to help but she waves me away.

'So now you're home, when are you two thinking of marriage? We can wait a few months, but not more than half a year. People will talk.'

Her tone is casual. She doesn't look at me, doesn't include me in the question. She uses the traditional word – *stefanothitai* – crowned.

'Well, we thought –' Zoi begins to say, glancing from her to me.

'Who said anything about a wedding?' I ask.

I move my chair back with a screech over the marble floor.

'Why else would you follow our son here?'

Kiki is genuinely surprised. Zoi is silent, hands splayed open on the tablecloth.

'I wanted to see Greece,' I say. 'And – I think I love your son.'

The statement I've just made surprises me. I think I love your son. Why qualify it? I love him. I love Zoi. Kiki appeals to her youngest.

'What is she saying?'

Dimitri has stopped eating. He places his fork on the tablecloth and a dark stain seeps through the fine weave. His mother reaches out by habit with a napkin, still flitting her eyes from person to person at the table, and he grabs her by the arm.

'Can't you ever stop? It's their first night here for God's sake.'

She jerks her arm at him, struggling to wrench it away, but he keeps it fast in his grip.

'Don't you understand it's their business?'

Kiki is stunned. Dimitri keeps his tight hold on her arm. Their father raises his voice, and Dimitri releases her.

'The shame,' she says. Her words are slow, drawn out. 'The shame on the family.'

She straightens up.

'What about your family, Mara? How does your mother let you go, follow a strange man halfway across the world?'

I don't answer. Kiki nods, looking from one son to the other now.

'I see, so now I see.'

She can't seem to stop repeating those words. Then she gathers the pile of plates in both hands.

'There's nothing more to be said, I suppose.'

Her voice is tight, small.

'And you, Zoi?' Dimitri asks. 'Aren't you going to say something?'

Zoi shakes his head, not looking at his brother or at me. He spreads his hands open in a mute gesture of appeal.

ON THAT FIRST night in Athens I can't sleep yet I go to bed hours before Zoi does, pleading tiredness. He looks up as I leave; barely registering I'm gone. He's lying on the couch watching television, bare feet in his mother's lap. Dimitri's eyes follow me all the way down the corridor, and I jump when I feel him behind me, running to catch up.

'Remember where light switch is? Come, I show you.'

He turns on the bedroom light, brushing the front of my body with his arm as he does so. I'm not sure if it's intentional and stand still, allowing it to happen. Again, his distinctive smell, the memory of leather sofas and school desks, days when the sky was low and threatening. The room fills with light blue, a strip of fluorescent bulb flickering on and off, like a question.

'Is there a lamp in here? I like to read before I fall asleep.'

'Come. I do not need mine.'

I follow him to his bedroom. In the dark he fumbles for the socket and with a yank unplugs the cord.

'Come, you have it.'

'You sure? Sure you don't need it?'

He doesn't respond. He's studying my face and I wonder what it looks like in the half-light, whether it pleases him. I feel silly then and still he

continues to look at me in the filigree of shadow and brightness from the street lamps outside.

'Do not worry. Do not worry about anything. What happened this evening, it is like this here many times.'

'I don't feel very comfortable,' I whisper. 'I don't feel welcome.'

It seems easier to say in the dark.

'She mean nothing, my mother. Please. My brother want you to be happy.'

Then he puts his hand on mine where I hold the lamp and can't move my hand away from him.

6

AS DAWN PRICKS the shutters with needles of light I open my eyes and strain into the grey, searching for something familiar. Shapes of strewn clothes and luggage and a dressing-table mirror blotted out in the corner. For a moment it was hard to know where I was: which city, which country. But I knew somehow I wasn't home. I lay on my back afraid to breathe, listening. Something woke me up. Voices coming from somewhere in the apartment, a woman's high pitch and the answering rumble of a man. I can't make out what they're saying but I know they're talking about me. I feel for Zoi, find his thigh with my hand. He's asleep, snoring gently.

I can hear some Greek words louder than others. The woman says *irresponsible*; the man replies *shut up*, as if pushed to it. The woman says, but she's a *Turkala*. I can discern one phrase clearly and put the covers over my head to block out the rest. *She doesn't even have a father.* I try not to think of my father but the idea of him knocks against my skull, demanding entry. My father. I only have one memory of him. Only one complete scene. It's a sanitised drama repeated so often I wonder if it really happened at all. But my mother assures me it was so – he came back from Turkey for a brief visit when I was seven – to see his 'Australian' daughter. His swift leave-taking after that one encounter was more of a betrayal for me than the first time, as if now, on taking my true measure, he decided I wasn't worth the trouble. Yes, my mother would say. He was like that. Even with me.

I sit up and pull my hair back into a knot. The room is dark and I have no idea what the day outside is like. I open the ugly iron shutters, step onto the balcony and register vaguely that the concrete floor is already too hot to stand on comfortably. Olive trees lashed by hot winds. Noise from the coast road banked up with traffic, the Saronic Gulf a dazzled blue. All around, as I rest my hands on the balcony railing, is the sea. Too blue to look at for long; hurting my eyes with the shimmer of sun on the surface of the water.

ZOI AND I don't touch each other for weeks. Or rather, I don't encourage any contact. In bed I turn over and present him with my back, a mute negative. I'm not sure why it doesn't feel right to be intimate, as if he's somehow moulded himself into another, younger man here. The Zoi I suspected he was before we met. A man I hardly know, and don't find all that interesting. A man of simple desires, like his brother.

He doesn't press me. Besides, it's hard with so many people close by, so many thin walls. Dimitri plays the radio by his bed every night, so it's hard to sleep as well, punctuated by the shrill sounds of bouzoukia and high-pitched wails. I lie awake and worry about my mother, alone in the nursing home. Our damp Darlinghurst terrace empty. I telephoned the home a few times, not asking much, not quite sure what to say. The outlines were too hazy to be coherent. They put her on the phone and I told her how lovely the weather was, how improbably blue and cloudless the sky was every single day, how hospitable Zoi's family were. On the other end, quiet breathing, nothing more.

I wonder if she misses her home, her bedroom. The old bath, that stands in the centre of our tiny upstairs bathroom like a shrine. Cherished, scarred by time, by the constant friction over years of all those bodies, lying down, getting up, turning laboriously like fish too big for their tank, losing the soap in the water and searching for it, frantic under the foam. On the white walls there's a multitude of faces, relatives long gone, faded, sepia-toned, receding into the steam as they dissolve in her memory.

THE BATH WAS already green with age when her father brought it from town on the back of a donkey.

'Poor donkey,' she said, then put her hand over her mouth, afraid of his rebuke.

He soaked in it on the first Sunday of every month, an hour before church. He was a man who prided himself on punctuality; otherwise Olga would be to blame. She heated the water in the cauldron on an open flame, testing it with her elbow in case he burned himself. Too hot, let it cool, fanning it anxiously, hurry up, hurry up, prayed he would not yell for his bath, no, only six in the morning and he, supposedly asleep, suddenly stirred, calling for warm water.

'Come, daughter. Water!'

His voice moved like a beast through the house, catching between the stones of the walls.

Her red, raw elbow. Balancing the cauldron ahead of her with arms outstretched, she poured water into the tub, heaving and gasping while he stood aside and watched. Flicked a crust of sleep from his eye. She sprinkled handfuls of lemon leaves on the surface of the water. Averted her eyes from his careful disrobing, as he handed her the undershirt and long pants, soft lambswool stockings. Still warm from sleep, the odour of his resting body.

If she were late washing or drying these, his only set of clothes, he would have to sit in the cooling water and watch his extremities wrinkle. Rubbing thumb and forefinger together, swollen toes, shivering. Sad penis. Scum of soap on the water as he twirled it around with his hand.

As a child I was afraid of his photograph. Those white woollen stockings bunched at the knee, his stern face seemed to mock me. I'd never met my grandparents, on either side. Never known any aunts, uncles. Children with cousins seemed exotic to me. Only the photographs in the bathroom, my sole tangible link to a meaningful past. Grandfathers and fathers and sons, it strikes me now as remarkable that there's a total absence of women. My mother would take her bath under the gaze of men, displaying her nudity to an assembly of patriarchs. There must have been some quiet rebellion in that.

I told her on the phone about my trip to the temple of Poseidon, speaking into the silence. How Dimitri drove me along the winding coast road to Sounion, to see the stark ruins against the sea. Zoi hadn't come with us. I

didn't mention that. Didn't say he was spending more and more time with his mother, aunts and cousins, surrounded by women and food.

Dimitri and I sat under the flowering trees of the museum café, gypsy boys begging, branches low. German tourists at other tables drank from huge jugs of beer, silent with each other, looking into the distance. I gulped mine down and Dimitri brought his hand over my lip, to wipe a drop of foam. When we came home Zoi wasn't there and we sat on the couch together, trying our best to ignore each other.

Zoi has found a casual job at the National University Hospital in the centre of town, works until late every day, angling for a permanent contract.

'Only for the interim,' he tells me in bed. 'Just until I help my parents for a while. Then we can decide when we'll leave for Australia.'

This is not what I'd imagined. He wants to stay, establish roots, while I'm left out, in the cold. He touches my shoulder, tentative. I jerk away.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing. I'm fine. Everything's fine.'

I want him to divine the source of my discontent without words.

'You sure?'

'Just let me sleep.'

'Why? Are you tired?'

'Yes.'

He strokes my back with long sweeping motions.

'Where did you go today?'

'The temple by the sea.'

He insinuates his right arm under my body, holding me from behind.

'Did you like it?'

I let him kiss the nape of my neck, angling my head forward. His hands firm over my breasts.

'My mum and dad met there, did I tell you? '

'You never told me how he died.'

'Don't really want to talk about it now.'

'Why? Is it too painful?'

'No – at least I don't think so. I never really knew him. It happened when I was about eight, after he came to visit us in Sydney.'

'So tell me how it happened.'

'Really, Zoi, I'm too tired.'

'Why, did my brother tire you out?'

He presses the weight of his body on mine, still talking.

'Do you like my brother, then?'

His voice fierce in my neck.

'He's all right. Don't know.'

He twirls his fingers round and round on my navel, tracing an imaginary line to my groin.

'He likes you, I know that.'

His fingers stop moving and I feel him hard against me.

'Don't, Zoi. They can hear us.'

'Don't you want him to hear us?'

I surrender to him, floating in that dark quiet space between time, borne along by the movements of his body, bodiless myself. My thoughts turn again, involuntarily, to my mother. There was shining light and bright water when she met him. Stranger. Older than her. Man in a cheap dark suit, with a squint in his eye. Olga was at the temple for the day and saw this tourist, this Turk, travelling for the first time in his life, though he tried not to let it show. He wouldn't even take off his jacket, sweating under the columns. He paid the tea seller ten drachmas instead of five. Offered her the glass without averting his eyes as she drank. Slurped his tea noisily. Stood balanced at the edge of the rock, holding his shoes in one hand. Marvelling.

A pounding crash, the waves reared up and drenched his trousers. She laughed out loud. This young man, he didn't smile as he wiped his glasses carefully with a clean handkerchief. The spray salted her lips and she licked them slowly, showing her tongue.

Fanning coastline, jewelled water and death rocks. Poor Aegeus; threw himself off the cliff when his son didn't come back from Crete. All bad sons. Stern fathers, stern temple. View of heaven and water and no world in between. I close my eyes. Darkness, shot with streams of red and yellow. Capillaries of light. Blue water. Clear sky. My mother's pupils, shiny as a bird's in the dark. My eyes shut, Zoi carrying me on the wave of his need. I can't even call it desire.

7

THE KITCHEN IS a mess after lunch: dirty plates and lamb bones and glasses with rings of wine around them. The television is on although there's nobody watching it. I've just made up my mind to turn it off and start cleaning when I hear a shuffle behind me.

'Mara?'

Zoi's voice is low, almost a whisper.

'I got the contract – and I won't have to work nightshifts anymore. I meant to tell you on Friday but things got in the way.'

I don't kiss him. I wipe my hands with stiff fingers on a teatowel. No congratulations. No answering flicker in my eyes.

'Well? It's a great opportunity for me. For us. I know you didn't want to stay in Athens, I know you didn't like living here, but we can move now, maybe somewhere nice, Psychiko even –'

'I don't want to stay in Athens.'

'Ssh.'

He looks around, afraid of waking his parents from their nap.

'Look, it's just another short-term contract. Only six months this time. We'll even be able to afford to rent a villa. Some trips to the islands.'

'You said we'd go home, for my mother. Remember?'

'Come on, stop being a child. It's only six months. I promise we'll leave at the end of the contract if you still don't like it here. I promise.'

I turn my face up to look at him properly for the first time in weeks. I'm shocked at how he's changed, the wrinkles at the edges of his eyes deepening, the pores on his cheeks larger, his forehead broad and red under the harsh kitchen light.

'Alright. When are we moving? Straight away?'

'Give me a chance, Mara. I haven't settled in yet.'

'I want to get a job as well. I'm tired of sitting around here with your mother, being ferried around by Dimitri.'

'Forty per cent unemployment and you talk about getting a job.'

Then he sees my face.

'Really, you don't need to work. You're here on holiday after all.'

'Doesn't feel like much of a holiday to me.'

He stops, spreads out his hands, tries to draw me to him but I'm rigid.

DIMITRI AND I go out more – in the day, when Zoi's at work. One morning, we become slowly drunk in an underground bar; branches of candles all around, reflecting their flames into mirrors. I take his hand and he laughs as if it's funny we should touch. Flanges of fire around our heads. He and I, in the midst of the flames. Drinking, not speaking, my head leaning on his shoulder: the day becomes sad and happy and exciting and slowly an animal contentment steals over us both in the dim shadows and flickering light.

We walk home from the trolley stop together and Dimitri comes uninvited into my bedroom. The apartment is empty. Kiki and Yiorgo are visiting relatives, more and more relatives. Zoi is still at work. Dimitri runs his finger up the line of my back as I bend over the bedside table. I tell him to go. Not angry, just tired.

'Please, Dimitri. That's the last thing I want. What I want is a nap.'

He stands by the door. I sit on the bed undoing my hair, laying out a T-shirt, making my quiet preparations. I unhook my bra, taking it off from underneath my dress: a practised motion. I reach under, not looking at him, behaving as though he isn't there, watchful, by the door. Take off my underpants as I sit on the bed, sliding them down one outstretched leg, then the other. He's so still, waiting.

'Take off your dress,' he says in a small voice. 'Quickly,' he whispers, as I shake my head. 'I just want to see you.'

I'm so drunk all I want is sleep. My head is heavy and fuzzy, as though I'm someone else. Dimitri is insistent.

'I only want to look once. Just for a second.'

Maybe if I let him he'll let me sleep. So I slowly and deliberately raise my dress to the level of my stomach then take it off all in a rush, warm from the heat off my skin. I stand up close to him at the half-open door, kiss him on the cheek and abruptly walk back toward the bed. I can feel him looking at me, at the way I walk, at the way my thighs rub together and my feet turn inward.

Then I hear the door close behind him very slowly and softly. I hear his

footsteps grow fainter down the corridor to the kitchen, the fridge opening and the clink of ice in a glass.

8

EFES, WINTER 2012

WE WOULD MEET past midnight at an outdoor café lit by streetlamps. Every night after a shift I was late and every night Zoi sat waiting for me beneath the striped awnings, tattered, that clung to the highest wall of the mosque. His linen suit and long crossed legs. My dirty jeans and stained T-shirt, the tips of my fingers smelling of food. I strained to see him as I hurried along the crowded street, scanning the low tables hung with coloured cloth, the assortment of wooden benches. He would order baklava, always four tiny pieces, but we never managed to eat them all. The sweet apple tea, though, we gulped down as if draining each other, satisfying our desire.

I told Zoi everything then, anything I could think of, all there was to tell: desires, goals, childhood traumas, the burden of my mother's love. I talked and talked and he merely sat back looking at me without a hint of expression on his face. I stopped mid-sentence.

'You're not listening to a word, are you? Or maybe you don't follow, I'm talking too fast.'

'No, no. But I do get distracted looking at you. I lose my bearings.'

I was aware that he only looked at my lips when I spoke, not my eyes.

'I'd never say any of this if I thought you could understand what I was saying. I'm counting on your lack of English for my confessions. Though at times I feel it's better than mine.'

He laughed with me then grew silent, withdrawing from my gaze.

'Zoi? Are you okay? What have I said?'

'I understand everything, Mara.'

We kissed in the shadows away from the street, cautiously, like two people learning from each other to be tender after a lifetime of doubt.

9

ATHENS, SUMMER, 2013

WHENEVER I'M ALONE, Dimitri appears. He comes upon me in the bedroom while I'm brushing my hair. He disturbs me when I sit chewing a pen with my wad of paper, vacant expression on my face. He knows I'm copying out poems then, and I can see it endears me to him, as if I'm entering a high, treacherous territory he'll never have the courage to scale. Yet he entices me away with sightseeing and beaches and cafés and bars. We've found a way of communicating that's comfortable; he speaks in Greek and I in English. He takes me to secret places and I feel the thrill of pretence, the illicit nature of our appearance together. It makes my eyes bright and my movements languorous, full of the promise of things to come.

At the Royal Gardens we run hand in hand through sprinklers, under showers of water, spurting liquid, arbours of light. Escaping the relentless traffic and all those frantic people, into the coolness of the park. Flopping down breathless beneath mastic trees, sour scented. I turn to face him. What is it about this boy? He's a few years younger than me, just out of the gawky phase of adolescence. His face draws me, pulls me in. Those creased eyes, the smooth forehead, that loose mouth. He's tired; maybe it's that. All those night shifts in a Kolonaki bar. Or is it sadness? Disillusionment. His face echoes mine in some peculiar, disassociated way.

I feel the connection behind my eyes in pinpricks of compassion and conscience. He blinks, looks away. But I'm kissing him on the mouth now and somewhere in the dark reaches of my mind I can remember doing this before, in a time far away, with a man that was him and yet not him and my lips know what to do, my hands circle his skull so tightly and while his eyes are creased shut, mine are wide open, I'm tumbling, grasping, falling headlong. I don't give myself time to think but I repeat it in my head, repeat the phrase, it's Dimitri, it's Dimitri, it really is. I allow myself to become excited by the feel of his body, let myself grow loose, without edges, feel my outlines merging into his and yet I also feel the dark thrill of control, the haze of power. His face so close, my nose buried in his

cheek, his ear in my mouth, his hands rough on me, his eyes still closed, shutting me out.

'Stop,' I say. 'Look me in the eye, at least.'

He opens his eyes, leans back on the grass. His hair is ruffled and there's a bright spot of red on one cheek.

'I'm looking at you now.'

'Now kiss me. Kiss me and look at me.'

He comes forward, covers my mouth with his. He's gentle, a mere brushing of the lips. I draw his head hard into me and shut my eyes, inhaling his breath in tender resolution.

10

SYDNEY, SPRING, 2017

I'M AWAKE AND it's dawn. I stand on the balcony, gazing into the park, shielding my face from the early sun. I think of my mother, comatose downstairs. Her devotional neck, that suffering face. Her failed relationship twenty years ago. My own tug of love and defiance and with Zoi. My eyes are unaccustomed to the brightness and I stumble inside, trusting my instinct to find a way through the corridor, blurring the old sepia images on the bathroom walls. Olga as a bride, bareheaded, hand on hip, the other rattling the ice in her glass. Her eyes are focused on her drink, bluish milky liquid, cold in her hand as she flirts with boys and forgets she's a married woman now. Bel canto inflections pervade the air. She poses in the photograph like some archaic statue in fluted robes; a wedding dress she made herself, my father's dark face squashed behind her.

I feel an absurd twinge of guilt at her hard life and the inevitable decline of love. This train of thought invariably leads me to Zoi. His trusting mouth. My indulgence toward him, the subtle worming expiation of guilt that followed each time I betrayed him. His face, his body. I've been down this path many times before. Foolish. Do I still love him? Irrational. I think of his open hands, strong eyes. Maybe.

Of course I got pregnant. I was sleeping with both men, daily. And when

I found out I had no idea whose it was. Even now, I look at Pan and wonder. He has so much of both brothers in him. One day, when he's older, a teenager, I'll tell him the story. At some point he deserves to find out, and to choose whether to take it further. And I will carry no weight of blame; I refuse it.

When I found out I was pregnant in Athens, I kept staring at myself in the bathroom mirror. I leaned over the basin, willing myself to vomit. A swell of nausea rose, and just as quickly subsided. The speck, the soul, a child; red in whorls of white. A shaft of light pierced through the window. I heard neighbour's voices in the next apartment, uninspired toasts. Dimitri came to my side and rested his head on my shoulder so that his face was also framed in the mirror. We looked at one another, eyes focused on the other's face.

'Well?' I could see his lips forming the word as though they belonged to somebody else.

Near the plughole lay the discarded test wand. It was stained a pale baby-girl pink. Dimitri's hand was on my head, his fingers working in my hair. I could sense an anxiety filling me, spreading now slow, now quick through my body.

EVERY DAY, WHEN everyone was gone, Dimitri and I would go back to bed, scattering his sheets with crumbs of fresh bread, surrendering to the soft coolness of each other's skin, each other's naked arms, in a cocoon of darkness shot with light from the street. He was careful of my growing belly and our lovemaking was stilted, formal, like the couplings seen in Pre-Raphaelite paintings.

Reckless, we no longer tried to find anywhere else discreet or neutral. Always, in these hushed still afternoons, the gypsies in their trucks broke the silence on suburban streets violently with their repeated refrain: *karpouzia*, *karekles*, watermelons, plastic chairs going cheap – two unlikely phrases that will be forever associated in my head.

I would rip off my dressing gown in front of him, twirl slowly with my arms over my head. There was no denying it: my belly was rounder, hips filling out, breasts like somebody else's. I looked closer into the mirror then shocked myself by smiling at my reflection. I'm becoming a woman, with a

woman's body. I marvelled at the swell and curve and breadth of it. Carrying another being inside me, an explorer in unknown territory. A living landscape on my skin; the crazy tracery of veins under the surface, bumps and cracks and lines like an early cartographer's map of a new world. For the first time, I was excited by the idea of these changes. No matter I looked older, riper. I could accept now that this was happening to me.

Of course, the situation was unbearable. But the illusion that it was only temporary, that it must change somehow, even if we didn't yet know how, made it slightly more tolerable for all three of us. Zoi didn't know what to think, or what it was he should be objecting to, and grew more and more torn between the desire to act and his denial of the irrevocable, convincing himself that once the baby came all would be forgotten. Dimitri only let himself live from moment to moment, from the time he saw me alone to the next time we were together. The long black stretches of time between those moments were ephemeral. And the birth of the baby couldn't intrude.

And I, who tortured myself with the sense of it all being my fault; that the happiness of three – no, four – people was on my shoulders, merely waited for my child to be born and for some action, some solution to become inevitable. What would make it so inevitable, I wasn't exactly sure. I wasn't even clear who the father was. So I thought of the child as solely mine: an immaculate conception. And I comforted myself with the idea that something must shatter, something must change, and I'd be able to leave the pieces behind and go home with my baby. My baby: nobody else's. In truth, none of us knew how this change would take shape, this change that would reveal all and relieve us of our suffering, but we hoped for it in secret, and smiled at each other with suspicion on our faces.

NOW I GO back to bed, willing some rest. Pan kept me up last night with a bout of coughing and a stuffy nose. I took him into my bed, now I watch him sleep, smelling his pallid, milky damp on my pillow. The customary Sydney traffic is muted, the city hushed as if falling asleep itself under a blanket of drizzle.

Whenever I'm alone, I think of Zoi. It's always the Zoi he was when we first met, as if the Zoi of Athens was an anomaly, a perversion of what I

perceived as his true self. He hounded me toward the end, made me relive the betrayal, blame myself. He trawled with me through the intimacy of detail, its sick splendour. Did you have sex with my brother? Yes. Did you come? No, I lied. When was the first time? It doesn't matter. How could you do it? I don't know.

There was one thing about Dimitri, when he held me he was really there. Unlike Zoi, who was mostly absent in some fundamental way, forever thinking, dreaming of our future together, yet careless of the present. For Dimitri there was no future together: so in the moment, the breath, the flesh, lay eternity. Even if he was looking away from me, even when he was asleep, he couldn't forget I was there. The delicious state of knowing I slept in the next room or close beside him kept his every nerve heightened. His thoughts bled into my dreams. His hands on me were like two eyes. Even the pressure of his thumb on my waist as he slept during our brief daytime interludes was conscious, scrutinised, balletic. If I showed him some small affection, his body stopped, frozen, listening for my desire. In the end Zoi didn't have that capacity, didn't want to have it, maybe never did; and I resented him for it.

I bought flowers for the house yesterday in a fit of extravagance, preparing for Zoi's arrival without admitting it. I took Pan with me to the grower's markets and watched as he pointed and exclaimed over blooms and fruits. He chose freesias in pastel hues, mandarins and limes, sugarplums and glacé figs like Victorian children's bonbons. Now I regret how much I spent. I don't know how to make ends meet now I'm looking after my mother and Pan. When he starts preschool I'll work some morning shifts in the tiny café down the road, the one with milk crates scattered about for outdoor seating and its relentlessly fashionable clientele. I'll do it on the days the homecare nurses are here – or maybe that won't be a problem anymore.

Pan's awake now. I make breakfast and watch him play in the front garden from my mother's bedside, while I feed her. He's talking to the flowers, bending his glossy head to them, sticking his tongue out into the centre of the petals, whispering his secret thoughts. Something in the way he bends his head and opens his mouth, pinching his eyes tight, reminds me of Dimitri. Silly. Pan's nothing like him. Then I stop, watching my son, shielding my face with my hand. My heart's stopped, breath stilled. Pan's voice chanting

to the flowers is drowned by the perfume of Dimitri's presence. Dimitri is Pan's uncle, after all. Or father. Why shouldn't they share something, if only the memory of a gesture, years ago in a darkened room?

THE SHUTTERS WERE closed although the day's heat had long since abated, and the traffic that drove me mad during the day had thinned on the coast road. I sat on the bed watching Dimitri. He bent his head and kissed my bare shoulder. We decided to go to the Hilton Hotel near the stadium, with its cocktail bar on the top floor and 360-degree views of the city.

'Come on,' he said, standing above me. 'Put on your beautiful dress.'

I stood, holding it up against my body. The silkiness of it cooled my skin.

'This one? Don't you think it's too formal?'

'No. Don't be afraid.'

'I won't fit into it now. I won't.'

'Yes you will.'

He watched me put it on over my head and came to my side to fasten the crystal buttons at the back. It was an empire-line, accommodating my belly with only a slight swelling to indicate I was pregnant.

'How do you feel?'

I turned toward him, his hands still fastening the buttons, so that his arms were right around me now. I bent my head so he couldn't see all of my face.

'I don't feel anything. Now finish doing up my dress.'

I can barely remember the occasion, only that we had to be somewhere else within the hour. Some reception in a suburban club: a christening party maybe, or an engagement. Zoi wasn't with us. Again, he was at work.

We wandered around the ruins of the stadium in the summer twilight and all the crushed colours of dusk and the distant sounds far below were intermingled. We linked arms and walked slowly, like lovers. All over me, under my skin, was an overwhelming peace, the realisation that I didn't have to talk or smile or even think. Walking with him in silence. Remarkable.

Since getting pregnant, I'd become intensely aware of the quality of light, its shifts, transmutations, its effect on my open or closed eyes as I struggled to sleep, on my tender skin, the veins of my hands and temples.

We weren't admitted into the cocktail bar. It was full or perhaps we didn't look right for the place. Dimitri was wearing a tie but his suit didn't sit well on him, he was so short. So we went to the old underground bar and he drank shots of colourless liquid. I drank water. A faded mirror across from us, heightened in the dwindling light. Searching each other's faces for who we really were.

We'd finished our drinks and ordered more when Dimitri turned to me. I found it hard to tear my eyes away from the mirror behind the bar, at my own face among the coloured bottles on the glass shelves. An unreasonable pain took hold of me then, at the injustice, the chaos of the world. I forced myself to look at him, to let his eyes travel at leisure all over my face.

He downed his drink in a gulp. Then he held the empty glass to his mouth, muttered into it, eyes locked on mine.

'What did you say, Dimi?'

'I really don't think we should be doing this anymore.'

'Why?'

'Now the baby is nearly here and Zoi is working so hard for you both, I'm starting to feel –'

'What's the difference between now and a month ago, Dimitri?'

'I've been thinking. And Zoi says he's taking you away for a little time, before the baby's born. He's trying to do the right thing.'

'Where's he taking me? It's the first I've heard of it.'

He spread out his hands in a gesture of hopelessness.

'To our village. It will be a good rest for you. It will make things easier.'

'And you?'

'I'm not coming, at least not yet. You must understand, I love my brother. We've spent some good times together lately, talking.'

'About me?'

'About you. And other things.'

'Have you told him?'

'Yes. No, not really. I told him as much as I thought necessary.'

'What? What exactly did you tell him?'

'That I'd fallen in love with you. That I wasn't in love with you anymore.'

I turned my head away from him in a savage gesture.

'He's known all along and never let on. How could he do that to me?'

'How could you?'

'And you,' I snapped. 'Don't forget your part in this. You loved me and now you don't? Am I supposed to believe that?'

'I think you should give it a chance, Mara. You won't find anybody again who loves you as much as he does.'

I opened my mouth to speak, still looking at my own reflection, addressing the words to myself.

'Is it the way I am now? Is that why you're doing this to me?'

He laughed mirthlessly and put his arm around my shoulders, like a brother.

I CARRIED A pocket-sized mirror in my bag when I was pregnant, and kept it hidden. It was easier to see my face in parts without being confronted all at once with my whole body. Anxiously, when nobody was looking, I would check on my appearance, in all lights, at all times of day, frightened by the changes, the loss of control. It became a compulsion.

I fantasised about being blind. Examined my points of reference. How they would change, how the unbelievable burden of my face would shimmer for a moment, fizzle out, vanish in the blankness of not seeing.

On the bus to Zoi's village I threw the mirror out onto the road, where it dropped into a ravine, a jagged splinter of light in the foliage. But I couldn't help it; I followed my reflection in the windows of the bus, the way my face flattened over the landscape, merging with the trees, a stark outline against the sky.

DISTANCE

We're never equal to our desires. Desire isn't enough. What remains is
weariness, resignation – a felicitous near-loss of will,
sweat, distraction, heat. Until, finally, night comes
to erase everything, to mingle it with one solid, incorporeal body,
your own,
to blow damp from the pinewoods or down from the sea,
to submerge the light, to submerge ourselves.
Persephone, Yannis Ritsos

11

LITHOHORI, SUMMER, 2013

I BATHE IN sweat under goat's hair blankets. Zoi's aunt aired them for only a day; not long enough to rid them of the smell of rats and mildew and something else, indefinable, a little like disappointment. Blankets woven by her mother, carried to her husband's home on a mule, a marriage prepared for since she was seven.

'Good dowry,' she hinted in dialect to me. 'Eh?'

I didn't understand her northern accent and asked Zoi to explain.

We're huddled together in a single bed with blankets thick as rugs over us. I have no idea why Zoi's aunt would think we need blankets, let alone so many, in the middle of July. But the mountain nights can be cold, he says. Sometimes even midsummer nights fall to ten degrees, with howling winds. These are blankets that scratch through thin polyester sheets, shaken from old chests unopened for decades. Only one hard pillow to share; I let Zoi have it. Why am I here, in this village, empty except for old women and goats? I'm drowning in the mundane, the everyday, with no time or energy to plan for the future. Zoi's imperatives override my own more and more now that I'm in my third trimester; tired, passive, wanting to curl up in a corner and cease to think.

Roosters crow from every direction. The village rises early and I'm glad to see the sunrise. Zoi's still asleep on his back with his arms by his side, like some fallen knight on a catafalque. I'm jealous of his slumber and restrain an urgent desire to shake him awake. Instead I slip outside, wrapping a blanket around my shoulders and washing my face at the outside tap. Brown water splashes against my cheeks; I cup my hands and drink from them to wash the sour taste from my mouth. The blanket falls from my shoulders and is soiled by mud. I flick it off, rub it, the stain grows. I have no idea how I'd go about washing it here. I entertain vague images of running streams and women pounding on bare rock with no soap, using only the strength of the paddle and powerful forearms; then dismiss them. I sit for a while on the doorstep, drawing my knees up against my belly, feeling the resistance of the swelling, the hardness of the baby embedded beneath my skin. Kicking, floating in liquid, clear as sky.

In the wan sun I begin to feel sleepy and as the light grows stronger, glowing on the rim of the mountains. I slump on the doorstep, rocking, closing my eyes and opening them once more against the sun's dazzle, playing the secret, silent games of childhood. The house is perched right on the edge of the mountain, one of the highest buildings in the village. Zoi told me his grandfather built it that way on purpose. He wanted to see everything, keep an eagle eye on his ten siblings, also have the best view of the cleft between the mountains, steep cliffs plunging down into darkness. Uncharted land. He prided himself on his origins: harsh, uncompromising, brittle as rock. He boasted that the Turks never ventured into these parts, it is and always has been family territory.

'The mountains up above us,' he would say, pushing Zoi's chin up to look at them, 'see their bald heads. See the hawks circling round and round. Unwritten mountains, they're called. Unmapped. Nobody except us has been up there. Our people. And even we only dare go there in the summer. The Turks never got this far; our mountains stopped them.' And Zoi as a little boy would gulp, overwhelmed by his glowing heritage.

The terrace juts out from the building at a dangerous angle, teetering high over the chasm, over pines and walnut trees and away into folded mountains so far they're shrouded even at noon. Aunts and uncles and cousins trudge up and down the rough stone steps leading from the valley to the peaks. Crunching with their shoes on fallen walnuts, stripped from the trees

by summer rains, hard and still green, inedible. Slipping on dry leaves crushed into the pitted stone, a mass of dead brown and yellow and black from the husks of the walnut shells. Those steps are the only thoroughfare for the whole village and early morning is the busiest time.

I don't want them to notice me so I draw my legs up under my nightgown, resting my back against the door. But I can see them all clearly. They take their goats to the high pastures where the grass is tender and the sun shines way above the clouds. Their children troop to the road above the house to catch the only school bus of the day. I can hear their sleepy chatter, the drag of feet as they carry their heavy schoolbags up the steps. They're all in summer clothes, bright colours; the girls have ribbons tying back their hair. Some of the old women stop close to me, labouring, their breath coming heavy. I see them glance at the shuttered windows of the bedroom where Zoi lies asleep. The poorer women still haul firewood up and down the mountainside exactly as their grandmothers did, to feed fireplaces and stoves and outdoor ovens shaped like hives.

It's summer in the village. Still, up high on this balcony, crisp winds gust in all directions, rustling the leaves, and sweet purple grapes fall to the ground. An ancient landscape spread out before me – all those adjoining terraces, the peasant's measure of wealth; olive groves, tobacco plantations, rows of vine. How many pieces were you given when your father died? Pieces are what they call fields, vegetable patches, orchards; the meagre wealth of three olive trees that haven't yet borne fruit. I heard these discussions over dinner last night, matter-of-fact. How many pieces does your husband have? Did the new wife bring any pieces to the marriage? They still ask these questions. These concerns haven't ceased to be important. I sigh. There's blue over everything in the early light. Fir, walnut, stream, rock, fern. It spreads a film over my thoughts, stilling them.

WE ARRIVED YESTERDAY. A rainy evening with glimmers of sun, reflections on a pond. At the outskirts of the village we pass jerry-built shrines, squat white houses for icons. I look out the bus window and hear other passengers muttering to themselves, old women making the sign of the cross, pointing out the sights to each other. This is Saint Peter's house. This is the house of Saint Irini, the wise and compassionate one. Shrines erected not to the dead as one would imagine, but in gratitude for those who escaped death

on the roads. All those hairpin bends. Each shrine holds a votive candle, a dirty glass with its solitary wick floating in olive oil. The spirits of evil are kept at bay in this fashion on either side of the village, mapping out the spiritual boundaries of light and dark.

The bus connections are delayed as usual in these parts and we stumble late into a gathering of people, assembled in the kitchen of the eldest aunt. Aunt Pandelina, called by her husband's name since she was married. Both her former names vanished in the marriage contract, subsumed into his body. Now she is Pandelina, she who belongs to Pandeli.

'Health to you, aunt,' I say.

It's a formal greeting, repeated so often it's lost all trace of its original meaning. I kiss the little woman's powdery skin and am held by her at arm's length to be studied, summed up. This is an old woman whose memory of the four-hundred-year Turkish occupation is still knife sharp, painful. Pandelina's eyes hold mine, challenging me to look down. I don't, but struggle subtly to wriggle free of the strong grip, the clawed hands with their dirty fingernails.

'Aunt,' I ask, regretting my question already, 'what's your real name? The name you were born with?'

Pandelina doesn't answer the question. She speaks as though reciting a lesson.

'My name is long forgotten, my girl, and well should it be so. That is the way things are.'

She presses her breasts hard against me, holding in a final test. There's no softness in her flesh, no give. The others in the small room, cramped, unknown faces, look on, waiting for something. Pandelina turns away as if appeased, but only for the moment. She kisses Zoi on tiptoe and squeezes his waist with a practised gesture.

'Well, Zoi, young man. How is your dear mother?'

She doesn't wait for his answer. The ritual has been performed.

She turns her attention to the others at the table, standing, uneasy, waiting to eat. Food growing cold on plates. Forced smiles, appraisal. Not much time before bed, these old people are used to waking early. It's still light outside, yet for them it's already too late. Hurried greetings. I can't remember all the names or attach them to faces.

The only one I'm not introduced to is a woman, at first glance much younger than the others, who sits on a chair by the door, her face obscured by her kerchief. After everyone is served Pandelina hands her a plate that she balances on her lap as she eats, ruminating as she chews. She looks out at the view and sighs now and then, voluptuously, as if alone.

'Who's she?' I whisper in Zoi's ear.

'That's Alcmene.' He's interrupted and looks away. Pandelina heaps another three slices of pie on his plate.

'How is your mother? Well, Zoi? How is she, tell me?' All those tiny women look up into his face, exclaiming: 'You're the spitting image of your mother, Zoi.'

He grimaces and they laugh.

'And how is your brother? Still breaking all the girls' hearts?'

Zoi looks across at me before answering. He takes a long slow bite of his pie. I flush, pick up my glass and use its smooth side to cool my cheeks.

'Still working as a barman,' Zoi replies between mouthfuls. 'Bit of a shame he's so lazy. Has it too good at home.'

We gulp down cold food, hastily made – marrow pie with goat's cheese, pastry hand rolled by Pandelina, hunched on all fours by the fire. She laid out a piece of matting on the floor that very afternoon, as she did every week. It's the only part of the floor kept away from the hens, sacred to the making of filo.

'The pastry is fresh,' she assures me. 'It's the best you'll ever taste.'

There's icy spring water in dirty glasses. Pandelina can't see very well and her crockery suffers for it. Pandeli drinks whisky behind his hand and only eats the soft part of the bread, afraid for his broken teeth.

'We'll be feasting on marrow for years,' he says, looking up from his food. He grins at me, pointing at my plate still heaped with pie. His wife tells him to be quiet. She apologises for the poorness of the food but in a way that suggests offended pride, challenging, dare you look down at our victuals? I can't finish my portion and she clucks and fusses.

I touch Zoi's arm.

'That woman you called Alcmene. Why do they serve her last of all?'

Zoi covers his mouth with his hand.

'She's a bit of an outcast. I'll tell you later.'

I watch Alcmene narrowly. She eats with her fingers, scooping up the pie and opening her mouth only a little, just enough to cram the food in, no more. The other women yawn pointedly, not bothering to cover their mouths.

'We didn't have time to clean your grandfather's house properly Zoi, although we aired it for three days.'

Pandelina turns to me; I swallow a mouthful with difficulty and attempt a smile.

'Surely Mara will make it comfortable very soon. Won't she, eh?'

They all smile back, looking askance at my belly. Instinctively I cover it with both hands. Pandelina sees the gesture and leans toward Zoi, her breath coming into his face.

'When's the wedding to be? What are you waiting for, eh? Twins?'

Pandeli appreciatively pats my hand as it rests on my belly. He has thick smoke-blackened fingers.

'Don't you worry about my crone of a wife. There's plenty of time for weddings yet.'

He nods sagely at nothing in particular and kisses me on the forehead as he shuffles off to bed. Pandelina rises from her chair, signalling the end of the gathering. Zoi catches my eye.

'May we – Aunty – Mara is, ah, accustomed to having a wash at the end of the day. Is there any hot water?'

Pandelina laughs as though to rid herself of a bitter taste. She leads me by the hand out the back door. In the chill of the woodshed she heats a huge pot of water, makes up the fire, hauling in dry twigs and charred branches of pear-wood from a tree burnt down in last summer's fires. There's a twisted pipe leading out of the roof, repaired in places, patched with odd bits of tin. I have no doubt Pandelina did it herself with the tools heaped on the kitchen floor.

'Really,' I venture, 'if it's so much trouble I don't think we should – '

'It's done now; it's done.'

Pandelina sweats and heaves, bent over double. Zoi tries to help but she pushes him away.

'What do you know of this work, boy? Look at your hands. You've never touched an axe in your life.'

She has incredible strength for her age. Soon the fire is lit, a huge pyramid of flaming wood and curling leaves, filaments of blue and red at the edges of the heat. She picks up the cauldron with difficulty, letting Zoi help her place it on a tripod above the fire. Then she leaves us there, shouting over her shoulder as she bangs the door shut.

'Don't be too long, I want to lock up. You never know, these days, Turks and Albanians and the like roaming around the countryside, desperate for money – we'll all be murdered in our beds.'

I flinch at the mention of Turks. Zoi pours water over me in long silver rivulets. It runs in a warm rush down my body as I stand on the stone floor. Bells tinkle like stars as goats return home, unaided. Fat brown hens cluck wildly as they peck in long grass, and kittens smelling of hay and wood-smoke shy away from the rooster. The door creaks in the pressure of the wind and a brood of hens flows into the shed. It's their evening roost and they arrange themselves comfortably up in the rafters, clucking against each other with small flurries of affection. Some make throaty noises at my feet, russet creatures on thin twisted legs.

I turn my back on Zoi as he washes my hair, lowering my head to make it easier. He loops the coil over his left hand and lathers my head with soap, combing suds through the long strands with his fingers, rinsing it quickly with the rapidly cooling water. He puts the pot down with an outbreath and rubs the cake of soap up and down my back, with rapid strokes, then slower, lingering over my thighs. He rinses me again and I close my eyes against the force of the stream. Then he turns me around to face him, leans down and tips a little olive oil from a jar into his palm.

'No, Zoi, I don't like it.'

'Come on, it's good for your skin.'

He's play-acting, putting on his foolish voice.

'Extra-virgin, cold-pressed from my grandfather's groves.'

He's authoritative through his laughter: pulls the hair back from my face and rubs the sweet green oil onto my chest and ribs and breasts, until they're full with large nipples that betray me. I keep my head lowered, not looking at him, mutely suffering his attentions, shivering in the cold. Denying my slow arousal. He opens his mouth as if to say something, then decides against it.

WE'RE INSTALLED WITH candles and an armful of sheets in the ancestral home. It hasn't been lived in since Zoi's grandfather's death five years ago. On our way we pass the café on the main road where the bus left us earlier: the café glows with light at the end of the day, its silent ragged men playing cards and drinking. We're tempted to go inside, spend a few hours in the warmth of strangers instead of in the dark cold house, but neither of us admits it. So we close the heavy door of the house behind us, shutting out the old men.

I hold a candle out in front, afraid of hot wax, while Zoi drags our luggage over the doorstep, leaving a deep trail through the dust. There's dust on chairs stacked in one corner, dust on the iron-grey shutters, in wing-like sheaths from the ceiling. There's a fireplace with a tiny heap of ash in it.

I start to cry. I sit with a thud on the floor, hold my head in both hands, wipe tears, streams of mascara run down my cheeks, glowing unnaturally in the light of the candle. I wait for Zoi to notice, to come and comfort me. But he doesn't. He's roaming around the house with his own candle like a trail of fire through the gloom, opening cupboards and inspecting behind each door.

So I get up from where I sit and light all the candles the women have given me; stub-ends found in kitchen pantries, moulded pink children's lambathes left over from Easter Sunday services, beeswax tapers like rolls of honey. I put them on the mantle, on the table, on every windowsill. Sniffing and sobbing in great gulps as I light matches, only to have them blow out or drop or burn my fingers. Zoi says nothing, standing in the middle of the room, hands dangling by his sides. He isn't even aware of my distress, mentally traversing the narrow paths of the village with his grandfather. His fingers are curled tight in a little fist within the palm of the older man. He was a little boy when he first came to this house and his grandfather hides in the corners, away from my pools of light.

12

I WANT TO establish order in the grandfather's house. Rhythm, security, some small sense of permanence. The floors are swept and mopped, windows washed, the brass fixtures on the shutters polished. I beat rugs on the railing of the terrace, woven rugs slippery and shiny with grime, always threatening

to fall down into the chasm between the mountains. Curtains are washed and put up to dry, smelling of lemon and olive oil soap. Then I sit in the disorder of my cleaning, tired in the middle of the day, reading Ritsos.

Zoi comes through the door carrying a covered bowl.

'Hey, Pandelina gave us some currant rice she made this morning.'

I get up, using his leg to help me onto my feet, take the bowl from him, peeking under the white cloth and sniffing at the food. I put it into the kitchen and begin working again, starting now on my backpack, unravelling my clothes.

'I'm going to help old Pandeli bring the sheep home,' Zoi says. 'Do you want anything?'

'See if there's any fresh yoghurt. I feel like something sour.'

When he's gone, I turn to his suitcase; take out his clothes, unfolding creased shirts and refolding underpants again before placing them in the cupboard. I linger over his toiletries, carefully arranging his shaving brush and soap and razors on the bathroom sill. Unscrew the top of his aftershave bottle and inhale its scent. Cinnamon and orange peel. I start to fold his jeans, thrown hastily over a chair last night, and my hand brushes over his wallet in the back pocket. I sit on the edge of the bed with it in my lap then pick it up, caress it, bring it to my nose and smell the rich leather. It's soft, worn, moulded by all those years being carried in his trousers. I decide to open it, look inside.

What could be the harm? All I'll find are some dirty drachma notes; wads of out-of-date bus tickets and credit cards. Nothing shattering. There's an old photograph of me displayed behind the tatty plastic screen. It's a passport shot, the one I gave him when we first met; the only one I had of myself. Only my head and shoulders, a glimpse of what I was wearing; one of those silk shirts you could get for a couple of dollars at the markets. Chinese. Coffee-coloured. A string of cheap turquoise beads around my neck. The girl in the photograph stares ahead at her future self, solemn, lips slightly parted, less than a year ago. I like the photograph; it shows exactly how fresh I was when it was taken. A moment in time, stillness caught, captured.

Alongside it is a photograph of Dimitri taken in a booth. He's making a face and his big hands are also in the shot, palms outspread on his chest. His

laughter seems to make a mockery of the photograph nearby, of me. My face so serene, almost ridiculous in its nobility, rigidly immortalised next to his.

I feel behind the two photographs. There's something else there, hidden behind the other two, wedged in tight. I take it out, spread it open. It's a standard size Agfa print. The colours are not so vivid as the passport shots; washed out, grainy as an old film. There's a deep crease between the two figures in the centre. Zoi. His brother.

Zoi looks straight ahead at the camera with his peculiar green-eyed stare and Dimitri's head is turned sideways to seek him. But there's something different about Zoi's face; it's open, trusting. He appears happy, free, his energy lurking somewhere beneath the surface, in the curve of his arms, in the tightness of his belly. I haven't seen that expression on his face, not once. Not ever in our first days together when we took photos of each other all the time, not once when we talked, not once when we made love, not once, not at all, not ever.

I sit on the edge of the bed, holding the photograph between my fingers. My face, my heart, static as a photograph. Then I fold it quickly, how easily it creases in the centre, how it's meant to be in that soft leather wallet, secretly behind the other, these images of the two people Zoi loves.

13

THE FIRST TIME I meet Alcmene alone I have no words. It's my third day in the village and I've left Zoi to fix what he can in the decrepit house.

'Where are you going?'

'Just to the square.'

'Don't get lost. Keep to the village paths.'

I don't keep to the well-worn trails that cut through the village. Instead I take the main road leading out of the settlement until it veers sharply down into a valley. I climb to the top of a crag from where I can see the village spread out below me: silly, inconsequential, harbouring no danger. I turn around, walk away from it, always higher. I seem to know where to go, plunging through bracken and tree roots until I find Alcmene's home.

The old woman stands awkwardly in her dirt backyard. She looks as if

she's about to run away. Her sheep lean against her; protective, possessive, and one of her hands rests casually on the head of the closest one. She has dark, weeping sores over her cheeks and chin. I'd failed to notice them before, or perhaps they've become worse in the intervening days. One is heart-shaped and purple. She motions for me to come into the house.

'You can call me Mimi,' she says. 'The people who loved me in the past would call me Mimi.'

Mimi, in Greek can mean sore, scratch, wound. It can also mean help me, mother me, make me feel important.

Alcmene lives in a single room with her son, Yanni. I know this from Zoi, from the gossip that very morning at Pandelina's kitchen table. She was pregnant at fourteen and gave birth to her child alone up in the mountains one spring night rather than risk the village judging her transgression. Nevertheless they found out and pressed her for the name of the father, which she never told. I know Zoi's theory: the man who made her pregnant was her own father. 'That's why the boy's an idiot,' he said. 'Bad blood.'

As I stand in the doorway of the hut I see no evidence of Yanni's presence. It's a female room, womb-dark, fire-lit, untouched as a nun's cell or a cave. Candles everywhere, even in the warm pink light of afternoon, and nubbled garlic hanging in every crevice, permeating the folds of Alcmene's clothes. There are apples too, from last season; cold apples strewn on the stone floor. Alcmene gives me some and we eat together, not speaking; they're small, soft and ripe under the skin. Bursting sweetness on the tongue.

'I'll show you my tree,' Alcmene says.

She takes my hand.

An apple tree in summer is a beautiful thing. Trembling against a china sky, growing new leaves. We sit beneath it and watch the delicate patterns made by the branches, designs that seem almost Japanese, tracing over our faces and bare necks.

'I no longer remember the words,' she whispers.

'Excuse me?'

I'm beginning to think the old woman is mad. No wonder she's an outcast.

'I'm forgetting the words for things,' she says. 'I can see the object in my

mind's eye, I can see its colours, remember the way it feels to the touch – but the word is gone. I can't remember the words; for the top part of a shovel, the smell of earth after rain, the –'

'Like my mother,' I say. 'That's the way she felt before the Alzheimer's hit.'

'Hmm?' She turns to me. 'I don't know what that is,' she says carefully.

'It's a disease of the brain.'

My Greek is faltering.

'It gets worse,' I say. 'I hope not.' She laughs. She seems to be thinking of something else. 'I tell fortunes,' she says. 'From the apple leaves.'

'Can you tell mine?'

'Of course I can.'

She smiles artfully and I catch a glimpse of what she must have been like as a young girl. She strips a low branch of its leaves and lays them on my palm.

'Now you squeeze them together and then fling your hands out as if you're drying them. Whichever leaves are left will show us the future.'

I feel the leaves disintegrate as I rub them. When I've shaken my hands out, five leaves still cling to my palms: two on the right and three on the left.

'First the bad news. Give me your left hand – that's it, show me.'

Alcmene leans over my palm, so close her coarse grey hair tickles. She picks over the leaves with the tip of her finger.

'Oh,' she says. 'I see three people hurting each other.'

I look up, scan her face.

'Who told you?'

'I know nothing, child. I only speak what the leaves tell me. Now, show me your right hand.'

I stare down at the two leaves, glued to my palm and translucent with sweat. She grabs my fingers and spreads them out and up to the light.

'Good news. Two people will reach a safe harbour.'

She studies my face, speaks slowly.

'But it may take a long time.'

Then she looks up.

'Look at the leaves dancing. Don't you love them?'

I stay with Alcmene to watch the leaves.

14

WE'VE BEEN IN the village two weeks; and I feel close to my time, although I know it's still months away. This morning I sit on the terrace gazing at the view: mountains cleaving together in numerous rifts, close, close, closer, until I'm caught in two folds, squeezed by the earth without an inch of air to breathe in. A shredded sky. But my far-off glimpse of the sea consoles me. The blue is limitless, full of possibility. Our only hope, I realise now, lies in the birth of my child, whoever the father is.

I've set up a table and the ubiquitous chairs sold by the gypsies from the back of their trucks. Each week they peddle the sort of produce nobody in these mountain hamlets can make or grow for themselves; oranges from Israel, packets of fine-ground coffee and sugar, white boxes of Turkish *loukoum*. And these cheap plastic garden settings. Each night we sit on them, waiting for the evening breeze that begins every day at exactly the same time, coming off the pines. Twilight hugs the coast, the mountains, our faces and hands, like a lover. From the kitchen I bring small bowls, cold food given by relatives and neighbours. Just to help out, they say, and offer fresh eggs with grey feathers still clinging, dried lines of blood in the cracks. A round of hard yellow cheese, a jar of briny olives. Rose-hued wine out of an old whisky bottle. As we eat, the sun disappears behind the mountains, Pandelina crouches on the floor of her kitchen sifting grain for still more pie; we can see her from the terrace and avert our faces. Alcmene is also there, banished to the courtyard to pick through black-eyed beans from last winter, Pandelina's rejected crop. She beckons to me with one hand, come and help, but I pretend not to notice.

Now Zoi comes out of the house with our towels slung over his shoulder, still damp from yesterday's swim. He pulls the door behind him and leaves the shutters open to catch the breeze. There's no need to lock anything; we're safe here, among family.

'I'm going for a walk,' he says. 'Through the gorge.'

'I'll come with you.'

On the path down through the village the heat is white, hurting our eyes, burning out every shady corner in its glare. I can feel it sizzle up through the soles of my sandals. Zoi leads the way down a back path to avoid as many people as

possible. We're both sick of smiling, talking, stopping, idling, exclaiming over nothing. Even so we make sure to wave or nod at each person, each open window or door, even if we can't see who's in the house, shrouded in darkness.

'A walk again? In this heat. You've become like a foreigner, Zoi. We see them all the time, trekking up and down the mountains with packs on their backs like donkeys – '

He laughs without conviction. The villagers are always incredulous when they see us on one of our walks. In Greece you only walk for a single reason: because you have no choice. We refuse all invitations to come inside for a glass of water, a saucer of spoon-sweets, a quick coffee. We refuse with differing degrees of courtesy and determination.

'Come, come, my children, new grapes from the vine.'

It's Pandelina. She frowns at me, examining.

'Are you in so much of a hurry you can't spare a moment for an old aunt? And you shouldn't be walking anywhere in this heat, Mara. In your condition. How far gone are you by now?'

'Thirty weeks,' Zoi replies. 'But she's feeling very well, aren't you, Mara?'

I smile. Pandelina closes her mouth with a deliberate sound. Perhaps she's learned something. She waves her hand at us, dismissive, and goes back into the coolness of her arbour. Zoi stops and considers, looking torn, before following me down the village steps. Pandelina shouts.

'Wait up, my boy.'

She runs after him, thrusting two bunches of grapes into his hands.

We walk down a twisting path, past pines and silence and resinous odours, the tinkling of bells. Closer. There's a company of goats in the cemetery at the edge of the sea. Cool light and cast shadow here, cypresses tall and dark and watchful. We pass plain marble headstones from saner eras and the lugubrious angels favoured by families of the recently buried. The goats shy away from us in a rush, finally halting under the furthest tree. They're still, except for the slight twitching of their faces.

Once down in the gorge we're alone. The sun beats in shimmering waves over rocks rising up on each side, pressing down on us. At our feet, pebbles crunch into splinters: glittering pebbles from the days when this gorge was a

seabed and the steep cliffs rose from deep underwater. A bird whirls through, emerging out the other end. All around us the goats follow, silent as statues. At first I hadn't noticed them. Then gradually as my eyes grow accustomed to the tricks of light and shade in the gorge, I can distinguish them from the colours of the pebbles. Now I see them clearly, staring down at me with their malevolent eyes, pinpoints of black. They hide in small patches of shade cast by overhanging rocks, balance precariously in crevices, surviving only by standing still until the noon heat is over.

We're almost there. We can smell the sea now, its salt breath, the roar and bellow and rush of it raise our spirits. As we emerge from the gorge the sun is suddenly blotted out by cloud and the landscape changes, fizzles, disappears. We've come out into a grey watery world: no people, no movement. There are white pebbles far away but as we draw closer I see this unrelieved whiteness is composed of stones of subtle colours. At the water's edge we strip off, walking into the sea without disturbing it. The waves are gentle, almost too small to be noticed. Further out, away from the shore, we float in still water like oil, keeping apart from each other. The mysterious day is vibrating, mystic in its stillness, its withheld significance. The sun struggling, constricted. I still feel stifled by Zoi and his brother's relationship, their tight undercurrents of loyalty and dislike. But now, watching him here, so serene, so intensely present to me, there's a possibility of hope, of something unbreakable between us. I plunge my head under. The sea is cold beneath, reminding me of my own vulnerability. My baby. I can feel the warmth of the sun on my body fizzling, and darkness spilling into me.

We get out, and suddenly I'm afraid someone is watching, hidden in the caves, and quickly slip into my clothes. The sun is poised, glowing for an instant on the edge of the sea. We are being watched. More goats huddle together in the shade and stare at us with their unreadable eyes. Dimitri's name comes back to me, repeating, repeating, pushing against my skull. The eyes of the goats glitter like bits of mica. Now the sea has turned ominous, sun sinking low, high tide. Zoi's face is like a bed whose sheets have been smoothed clean of any significance; the brief moment of understanding forgotten. The wind has picked up and howls high in the village, exhaled in a rush by the mountains. I walk the few steps to a rock pool, bend down to

the seawater, taking a little on the tips of my fingers to wash my face. Rock pools all around, shimmering yellow streams of water, inconstant, like the sequins on a woman's dress. I feel him crouch behind me, his thighs wrapped around my waist, head heavy on my shoulder. He takes my breasts in both hands through the thin cotton of my blouse.

'Let's go to the cave.'

His whisper is urgent. Once there the goats shy away, rushing out in a wave of flanks and hooves and the sharp rasping of their fear. I stand looking after them, mesmerised by their escape, the way they move as one. He stands behind me and begins edging up my blouse, feeling for my nipples, breathing heavily in the cool sinister light. He leads me further into the dark. I feel his hand, alert and sweating. The only point of contact I have, straining into the blackness, is the pressure of those fingers on my palm. His touch alive and glowing.

He sits down with his back against the wall, legs splayed. A shaft of light falls through a fissure above his head, illuminating the rock face behind him. I'm half-aware of a picture, or a series of pictures, scrawled on the wall. Are they fish, skeletal, the flesh eaten from the bones? Can I see the faint outline of a head, horned, with an open mouth? Chalky redness fades into stone, in the dim light from the opening. Outside, again there's only the sound of those birds I can't name.

I can only discern a blunted emotion in myself: a long, wailing, protracted unease. I try to concentrate on Zoi: his smooth body, his gravel voice. The goats are still and watchful around us. He doesn't take off his clothes. This I find faintly disturbing, somewhere in the periphery of my thoughts. He takes his penis out from the side of his shorts, the erection rising slowly, weighty, like a portent. I lower myself onto him, still wearing my sandals, not even stopping to take off my underpants. He pulls them aside with his hand, hurting me. And suddenly he's thrusting beyond his own will or control, and it's finished.

AFTERWARD, WE SIT on rocks above the village and survey the cluster of tumbledown houses and broken fences. Everywhere there's the smell of goats, the pungent smell of shit and earth and blood that reminds me in some disturbing way of my mother. As we sit, an old woman in a scarf waves to us.

From so far away, I don't realise at first that it's Alcmene. She seems somehow changed out in the open, she's put on her public face. Her movements are vigorous and decisive, she shrills and shouts at her sheep, puts her hand on her hip and watches us on the crag above her.

'Be well,' she shouts up at us.

We walk down to her.

'Mimi,' I say.

But she ignores me; it's Zoi she's looking at and her eyes light up with pleasure as she takes his arm.

'So you must be Angeliki's boy! Well, well, how you've grown. I remember you here when you were tiny, holding onto your grandfather's hand.'

Her voice is different too. It's become flat and nasal, the voice of every other village grandmother. Zoi helps her heave buckets of water from the weak, dripping tap to the trough. The sheep anxiously nudge me, climbing over each other to get to the brownish water.

Alcmene heaves herself onto a jutting rock. She pats at the flat space by her side and Zoi perches next to her while she takes his hand. She doesn't seem to be aware of my existence at all or perhaps doesn't want to show we have any prior connection. Or maybe she can't even remember yesterday. Maybe she's slipping into oblivion. She's no longer swimming in the child-like intimacy of her unformed thoughts, or alive to the quiet awe of the smallest detail. Today she's decent, hardworking, ordinary. She motions with her hand down the valley, tells us to stop for a glass of water at the house, her son is there. It's the Greek way of offering hospitality – *filoxenia* – literally, kindness to strangers: always underestimate the extent of the gift.

Her son is a fat boy with heavy-lidded eyes. We walk under the awning of the hut and surprise him dozing on a chair, but he stirs as soon as we appear. He doesn't look at me, addresses all his remarks to Zoi, and they kiss each other formally on both cheeks.

'My name is Yanni,' he says, flicking his hair self-consciously from his forehead.

His voice is thick and muffled; he has trouble forming the sounds. But his eyes are so kind I want to cry. He seems uninterested or vague about

the answers to his stock questions: where are you from, how long are you staying, are you married, I'm sorry, of course you are, with your wife expecting, do you like our mountains? I stop answering after a while. Soon I drift away to the edge of the terrace and gaze down at the sea until it becomes blurry.

Yanni places food on the table without asking if we're hungry. Warm tomatoes cut into quarters and swimming in olive oil; oil thick and rich and golden, from the trees bordering these crumbling terraces and abandoned houses. He sits and broods, asking after villagers he's not seen for months, here in his self-imposed solitude. Nobody comes to his house. It's too far, they insist. Too far up the mountains. Yanni is the one I've heard talk of as the village idiot, the butt of all their jokes. Sharp laughter behind their hands, sneers among the clatter of plates at evening meals, among empty glasses at the café. I hadn't paid much attention at the time but had been intrigued by the constant mention of his name.

It's Yanni who is laughed at by the shore-dwellers who have boats and women and children, who are men in the world; Yanni who did his eighteen months compulsory military service in another region and came home vowing never to leave again; Yanni who gives Zoi a black scarf hand-woven by Alcmene, demonstrating how it's worn, dangles it over his flushed forehead, he's so overwhelmed at the visit, sees perhaps six strangers a year; Yanni who mixes resin wine with cola and hands it to us in glasses with a scum of red dust on them; Yanni who hides up above the village among the shells of empty houses because he's young and impaired and afraid; Yanni whose mother comes running down the sloping path holding pies in her grubby hand, hot and flat and fried on a griddle, with goat's cheese inside; Yanni who brings us honey so old it's candied through, and smears it on the pies.

As we sit and sip and crumble our food into the oil, sopping it up, I look away down to the water so far below us and the wind rises, coating the glasses and plates and table still further with dust, until we too, just like Yanni and his mother, are dirty. Alcmene has built their hut beneath olive trees with gnarled branches, ancient roots thrust deep into the soil, red soil; the cave paintings of their forgotten ancestors.

15

THIS MORNING ZOI and I went for a walk to the village chapel. It's half-hidden among oaks; leaves casting patterns, a moving mosaic of copper and green. The one place we've both agreed would be ideal for our mythical wedding, where we could actually envisage getting married. And it's most propitiously the church of Saint Nicholas, patron saint of travellers. But not now, maybe sometime, later on, when things are different, better.

To the left of the chapel is an overgrown walnut tree with an old bell hanging from it, thick rope wound around the mossy bough, and a wide flat space for feasting and dancing. Zoi skidded over the fallen walnuts, crunching them under his muddy boots. We'd been fighting all the way up the mountain, arguing about what had happened in Athens, but without mentioning names. It deteriorated further when we got there.

'You know what's wrong with you, Zoi?' I said. 'You're too nice.'

He squatted in front of me and broke the fallen nuts open with a stone. Smashing hard, to make me jump. I watched the wrinkled meat of walnuts in his hands. He began eating them, raw and fleshy, white under crinkled skin.

'Nice,' I mocked. 'You can never think badly of anyone. Including yourself. You're afraid to really look at yourself, to take a good look at yourself.'

My voice was shrill, hunting him as he turned and strode away, crashing through the dry leaves and undergrowth that snagged at his trousers, twigs that tore at his legs. Thin lines of blood appeared on the pale flesh of his inner arm. He stopped and sucked at the drops springing up on his skin. I could still see him in the clearing through the trees.

'I should take a look at myself?' he yelled. 'What about you? Look at what you're doing to us. To your own child.'

He was still shouting and his voice was coming nearer now.

'Do you really think I don't know? I was stupid before, I didn't want to see, but now I know.'

I opened my mouth to speak. My hands moved to my belly as he came running toward me and I didn't realise what he was going to do until he was

standing over me. He put his hands to my throat. His hands large, black in front of me. Go on, do it. Show me how you really feel. Yet as I felt his fingers closing on my neck, they pinched only a moment and then became soft and caressing, circling my veins and tendons in strange, slow movements. I stood up unsteadily and he held me, his breath hard in my mouth. We staggered against each other, glued together in shared confusion. What do we do next? Can I forgive her? Can I trust him? I almost fell and he lifted me up a little under the arms.

'Zoi, I did want to hurt you, of course I did. But now – '

My breath was cut short. In an instant he had me down on the ground again and was bearing down on my shoulders with both hands and I became frightened for the baby and lashed out, kicking him in the groin.

'You bitch.'

He was gone, stumbling through the trees. I wanted to chase him, tackle him, hunt him down. Pinpoint him, wriggling, till he stopped and heard what I was saying. The sun was blinding. I got up slowly and untwisted the thin wire holding the chapel door shut. In the coolness of the interior, I sat on one of the chairs facing the altar. There was a peculiar smell in the air: damp, jasmine, old incense. A shaft of light through the western window fell on the altar screen. Two serpents met with open mouths, eternal, metallic green, glinting on either side of the altar, writhing against each other. I sank to the floor. It was so good in the cool. So good resting my head on porous stone, so good. The frescoed angels looked down at my inert body with no particular expression. I didn't know where to go next, what to do.

ALCMENE, WITH HER shadowed eyes and the raised mole behind her left armpit. I spy her naked tonight and want to press myself softly against her, in a moment of submission, perhaps tenderness. I've arrived at the hut in darkness, straight from the chapel.

'Can I stay here?'

Alcmene brews tea for me and puts me to bed in the middle of the room, sharing her own coarse blankets. I sit up among them and fish out floating flowers from the tea with my fingers, to suck at the petals. The dried flowers have swelled up and regained their colour and plumpness.

'What are they, Mimi?'

'Wildflowers I gather from the highest slopes. They don't have a name.'

She comes towards me and kneels close.

'You lie down and go to sleep now. I'll have a quick wash so I don't disgust you with my old woman smells.'

She goes outside and I can hear the bucket being lowered into the well. I stand up, teetering on my mound of blankets. I hide by the door and then step forward into a circle of light so Alcmene will know she's being watched. She doesn't look up to acknowledge my presence; continues to wash herself with slow deliberation, letting the water roll down the outline of her body in the light from the moon.

I want to touch her body, be familiar with it, become intimate with its secrets. But I can't. I stand apart instead and see the way time has sliced through her skin. Underneath my absurd pity, my fascination, is revulsion. Revulsion: for the body of a woman so different from myself. The marks of brambles and thorns, the sunspots and freckles on her arms and legs like burnt sugar. The skin thinning over her breasts, the girth of her, capable waist, thickness of thighs. I walk away in resignation and let her be.

As I turn over in the darkness I feel her slip in beside me. She's careful to keep to her side of the mattress. Then there's a sound and I sit up. The moon glistens gold and full in a tender sky.

'Sssh,' Alcmene soothes. 'It's only the animals talking to the ghosts.'

A donkey cry late at night. Immense sadness, mournful pain.

IN THE MORNING, I lie with Alcmene on the bed, sheets pushed down to my knees. It's a hot day, voluptuous in its humidity, its heaviness. The shutters are closed to keep out the heat and there's a green limpid light from the trees, thick leafed and luxuriant, clustering at the windows. A simple decadence about the way we lie there, together, like the hot mornings of summer holidays I would spend at home with my mother, not a care in the world. Alcmene boils white rice for breakfast, with sheep's milk and her precious store of sugar. We eat in bed, and I sit up and peel plums, watch the curling skins on my plate. Discolouring, turning brown, and still I haven't touched the slices of fruit, soft, gold, warm in the heat.

'Mimi?'

'What do you want, my child?'

'Were you never married?'

'Nobody in the village wanted me.'

'Oh?' I hesitate, looking at her slumbering face. 'Why not?'

She moves her lips very slowly and resolutely.

'Father gave me too much schooling for them. My head was always in the books. These men didn't want anyone who could turn out to be smarter than them.'

She opens her eyes, shockingly yellow, and turns her head to me. Her voice changes, ridiculing the accents of village matrons.

'All that book learning and where did it get her?'

She laughs a small dry laugh.

'At least I wasn't out tilling the fields for a man's brats, putting food on the table for them.'

'What do you mean?'

'The only one who wanted me was a widower. He had too many children and I was far too young. Only fourteen and didn't know how to cook or clean like the other girls. And as you know I had a baby of my own to look after.'

This she says under her breath, with sadness.

We drowse together, my leg beneath hers, afraid to move it for fear of waking her. My pins and needles are shooting stars, the electricity of my dreams. Lying on my side, the weight of my belly resting on a pillow, my mouth near her ear: I let myself breathe openly, long and deep, close my eyes, see the greenness of light from behind closed lids, open them again.

Alcmene snores gently. The birds outside argue. They fight about the position of nests. I close my eyes again, surrender to the greeny blackness. At the bottom of a still pool, an earthy pool in a forest glade. Lying on my side in the mud, sloshing my toes, squirming my fingers. Nostrils thick with soil. My child kicking out arms and legs inside me. A screen of leaves obscuring the sky. The sound of female voices as if from very far away: speaking a language of rises and falls, of drawn-out vowels. They carry me with them on these waves of sound, freeing my body, splitting consciousness. Am I here or aren't I? Grunting out my baby, looking up at the pattern of the oak-leaves, giving

birth with no effort at all. A sense of loss for only a moment – then release. A newborn child gurgling at the bottom of the still pool, hardly disturbing its tranquility.

Zeus and Chthonia, looking down. The Earth Goddess smiling. The Sky God with half-closed eyes, indifferent in his appraisal. My mother told me the story when I was very young, I didn't understand. Zeus married the Earth Goddess and wove the whole world as a mantle for her. He spread it over an oak, the world tree. There's beauty and ugliness here, good and bad in this story, haste and grace. He swiftly made her pregnant, as is the old way. She gave birth to the first being, the spherical god. He was only held together by the love principle, by the spirit of Eros. When Eros prevails, the world also is one, but when Neikos the god of discord arrives; the world crumbles, falls apart.

16

SYDNEY, SPRING, 2017

I SIT ON the front verandah, my mother in bed behind me in the dark room. I can't tell anymore whether she's asleep or awake. She can't move at all now, not even a hand. Her mouth hangs permanently open. She looks dead. I wish she were dead – for both our sakes. Then I feel guilty again for allowing the thought.

From my vantage point I can survey the length of Darlinghurst Road, watch homeless men carousing in the park opposite and women in black drinking lattes across the road, without being seen myself. My bare feet are up on the balustrade; I look across at my mother, crinkling my eyes against the glare of the afternoon. Her eyes are open, and she seems to be looking away, out through the French doors and over the span of rooftops and trees and the greyness of the hospital. She used to tell the story of her youth in a melodic, singsong voice, entering into legend, suspending disbelief. I can appreciate the story, the history; those two strands that will not mingle. I keep them deliberately well apart, while she blurred the edges, freeing herself from truth.

I've just washed her – the homecare nurse didn't come today. Mother's

hair is wet and her closed face is full of silence. Dusk settles over the narrow streets, deepening the violet shadows and the smell of wet earth. Tonight I'll leave her alone – with another pang of guilt – and go for a walk to the park with Pan. Zoi hasn't come back yet from his run, which is strange for him. It's already past six. I manoeuvre Pan through our narrow hallway. Have you got your jumper? Your ball? Satisfied he's well prepared, I close and lock the door behind us. My mother upstairs, still staring into the gathering dark.

Pan wants to walk in the gutter but I hold his hand. He points to houses and cars and exclaims at each one, trying to rhyme the words and sing them aloud. He breaks free from me and claps his hands in an ecstasy of his own making, bounces the ball into the road countless times. Finally we reach the far side of the park and I point to the waterlilies in the pond.

'Look, Pan. Look at the beautiful flowers.'

He runs to the water. There's only one child left, with a toy sailboat, intent on the game. He navigates around the lilies, squinting into the gloom. I sit on the park bench and watch Pan, his little figure almost obscured by the shadows of trees. I sit with my hands in my lap, resting. Allow myself to close my eyes. Just for a second. There are prickles of red and light behind my lids. I exhale, pressing my stomach with one hand. Out, in. I'm slowly relaxing: a balloon letting out air in increments.

Then I feel something behind me. A presence. An alert, inquisitive regard. I don't want to open my eyes, to see who's there. I take another three long breaths, counting them.

'Pan,' I call out, panicking.

He turns around. I swivel, peering at the bushes behind me. Nothing. I continue to watch Pan. He's fascinated by the boy with the toy sailboat. I feel the presence even stronger, as though I'm being watched from above. Hear a shuffle to my left, don't want to look. Then next to me on the bench, there Zoi is, sweaty and panting, smiling, but not at me. I can only see his profile. He's smiling at his son. His?

'Come,' he says, almost a whisper. 'Let's look at the lilies too.'

He turns to me, and smiles with that inclination of the head I remember so well. Pan looks up when we approach holding hands but continues to play with the boy. The lilies are large and smooth, upturned cups holding stamens

of gilded powder. Beneath them are orange and black carp, coloured like butterflies, their mouths echoing the openness of the blooms. The lilypads could be big enough to stand on comfortably and one of them cradles a pool of water, partly submerged beneath its weight.

'Listen,' Zoi says.

I look upwards, hearing birds, shivering ghosts singing themselves to sleep. The significance of his word is in the air, intangible, eluding me. I need more, need to know why I failed.

THE TV IS on in the corner of the room at Zoi's insistence, turned down low. Pan is asleep. We watch scenes of war in Iran: shelling, bombs, crumbling houses so far away from our reality, here in Sydney together. I feel a brief kick in the stomach at the suffering of others, their anguished mouths and eternal pain. But I turn away. Mine is a compound guilt: pity at their situation and the shame of not really caring enough to do anything. Then, inevitably, I think of Pan, wonder if he's too cold, too hot or crying, and hurry up to the bedroom to check.

He sleeps on his stomach, head turned away from the thread of light where the blind doesn't quite reach the window frame. I tuck in the sheet around him. He snores softly and I touch his head, still covered with fine gold down although he's nearly four. He responds to my touch by whimpering, and I kiss his hand where it peeps out from the sheet, before leaving the door half-open behind me.

In my mother's bedroom, nothing has changed. I stroke her hands, her arms, the tissue-paper skin of her cheeks and neck. She makes no movement, but her eyes are open again. She's not looking at me. I wish I could help her, help her in a way that doesn't mean killing her. In a swift burst of rage, I bring my hand down hard onto the bedside table, hurting myself. The stinging pain makes me feel as if I've changed the amount of suffering she has to bear – however incrementally.

Downstairs, Zoi's eating a mango, immersed in the sticky pleasure of the fruit. I'm aware mangoes are almost impossible to find in Greece, but he's eating it as if he's never seen one before in his life, holding the seed in both hands, dropping it in his lap, fine orange hairs snagged between his teeth. I look away from him to the TV screen.

'Zoi, I need you to help me do it.'

There's no answer. The mango is halfway to his mouth and his attention is caught by the figure of the Israeli president on the screen. The little man is screaming about justice and responsibility and truth and his eyes are glittering. Behind him, montage-like, come more images of desert and clouds of smoke and the charred remains of Islamic schools. A switch: Arctic sea ice melting more rapidly than before, frozen passages opening for the first time in recorded history, birds and animals dying. Governments have not heeded the warnings of scientists for a decade or more. By 2030, there will be no ice left. I lean over and turn it off.

'I said I need you to help me. I can't do it by myself.'

'Didn't I already bring the drugs halfway across the world for you? If someone had questioned me further, if they didn't believe my story – '

He shakes his head.

'I risked so much and now you want more. That's just like you.'

'Please, Zoi – I just don't know if I can do it. If you – if you ever loved me, help me do it, before you leave.'

He sighs.

'I need a drink, Mara, if you're going to be like this.'

I walk to the kitchen, bare feet making no sound on the wooden floorboards, pour him a large whisky and then bend over, elbows resting on the table. Curse myself for attempting to ask for his help, to make him understand what I haven't yet fully worked out. To absolve myself? I stay bent over and the fear of that summer in Greece washes through my body, paralysing me.

I could turn around and go back, hand Zoi his drink, could say next that we all exist, briefly, like moths against a flame, but it wouldn't be entirely true. In truth we don't even feel the moments pass. I could tell Zoi this and he could laugh, swishing the liquid around in his glass to make the ice-chunks rattle and he could tell me not to worry about it and I could turn away tired and angry and confused and regretful and what would be the point?

He comes up behind me, drops a kiss on my ear and I jump. He chuckles, bending over the sink to wash his hands of mango, and turns in a swift movement, flicking some water at me.

'Zoi,' I say, indulgent, inclining my head at him.

And we pretend to be friends in the quiet breathing of the kitchen. He still hasn't told me if he will help.

17

LITHOHORI, SUMMER, 2012

THE HEAT HAS finally abated and the family gathers in Pandelina's courtyard to eat hare stew. I saw it hanging in the kitchen this morning, skinned pink, with shot in its thigh. Kiki stands at the head of the table, ladling out meat and onions and potatoes, all in a viscous liquid. She knows not to offer me any but Pandelina is not so discreet.

'Is there nothing we can tempt you with?'

I get up and hold out my plate to Kiki.

'I'm going to give my portion to Mimi. Can you give me some now and I'll walk over there?'

'You can't leave now in the middle of dinner,' Kiki says. 'We'll give her whatever's left tomorrow.'

'No, I need to go now. Tomorrow will be too late for her to eat it fresh.'

Pandelina puts her hand on my arm.

'Even if there are leftovers I'm not giving her any. She can eat her own food from now on.'

I'm aghast.

'What's she ever done to you?'

'I'm sick of helping people who don't appreciate it. She's made her own mistakes and she can pay for them. She's not having any of my food.'

I wrench my arm away.

'Mara,' Zoi warns. 'Leave it alone now. Sit down. Sit.'

'Don't laugh at me, Zoi,' I spit out. 'Don't you dare laugh at me.'

'Nobody's laughing at you,' he says.

The way he says it, so flat and resigned and distant, makes me stop.

'I'm going to bed. I'm not hungry.'

'Mara.' Zoi puts his hand on my arm. 'Stay here until we're all finished.'

'Leave her,' Kiki says. 'She's tired. We all forget how bad it can be in the last months.'

I leave the table without saying goodnight or looking at Zoi. On my way through the dark laneway I bump into his brother.

'You scared me,' Dimitri says, 'running through here like that.'

He holds my arm up high as if he's suddenly going to twist it like a naughty boy.

'Let go of me, Dimi, I need to go to bed.'

'Hey, what's going on? Are they persecuting you?'

'No, they're not persecuting me. Glad you think it's so funny. I just lost it in front of everybody.'

'Again?'

I have to laugh.

'Come on,' he says, leading me by the hand. 'Let's go back and face them.'

I hesitate.

'No, Dimi, I can't. I'll just go back up to the house and try to sleep. Take care of yourself.'

He releases my hand. I watch him go. He let me refuse so easily. In the shadows, I inch slowly closer to the gathering and watch him arrive. Zoi stands up as his brother enters the lighted courtyard. He thrusts his hand out and they clasp each other for an instant. Tight fists, white knuckles. It's in that instant I can see Dimitri register the look on his brother's face, and realise that Zoi knows. Around them there are questions and talk and laughter and Kiki is ladling stew on his plate and his glass is being filled with wine. He finishes in one gulp. Flushing, he turns his head to look at Zoi. He lowers his head further until he's nose to nose and eye to eye with his brother. They could be mistaken for lovers contemplating their first kiss.

18

PANDELINA WAKES US when it's still dark.

Time to get up. It's already past six and our driver never waits.

She claws at Zoi, who pushes her away. I'm already sitting on the edge

of the bed picking sleep out of my eyes. When she's gone, we both put on our clothes with heavy movements. Zoi wets his head from a pitcher on the dresser.

Before we leave the grandfather's house, I notice that I've forgotten to take down my mother's photograph from the wall above the bed. I decide to leave it there, pressing it with my fingers more firmly against the porous stone. I don't know why I do but it feels right that the image of her should remain in the house, standing in slanted sunshine before her own narrow plot of land in Sydney, eyes squinting against the traffic dazzle from the street.

We run across the path to Pandelina's where she's made a hasty breakfast. I can't eat but drink the sage tea Pandelina brews, asking for another cup. We're in a tiny bubble of electric light here; all around us are houses and rooms of darkness where others lie asleep. Then I get up, swaying with weariness.

'Mimi. I have to see her before we go. I forgot all about her.'

Zoi stands and puts me back in my seat.

'We don't have time now. We'll write her a note.'

'No, I have to see her and say goodbye.'

'We said goodbye last night,' Zoi says, losing patience. 'At dinner. Don't you remember?'

'I'll tell her for you, my child,' Pandelina says. 'Don't worry about it. Come, let's go. It's twenty past.'

She hustles us into the courtyard, thrusting bunches of basil into our hands as goodbye tokens.

'Take this and smell it on the bus, Mara. It'll stop you from feeling sick.'

We stand at the bus stop clutching our luggage. The café opposite is dark and silent, the first time we've witnessed it so. Seeing it I'm forlorn, it's as if everything is futile now. We don't talk to each other and Pandelina is between us, hands on hips, stoically waiting too. She discourages conversation. Then there's light in the distance, the sound of a vehicle. We crane our necks forward and watch the blinking light become bigger and bigger until finally we realise it isn't the bus but a motorbike coming toward us.

'Dimi,' I shout, involuntarily, and turn to Zoi and Pandelina, apologetic. 'What's he doing up so early?'

We wait in silence as Dimitri brakes. He leaves the lights on and we're all illuminated in the greenish glare as he gets off.

'What are you doing here?' Zoi asks.

'I was out all night,' he says, addressing his reply to me. 'I rushed back to say goodbye to you.'

I step forward awkwardly and hold out my hand to him.

'Goodbye, then.'

He pulls me to him and kisses me on the cheek.

'I hope you'll be okay. I'll be back too in a few weeks, before the birth, I promise.'

'We don't need you to come back,' Zoi says. 'We'll be fine without you, I promise.'

Dimitri finally looks at his brother and Pandelina steps in, seeing the dangerous look in his eye.

'Time for us to go now, Dimitri.'

He doesn't turn around and she grabs his arm high up near the armpit.

'*Ela*, I said. You can give me a lift back.'

She gets on the bike, showing her fat legs in their rolled-up stockings, and all three of us can't help laughing after all as Dimitri revs the bike and waves goodbye.

19

WHEN EVENING COMES in Athens, the dying light spreads flat over the public squares and congeals like blood, egg yolk, tears on a cheek. When evening comes, the church bells on every street begin to clang for vespers. When evening comes, the protesters assemble on street corners and plan their next attack. Inevitably, they are tear-gassed and hauled off to prison, but there are always more. When evening comes, I stop on the landing between the second floor and the third, uncertain what to do.

Stars stud the milky glow of yet another sunset. One, two, then a group of three, come out at the same time. Tonight we walk the steep path to a special place overlooking the city and harbour. My tread is heavy now. I never thought I'd be one of those women who clutched their lower back

all the time when pregnant, but I do. Soaked with sweat, we sit on the cool ledge that wraps around all four walls of the chapel. It's a stone ledge worn by centuries of people, sitting, resting under the soothing cypresses. Hills with round shoulders crowd the trees.

When I turn my head finally to look at Zoi he's lying down and his head is thrown back. I put my hand out to touch his Adam's apple but draw it back again. His thin shirt sticks to his nipples. Then I touch him, with tenderness, as if I'm saying goodbye. Down the mountain; from the height we can reach after a half-hour walk the city looks careless, unstructured, thrown together as if by a child.

At home, it's a little after dinner. Kiki clears away the last of the plates, leaving Zoi lingering over his. He's a slow eater and still picking at the remnants of his food, delicate with his knife and fork. I've long since finished. Kiki doesn't serve us meals at the formal dining table any longer, as she did that first night. Only once did we have the honour – all family now.

I lean back and massage my belly. My navel protrudes like an olive. All day I've felt pains, woken at six in the morning thinking the baby must be coming today. But the contractions have been bearable, unpredictable. I was determined to have a morning swim then walked the whole length of the beach. When I got home, in the shower, the pain intensified. Now I feel needles pushing through my abdomen, a wrenching apart as if someone with huge solid hands has come to prise me open. Zoi looks at me. A gush of water. All about me now, the smell of the sea.

'You alright?'

'I think my waters have broken.'

I rush to the bathroom. The back of my dress is wet through. In the bathroom I sit on the toilet, shoulders hunched. My lips are dry.

'Zoi,' I call as loudly as I can. 'Zoi!'

Instead Kiki comes in, putting on her jacket, throwing her apron to the floor. A gesture so out of character, betraying her agitation.

'*Ela*, *ela*, let's go. Better there than here.'

'Where's Zoi?'

'He's putting your things in the taxi. Come, come, let's tie your hair back. We can't have you looking like a gypsy.'

She comes back with a pink elastic.

'I don't want to move.'

Kiki hoists me up by the elbow.

IN THE HOSPITAL I'm put in a wheelchair. Nobody seems to hear me. I can feel my wet dress sticking to the vinyl seat. In this moment, without the pain maddening me, I can sense the leaking between my thighs, the opening up to vulnerability.

'She's early,' I can hear Zoi saying. 'This isn't meant to happen until October.'

The orderlies wheel me into the ward, Zoi running alongside.

'You'll be fine,' he says.

The whole universe is an egg, as is the rising sun. In the Orphic texts, Chaos was created first, then Night and the round Abyss.

I'm rolled onto a bed very high off the ground, with pale blue sheets that crackle in their stiffness. The contractions are coming on strong now. Regular as a metronome, Zoi counting the spaces between. The time between pain is still, white and unruffled. I breathe easily, talk of nothing, joke with the cheerful midwives. Then the pain is red and sharp, dismissing all that came before. There's no time, no next moment. There will be no time in the future when pain doesn't exist.

'No drugs.' I can hear Zoi yell to the midwife. 'Not unless absolutely necessary.'

I can still register somewhere in the sane, quiet part of my mind that his Greek is very formal, almost aristocratic. He's talking down to the women around him, these women that hover around me like ministering sisters: calm, tender, with soft hands and soothing words. I hold his arm, bear down on it.

'Let me get up. I want an epidural.'

'No, no,' the midwife soothes. 'Try to kneel on the bed. Like a frog.'

The word in Greek sounds strange to my ears. I have no language now, no pleasantries; I'm one huge, black, roaring mouth. I want to squat on the ground. In the deep abyss Night gave birth to a wind egg. She moaned wordlessly in the time before language and pulled the egg out of her from open legs. Large and blue and with a shell so fragile it cracked at the force of her last birthing cry.

The midwives hold me up by the elbows. My sheets are splotched with blossoms of red. The doctor is called in. I lie on my back again, too exhausted to hold myself upright. The doctor's rubber-gloved hands are already spattered. He looks up over my knees to Zoi, gives him an encouraging look.

'Head's crowning. The hard part's nearly over.'

He puts his own tired face close to mine, whispers.

'It's up to you now, my girl. Push when I tell you, pant when I don't.'

He twists the baby's head gently, prising it with his fingers from my grip. I writhe, eyes so wide they can't see. Thus Chaos produced Chronos, which is never-ageing Time.

I feel the huge, hard egg between my legs, the burning, the impossibility of the task, the ludicrousness of it. The relief of blood lubricating me. I sit up, lean forward with both hands to catch my baby.

'Not yet,' the doctor cautions. 'Not yet.'

The shoulders are out and the rest of the body springs forth in a rush. I fall back onto the bed and the doctor pushes the baby up toward my belly, just one little push on its bottom, the cord dangling like a purple tail behind him. He's screaming and his face is scarlet.

In the split second before, the doctor held him and checked his air passages for mucus, the child was still. A second that lasted forever as we looked to the doctor, looked at the midwives, at each other. Then the magnificent wail. The doctor holding him high for a suspended moment and the baby's face raised up, mouth open, containing all. Numinous, as though in the presence of divinity.

In turn Chronos gave birth to an egg from which sprang a hermaphroditic god with golden wings, the head of a bull and springing from his head a snake. This god was called Phanes, the shining one.

My baby is slippery and shiny with blood and vernix. His white hair is plastered to his skull. I hold him in the crook of my arm, where he's heavy, limbs flailing. He begins to suck as if this is all he was born to do. My breasts are golden with colostrum, nipples big as plums. Zoi cuts the umbilical cord and a spasm passes over my baby's face as our bond is severed. I look at him and don't care who his father is. He's mine.

There is psychic wholeness in an egg, for it contains the whole world.

But the egg is split into two, into Earth and Sky. Then there's Zoi's face close to mine and my baby has his eyes open as he looks away, beyond us, into nothing.

20

THE HOSPITAL ROOM is bare, walls painted yellow to catch as much of the little sunshine that there is. It struggles wanly through gaps in concrete buildings, with crazy television antennae as far as the eye can see, on every apartment, every house, every hotel. Even as far as the Plaka quarter and the Parthenon, mercifully free of cables so high, yet shrouded in *nefos*, the mist of modern Athens. Those celebrated columns coated with multiple layers of dust. *Caryatids* hold up the pediment of the south wing, mute, long suffering, their wide eyes blinded by pollution. Dust so thick on the wall opposite my window it furs like the skin of an unknown animal. Waving in the breeze blowing high above buildings, down elevator shafts, looping through the fissures between balconies.

I pull myself into a sitting position, prop myself on two pillows. This way I can even catch the flame of the city far away, faintly erotic in winks of light. I notice there's no phone on my bedside table. I want to call my mother today, even if she won't understand a word. Say to her, he's beautiful. He wasn't a mistake. I'm not aware of anything much except his breathing in the plastic crib by my bed, mauve creases covered by a thin blanket, cloth-nappied bottom in the air. Other concerns exist only on the periphery of my thoughts. When the pain of the stitches disturbs me, it tears through the veil momentarily. But I can't move from this position once I've found it, balanced on the small of my back, squashed on the thin mattress.

My body's soft and moist and relaxed but it feels no desire. So strange, this dead feeling, for the first time in so long. All that passion and striving, eradicated. All that prodding and poking after the birth. The lilypad placenta, glowing unnaturally under fluorescent lights. I wanted to take it with me, bury it under a fig tree in Kiki's garden, but the midwives whisked it away before I could formulate my intention. I felt like a clammy-mouthed child, an alien who had given birth to something more alien than

me. Beneath it, a sense of violation, as if I should have given birth in secret, under cover of darkness.

The sheet is stippled by light. My baby continues to sleep. His name is Pan, we decided last night. Pandeleimon, a medieval saint. I wish he was in bed with me, but when I fell asleep this morning with my arm beneath him the nurses came and took him away, scolding, telling me it's too dangerous. I know now that it's the most natural thing in the world. I take him back from them every time, wake from my naps in between feeds with him nestled between my breasts.

There's a light tap on the door, a grazing of the fingertips. The door opens and Zoi comes in grinning, his right eyebrow cocked in a question. I see with blurred disappointment he isn't holding any flowers. Not even a box of chocolates. He was always one for upholding the clichés, the received manner of doing things. He's wearing his best suit; just come quickly to see me on his lunch break. He didn't wear it for me. His silk tie, Italian, chosen with so much care by me in the mirrored atrium of an Athenian department store, flops out of his back trouser pocket. He's somewhat embarrassed, as though having accidentally stumbled into a daydream of mine.

'You awake? Up to a visitor?'

'I could do with some company.'

We speak to each other like strangers, enunciating the words clearly with rounded vowels. He drops a kiss on my mouth, his tongue meets mine briefly, a flash of recognition, and then I abruptly shut my mouth. I look away from him and over to where Pan lies, eyes wide open now, strange sightless grey eyes staring up to nowhere. The innocent unpeeled eyes of an underwater creature unaccustomed to seeing, with a scum of grey over blue, obscuring the real colour beneath.

'Can you pick him up and bring him to me? Has he changed since you last saw him?'

Zoi picks Pan up with confidence, and I quickly scoop him into my arms.

'He was covered in a lot of blood then. Much prettier. And you. Slept all morning, I hope. You seem rested.'

I shake my head, wanting him to acknowledge my fatigue regardless of the facts.

As he bends over me and Pan I can see he's struggling to speak and I know one of those intense unexplainable waves of love has come over him. His eyes glitter with tears, wells of water that stay there, caught dangling on the rim of the eye without being shed. Pan stirs, moving his head with his limbs kicking, wanting to free themselves from the folds of the thin blanket wrapped around him.

'Take him,' I say.

But he's afraid now and hesitates, putting out his finger to touch the white floss at the top of Pan's head awkwardly, as if approaching fire. As he does so, there are whispers and giggles on the other side of the door and loud knocks.

'Not your parents. I told you not to let them come so soon. Tell them I'm asleep or something –'

He's already at the door, shrugging his shoulders at me with an agonised expression. There are bottles of whisky under the men's arms and the women bear arrangements of flowers like trophies.

'*Mara mou*,' they chirp. 'May the child live for us.'

I straighten my nightgown and sit up. I'm glad Dimitri hasn't come. Can't manage a smile. It doesn't matter. They don't see, swooping down with kisses on each cheek, male whiskers and ouzo breath, smears on the side of my mouth. Good wishes for the mother and child.

'Why have him unbound as soon as he's born? He could hurt himself.'

Kiki croons loudly at the baby.

'Your mother doesn't know how to look after you, does she, my golden one? Grandma will take you home soon and you'll be fine.'

'I don't think so,' I say.

The room is very silent.

'What do you mean?' Zoi asks.

'I thought we could try and find a place of our own.'

'We haven't even discussed it yet. Why bring it up now?'

'Now is as good a time as any.'

I smile.

'Don't you think a young couple and a baby need some space of their own?'

Kiki nods. She seems stunned. The other women sit on the bed in tacit support of her and it sags at the corners, the bedsprings creak in protest. Zoi's father asks if he can smoke if he leans out the window.

'No.' I almost scream at him. Then I collect myself, ashamed at my reaction. 'I'm sorry but we'd rather you didn't.'

Amazingly, Pan doesn't cry through any of this, merely continues to look about with his wide unperturbed gaze. Kiki attempts to appear industrious and bustles about the sink, fussing with the flower-wrappings, calling for a nurse to find vases, pouring whisky and handing around glasses.

'Look, Mara,' Zoi says.

He dips his finger in his glass, moistens it and holds it to Pan's mouth. Pan slurps it up greedily.

'See, he likes it.'

'Zoi, don't do that. It's not good for him.'

'Come on. It's good luck.'

Kiki spreads her hands out wide as if to encompass us all.

'Now, now,' she says. 'Let's not ruin this special day.'

Her voice is ringing, bright. The room is too quiet.

'Let's cut the cake I bought instead. We can't celebrate without cake, can we?'

She croons at Pan, bustles about with the glossy box and plastic forks, handing each member of her family a perfectly folded paper napkin. The cake is an improbable confection of shaved almonds and mock cream, the icing dyed a violent blue. On top of it are piped the words in Greek, *May the beautiful boy live for us!* Kiki cuts into the calligraphy savagely, destroying the pale blue cream roses.

'Thank you, I don't want a piece.'

I hold up my hand as Kiki stops, poised to give me a slice.

'Really. I can't.'

She's shocked. 'But it's for the future of your son – just a bite. For the good fortune of it. Please.'

I take the slice, nibble the corner. I'm furious at Zoi for being so ineffectual, for allowing this family of his to shatter my sense of self, trample over

these precious bubbles of time. He stands at my side like the good father, the perfect image of the conventional couple, smiling, talking to this one and that with grace and ease. I distrust him for his acceptance of them, for his lack of strength. The rest of the family stands against the hospital walls in silence, eating their pieces of cake.

21

THEY'RE GONE. ON every available space in the room are arrangements of flowers, the kind with silver helium balloons and signs exclaiming *It's a Boy!* in requisite powder blue. Garish colours, orange and red and yellow gerberas, those graceless blooms, impaled in florist's foam and crucified on wire, a stake through the heart of the bud. But I don't care. My eyes are closed and I'm drunk on the waves of fragrance from the heavy drooping heads of flowers.

Amber light from an oil-lamp wreaths Pan's face. Kiki placed an icon behind it; Pandeleimon, his namesake saint who bled milk and honey from his wounds when he was martyred. Shadowed eyes, a thin layer of gold leaf circling his upraised head, the metallic aura of his divinity. And Pan, lying in the crook of my arm, has for an instant turned his head toward the saint's solemn face.

Zoi and I lie on the bed, my leg over his buttock, his arm flung across my stomach. A moment. All is healed, if only for this brief white space of time. It's raining; dove-grey then silver sheeting through the city. White light outside, rain trickling through shards of sun like glass. His mouth locks onto my nipple, a drop of colostrum oozes into his body like light, the same light. Thin blood, rose-coloured, fading or brightening into white. Trickling out of brown nipples like rain.

'Stop now. Don't waste it.'

I breathe the words. They're caught between my lips. Zoi lies back, blissful, aware only of this, the quiet pleasure, the soft low deep throbbing in my right breast. My hand cups his head at the crown, caressing the smoothness of scalp through thick hair.

22

ATHENS, 2013

ATHENS IN A twilight hush. The café already shut down, one table remains occupied. I take a sip from my glass, my third drink after Zoi spilt the second, put it down again without having tasted what I was drinking this time. I feel his eyes on my brows, resting on my mouth, finally stopping at my eyes. The late summer wind picks up my skirt and lifts the fine hairs on my legs.

'You don't understand, Mara. I'm bound to this place, these people –'

'Against your will,' I finish for him. I know the routine by now.

We turn away from each other, looking out at the sea. Ferries ply out into the horizon, to islands and Levantine coasts I can only dream of now; remote shores Zoi dismisses with contempt. The last boat tips out of vision, swallowed by a trick of light. I order coffee and the reluctant waiter puts the tiny cups down with force on the white tablecloth. Zoi tries to leave after paying for the unfinished drinks.

'See you at home. I have to go back to the hospital – I forgot some papers I'm meant to read this weekend.'

He shoves a bill into my hand.

'Here, your taxi fare. I'll be back in about an hour.'

I nod, feel my eyes blurring, turning the street-lamps into washes of colour. He pats my arm where it rests on the table.

'Zoi. Don't leave yet. Let's walk to the beach.'

We walk close together but don't hold hands. It's now I begin to see, like the dawning of some insurmountable storm, that I intend to leave him. That I've been planning it for weeks, if not months. It's there, the elegant certainty of it, in the silence between my words. I don't love him like that anymore. I don't love him, never loved him, only the idea of him. Yet I can't let myself think that. I still love him but something's missing. There have been too many travesties.

The sea is dark, infinite. It's easy for us to plunge into, forget ourselves in its vast illusion. I dare him to go in first, wanting to push him into proving himself. Lightning flashes messages we can't understand in the sky. I glimpse

him as the sea rushes toward me in a white glare of light; he emerges close to the shore, grabs my leg, a pearl drop of water fastened on his earlobe like a baroque earring. I shed my clothes and join him, guarding against the shock of cold, but the sea is warm, familiar.

The first drops of rain fall like diamonds into the water and we float on our backs watching. Lightning comes quicker and quicker in flashes of code and thunder answers it far away from the coast of Turkey. As the rain pelts harder Zoi presses himself into me. I flail out of his grip, lurch out of the water, hiding under the trees. He chases me. I want him to look at my body, now so changed. Belly like stretched silk, a trickle of salt down my leg. I want the indelible material imprint of me to follow him when I'm gone, whether his eyes be open or closed, like the dark circle of the sun behind your eyelids when you've gazed at it too long. It's a selfish, brutal impulse, I know.

Yet when we finish our swim nothing has changed and dissatisfaction dances between us like a third person. We play at lust, touch each other lightly, tentative, but desire has been snuffed out, extinguished, consigned to memory. Zoi puts clothes back on his damp body with irritated movements, wanting to leave the empty, flat expanse of shore.

When he's gone, I sit on the pebbles for what seems like a long time. I want to go back to Pan, my body aches, my brain is filled with thoughts of his top lip, the sucking blister there, his tiny fingernails, his frown, but something keeps me here. The port glints far away in the last light and the fishing boats are bright for a moment, tossed on a sheet of water. Paper boats, makeshift jetties, improbable dolls' houses silhouetted against the hill. Large white birds crowd around with fluffed feathers, watching me with red eyes, waiting for nonexistent scraps. I realise these birds I once thought so strange, unclassifiable, foreign, are only seagulls, bigger than most, noisier than most, but only seagulls after all. I get up and they scatter and squawk to circle around me faint, then fainter, until they drop out of the sky into blackness.

When the cold of the approaching night becomes unbearable I decide to catch a taxi to the port. Part of me doesn't want to go back to the apartment yet, field Kiki's questions, chuckle over the television. I dread being in the brightly lit room, sitting on the sofa, murmuring of the weather and what

we'll eat tomorrow, crossing and uncrossing my legs, shifting loudly on the plastic covering. Helping lay the table under the fluorescent bulb. Oiling the salad. Pass the lemons, Kiki says, no, don't cut it like that, this is the way, my awkward smile, Kiki's quick roll of the eye.

Pan is fine, I tell myself. He's had his fill of playing, fed my expressed milk, rocked in a sling till he's fast asleep and tucked into bed. I don't want to go back, watch Dimitri and know he feels my eyes on every angle of his simple movements; the crossing from the lounge to the fridge, the raising of the drink to the mouth, the flash of a smile thrown at me out of pity.

I walk aimlessly around the docks, stopping at lighted street corners, resting. I'm accosted by taxi-drivers and sailors. Students with placards block the main street out of Piraeus. The wind throws leaves in my path; they become caught in my hair. This strikes me as a beautiful thing. Beauty. How my life has been lacking it. Security. Yes. I begin walking faster, seized with a will to leave, to take Pan with me, to see my mother, to be safe.

I take a taxi home through narrow white streets, mouldy plaster, oblong windows with frosted panes looking out onto nothing. The apartment is silent. I check on Pan; the glass lamp in front of the icon smatters a web of light on the wall. Casting shapes shrouded, then naked, with a sudden clarity.

'Mara.'

I pull a face. Dimitri sees it and is immediately at my side, his mouth close to mine. I can smell his breath; sour, distinctive. It reminds me of the last time we were together and I turn away.

'What's your problem with me all of a sudden? '

I back away. Dimitri follows close behind, almost stepping on my heels. I wheel around and bark at him in a whisper, face distorted with the intensity of my fury.

'Would you just leave me alone?'

He continues to follow me while I cover Pan more securely and sit on the edge of the bed.

'What do you want, Dimitri?'

'Nothing.' He sits down beside me, stares into my face. 'How do you know Pan isn't mine?'

'I don't know.'

He swallows; I can hear the saliva in his mouth in the silence.

'I'm so sorry, Mara.'

'So am I. And I don't know whether we should find out.'

'No. No, Mara. Leave it as it is. You will never find anyone who loves you as much as my brother does. I told you that.'

'Even you?'

'Even me. I'm sorry.'

'We're all sorry, I think. Especially your poor mother – '

The two of us begin laughing, rocking silently on the bed in twisted mirth.

'Ssh,' I say. 'We'll wake Pan. I can't sleep yet. Can you?'

He shakes his head. We feel our way down the corridor and he turns on the TV.

'Turn it down. We don't want them all waking up. Imagine what they'd think.'

We collapse into another convulsion of laughter. Dimitri points. It's an old Greek movie; one of those black-and-whites with a virgin village girl, a love triangle, and a lot of dancing and singing. We've seen so many of them they're interchangeable. The young girl perches on a mountaintop and opens her mouth to sing. She's frumpy, with a headscarf and hammy makeup, but she's singing a song of our grandparents, a song of our childish dreams. Dimitri is mesmerised. He turns up the volume and murmurs beneath her voice.

I will steal all the roses, from your rose bush, to see what you will find tomorrow to place in your hair; I'll come at night time, when you're sweetly sleeping, and I will climb, slowly, slowly, all the stairs. . .looking at me, his face beaming. He sings the word*s slowly, slowly* for a long while in Greek, pausing for emphasis before the next phrase, wiggling his finger. He prances around the room mouthing the words, skidding on the marble floor, holding his arms out.

'No, they'll hear us.'

But his enthusiasm is too infectious. Soon I'm dancing, singing to him as we twirl around and around, hair blinding me, pyjamas flapping about his legs, stepping on each other's bare toes.

There's a third voice there, coming from the shadows of the hall. We fall

apart from each other. Zoi emerges into the whitish light of the TV screen, arms folded across his chest. He's singing brokenly, singing off-key with a frown on his face.

And from your pot plant, so that you remember me, I will steal the slyest, and the smallest rose.

He stops midway, before the village girl does.

'See, Mara. I can do it too.'

With that he turns and leaves us together in the flare of the screen.

EPILOGUE

SYDNEY, LATE SPRING 2017

THESE MORNINGS I often wake early, before my mother and Pan. Today I wake even earlier, when the sun is a mere pearl glow behind the roofs of houses. Zoi's flight has just taken off and I didn't go with him to the airport. He decided to leave a week early. He didn't stay to help me. Part of me understands this, and forgives him. But I feel so bereft. I stand by the window and look up at the sky. It's Pan's first day at preschool. I arrange his bag on the kitchen counter: drink bottle, lunchbox, face-washer, a clean T-shirt and shorts, just in case.

All I hear in this hot breathy silence is the clink of ice in my glass as I drop cubes in one by one. Large ice cubes slightly rounded at the edges, in a tall glass of water. I stand by the window and drink, watching nothing in particular. I'm hungry, but it's a deep hollow need, not easily satisfied. I'd like to gorge on double cream and chocolate and jagged bits of toffee, substitutes for love, but I know how I'll feel afterwards.

I sit at the table I now adore, appreciate with the nostalgic tinge of perspective. This scrubbed pine table, scene of so many silences, so much sullenness in my teenage years. The time I came home high, and my mother had no idea. I sat at one end of the table and pushed a solitary pea around my plate. The night I pushed her hard against the wall, heard her bones crack with the impact. So many misdirected passions. The table has gouges and marks on its surface, testaments to my small frustrations when I sat, listening to the radio, watching my mother's back at sink or stove, doing homework. Its scrolled legs like an arthritic woman's. It seemed so imposing when I was a child, the table I'd hide under and listen to the secret stories my mother would tell other adults, Greek neighbours sipping thimbles of coffee, her few friends.

Now I realise how small the table is, far too low for someone of my height; only little malnourished people like her can tuck their legs comfortably beneath it. Pan, until recently, would only sit at his high chair. Not any longer, now he likes big chairs, peeping out from the edge of the tabletop. I look at his chair now, abandoned in a corner of the kitchen, too beautiful to

stow away. I painted it eggshell-white with the shape of a duck cut out on the back. That was the first word he ever said in English. Duck.

I go upstairs, watch my mother narrowly from the bedroom door. Her blankets are bunched at her feet in a thick wad and the full nappy under her nightgown makes her look bloated. Mouth open, head flung back, she looks more like a corpse than ever. The room smells bad, of closeness and old skin. Her eyes are closed, and I pray she's sound asleep. I listen; a rattly sound of breathing, the slight rise and fall of her chest. Her throat looks so vulnerable in the rising light. If I'm going to do it, I should do it before Pan wakes up. There's no nurse coming today. I can call the undertaker afterward, just say she died in her sleep, that I found her like this. Will there be an autopsy? Will they see the puncture mark under her toenails? My hands are shaking, my wrists and knees turned to water. I open her mouth wider with two of my fingers; syringe the liquid sedative down her throat. She splutters, gags, subsides. I wait, my heart beating in my ears. She's somehow stiller now. I can hardly hear her breath. I lay out the morphine and Nembutal on her bedside table, already mixed together with urea and sodium. I unwrap the plastic from the other syringe, make too much noise.

As I snap off the ampoules and click the needle on, she stirs. I stand frozen by her side, watching her face. Her eyelids flutter, straining against the light, and she finally opens her eyes. I turn my back; start working faster. The needle is ready, chilly and solid in my hand. Over my shoulder, I glimpse her lips, pursed now, as if she's making the effort to speak. Come on, I tell myself, she hasn't spoken for years. Come on, stop imagining things. Do it. I kneel beside her, breathing heavily, and kiss her slowly on the forehead. I trace the sign of the cross with my right hand on her chest, near her heart, three times. I don't know why – but I remember her doing it to me as a child before putting me to bed. The needle's shaking so much now I don't know if I can find the strength to jab it in. I push the loose blankets up to her knees, expose her weak, white feet, the bony shins. I imagine heaving forward, pushing down on the needle until there's nothing left. Her eyes are wide open now, and I reach forward with my other hand to close them, but she resists.

'Damn you!' I yell at her. 'Damn you for making me do this.'

I look around, fearful I've woken Pan. Take a deep breath. I try to position my hand so it will be easy to stick the needle in. It's now shaking so hard it has a mind of its own. Oh God. I can't. I put the needle on the table, try to breathe deeply. I can hear the wet sound my breath makes as it goes in and out. I'm going to vomit. My mother settles into herself, sighs. Did I hear it, or just imagine it? I sit on the edge of the bed looking at the needle, filled to the brim. Then at my mother, now so peaceful, sedated. I can't do it.

I stretch out next to her on the bed, facedown. She's warm, damp. My mother. Mum. Oh, Mummy. I sob, heaving against her, rubbing my face and tears and snot all over her nightgown. She's inert, wooden. My hands clutch her legs as though without her I might float, or fall, away.

'Where's my daddy?'

I jerk up, quickly hide the needle under the packet.

'Why are you up so early, love?'

'Where's Daddy?'

'He's gone back to his home, but he'll be back very soon. Remember? He promised.'

His face has contorted.

'Oh, Mummy,' he wails. 'I'm so sad. Make me feel better.'

I hug him. His tiny, hard body clings to mine. His tears – sudden, huge drops like rain – wet my shoulder and hair, and he's crying for my mother, for Zoi, for me. I seem to be falling further, losing myself again, but I continue to hold him, murmuring in his ear. Within a moment or two, he's fine again. I lead him away from his grandmother for a glass of water, and he replenishes himself after all the tears.

I'VE PLANTED A jacaranda in the backyard, still a sapling; its spindly branches draw ever-changing patterns on our skin as it grows. Pan is a mottled frog with his stained T-shirt and grimy shorts. It's after dinner, and he eats a lemonade iceblock so passionately his face is furrowed with the effort.

'Just this once,' I say to him. 'Only because it's such a special day.'

He nods, understanding the boundaries. Licks syrup from his elbow, and says confidingly, 'You know, Mummy, I don't miss Daddy as much as I thought.'

I feel an upsurge in my heart close to pain, gather his skinny limbs in my arms.

'You're a brave boy, Pan. Braver than Mummy. Braver than all of us.'

He shows me a painting he did at preschool today. He points, weary, when I question him, as if explaining something obvious.

'See? There's the sky and clouds. You and Daddy and me are lying down on the grass. And the flowers are waiting for rain.'

I look closely at the picture. The three stick figures are replete, covered over with green and brown scrawls. The pink flower blobs have smiling faces, every one.

'Where's Grandma?'

'She's up in the sky. See? Her face is peeking out from behind one of the clouds.'

I lean back with him on my lap, resting all my weight on my wrists. My mother and her pain, her imminent death, is a dark voice from the past, nothing more. The telling of stories and movement of hands, emerging from stipples of light and shade. Pan yawns, his stomach full of ice and chemicals now. I carry him inside, inhaling his cocktail of soil and sweat and sugar; wanting to remember it, keep it in my nerves forever. He's grown heavier – I haven't had to hold him so much with Zoi around in the past few weeks. We plunge into the darkness of the hallway. I undress him and bathe him in the old tub with lavender soap and toys for company. After being splashed many times I finally put him to bed, read him a book, then another as he asks for it, and another. I tuck him in, tenderly telling him a story of my own, a simple, weightless tale about a mummy and daddy who love each other very much but can't live in the same place. Not for now, anyway. I'm not sure how much he understands. He seems content, though, happy to know that Zoi will come back soon and we'll all go to the zoo together, and on the harbour in a big boat.

I hold him in my arms then stretch out beside him, my face close to his on the pillow. The room darkens. I keep my hand on his back; he likes the weight of it as he drifts off. I sing a half-breathed phrase in Greek. *And from your pot-plant, so that you remember me, I'll steal the slyest, and the smallest rose*. He's taking longer than usual to fall asleep, his fingers working at my hair, my

neck, my wrists, tickling me. I'm now singing the entire song for the third time, fighting off an intense sensation of panic. I want to get out of the room, compose myself before I go in to my mother. I coach him in a whisper, straining to keep the irritation out of my voice.

'Time to sleep, love. Mummy's right here. Relax now, think of beautiful things.'

'Like what?'

'Flowers, trees, the ocean. Cats, baby birds, grandma's hands.'

'I'll think of you and my Daddy,' he murmurs, and my heart contracts again.

In the next instant his eyes are fluttering, his mouth trembles a little with an unexpressed word, and he's silent. I lie with him for a few moments longer, breathing in rhythm with him, watching how sleep overtakes his face. His features smooth over; become ageless, amorphous. He could be Zoi sleeping, head upflung, flat on his back, or Dimitri, dreaming peacefully. I kiss him one last time and close the door, not leaving it ajar as I normally do.

My mother's eyes are open. This time she looks dead beyond doubt, and I wonder if the sedative has worn off. I curl up near her on the bed and watch the sun suck itself out of the sky through the French doors. She smells of age, urine and soap, unfamiliar. Not the mother I knew. I place one of her limp hands on my chest, feel my heart beat through her inert fingers. The sun pales and shudders. Gone. I can't hear the traffic on Darlinghurst Road any longer. Or see the tree at the window. Outside is my mother's village, Zoi's, anyone's. Great folded mountains like sleeping ghosts.

On my mother's headboard is the snapshot of my father taken at the temple of Poseidon. He faces the sun through oval glasses, apples of artificial rose painted on his cheeks. Prospective husband. Stranger. Man in a cheap dark suit, with a squint in his eye. I still can't believe he was my father. And that I still care for him so much. Nearby is a photo of Dimitri, peeling off in the heat. He looks uncharacteristically solemn. There is Zoi in Efes, laughing into the camera, teasing me. And now Zoi is gone again, when I allowed myself for a moment to hope he would stay. He told me once that even if we never saw each other again his love would hover about me like a benediction. This was in Efes, when his conception of our future had been extravagant,

baroque. I'd been touched, transformed by his admission, tricked by my desire for the tragic love that lasts a lifetime. Impossible. Love like that doesn't exist.

There's a framed photo on the bedside table, my latest of Pan. His head fills the whole space; eyebrows cocked like Dimitri's, that crooked mouth wide in a toothy smile. The photograph has managed to capture the translucency of his skin, the softness of his chin and cheeks and the goldfire of his hair, as he stands posed in the sun under the jacaranda. A haze of purple seems to envelop his head like a petalled nimbus.

The photographs in their tarnished frames are mute behind glass. They tell no stories. My mother has survived them, with her silenced voice and the stillness of her hands. Resilient still, with only one photograph of herself. Perhaps it's still tacked to the wall in the village house, edges curled up and splitting, colours fading into the dampness of air. She stirs slightly and opens her eyes, looks at me. Really, she's looking at me, seeing everything. Behind her the wall is blurred, no faces visible, only a flat vivid sheet of blue.

Katerina Cosgrove was born in Sydney in 1973. She completed a BA Comm (First Class Honours) in 1996, a Doctorate in Creative Arts (Australian Postgraduate Award) in 2003 and tutored at UTS. Her first novel *The Glass Heart* was published by HarperCollins in 2000, and also published in Greece. Katerina was a judge for the NSW Premier's Awards in 2007. Her latest novel, *Bone Ash Sky*, has been completed with the assistance of a grant from the Australia Council for the Arts, and a six-week residency in Ireland. It was shortlisted for the Australian Unpublished Manuscript Award in 2011.

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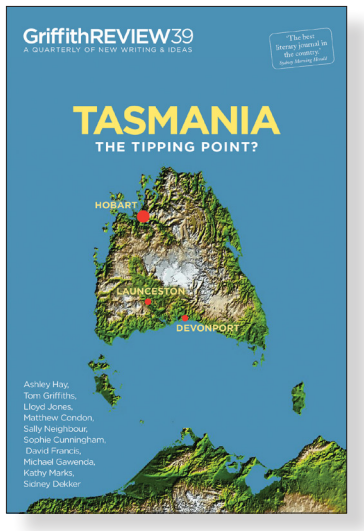

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