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Crow Experiments

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I

Measures

Under water the pockmarked face of a boulder will soften
into international measures. Cobbles the size of a human child
will melt, in time, into pebbles the profile of a sparrow's egg.
We walk the long estuary where the semi-enclosed body of water
mingles in layers of lucid gold and milk. Your face is coastal,
your eyes slate. They map the hills and fallows of the track
before your feet. Our conversation slips like lumbering cattle,
the ground we cover immeasurably diluted by the last
week of storms. You are three hundred days of rain. When we reach
a fairway I tell you, without metaphor, how the saltwater mingles
with the lighter freshwater into a zone where water erodes
water. In the sun the tidal action of swell and deflation unsettles
the bed of the inlet. That is to say, I speak only of the sea.

The Fire

His wife moves outside to join him on the patio where he chain smokes cigarettes in the blustery evening. She sits, wrapped in her nightie. Before them the garden is brown and overgrown. He can tell she is uncomfortable resting on her own bones because she shifts from one buttock to the other like someone singing themselves a tune. In the morning when she showers he makes her laugh when he forces out a farcical soprano. 'Ara-la-la!' He holds her hand as she shakily toes onto the fish bathmat. She rounds her back and he curls her hair into a whispered bun. 'We have each other,' she says when she's lost for another rational argument. He makes her toast and, some mornings, crumpets with a dribble of honey. She can't read anymore so he invents games. 'The crumpets are gold medals,' he says and takes an overly large mouthful. She nods, 'Yes what a funny idea, ha ha,' and as she swallows the skin on her throat quivers like a flame. In the sitting room he puts on the Beatles but she's already gone to lie down. As a young man he worked in a record store. He wore stovepipe jeans and a button-down shirt. One afternoon he'd finished his shift and was going to meet a friend by the river. He had to pass the council flats he'd always joked were the modern equivalent of a decapitated head on a spike. That day people crowded at the base of one building as a fire billowed behind a fifth-storey window. He had to stop and watch: the window blackened as flames sucked against the glass. He felt the heat of the people around him as they jostled and yelled reassurance that the Irish family who rented the room were at work and everyone was sure, they'd checked twice, that the building had been properly evacuated. The crowd vibrated with the mood of a carnival or a street riot. Theories were exchanged about the cause of the fire. Children pushed and dared each other with playground goads to go closer. He too felt unconcerned. He felt a sort of joyful undoing and for a second the dizzy impulse to take off his shirt. He felt like he—or any of them for that matter—could achieve miraculous things. And just as the woman next to him linked his arm, the window shattered into the air. The crowd curdled inward.

Bees

On a barren hexagon of land he builds her house. He grades and stakes it for the concrete pour. He hauls great limbs of pine that cut his hands and strain his back until the frame rises like a mighty Saguaro cactus filling with rain. One evening there is a fat cloud of bees. They hum like worn out machines and rising canals. They hum into his empty spaces. He starts to sheath the frame, and each morning walks the skin of the house, cigarette in hand. He taps the hollows and listens for a riff of wings.

Relief

His neighbour, the girl with a mop
of blonde hair holds two sticks of chalk. She hovers
as she draws along the concrete wall,

a white moth in the yard of their housing block.
Stick-legged deer bobble along her side.
Her mother hides just inside her doorway

speaking into a phone. 'Hello neighbour,'
he wants to say, or 'That wind last night,
it nearly tore off the roof.' When pressed he jokes

he never had a mother. Sure, a woman
pushed him from her body and afterward he lived
with her in a sound townhouse. One year men

swarmed over the walls, scraping and steaming
off the old paint. The noise went on for weeks until the radio
blended into a single tone, like a groan of pain.

One Sunday (the day the men disappeared) he climbed
into the canopy of scaffolding and ropes. Buckets
teetered and drew long megaphone shadows. With a nail

he scoured his name into the fly ash and slag cement.
I am here. As an after-thought he outlined the Siberian Moose
he'd seen in Readers Digest: one thousand pounds

with antlers raised like the palms of a man.
We can live our whole lives alone. Booming grunts roll
through the blue city night.

When the Sister walks

The trail is damp so she gathers up the hem
of her habit and scolds her own impatience

as she steps over roots as thick as a boy's wrist. She
is not at her best. When she left he gently pressed

his tattooed palm to the glass barrier. He said,
See ya Sister. He made a joke – *See you tomorrow*.

He watched her face while she recited from her red-
edged bible. Finally, like a child, his head rested down.

At the lake she makes towards the witness tree,

she holds aside a low-hanging hickory, the seed-nut rattle
exciting a family of yellow-back wasps. They scatter

like bright marbles, afraid or maybe angry.
She cries out, *Oh – oh* – and stumbles

away from their hide. They are sucked into an undulating
bubble of yellow and vibrate up into the trees.

They haven't hurt her. It is nothing,

but on her knees she says, *Oh God, I am thankful
for you*. She wipes a dirty finger across her cheek.

Voices

Sometimes the parts of a man stop working. He might be calcified and brittle. He might be diabetic and crumple and suck away like a parachute. He is a boy again racing his red bike in a figure eight of swoops and echoes. There are starlings in the neighbour's silver birch like cold needles in the air. He hears voices like a wave of sirens. One woman keeps on calling his name. Her voice flickers like the view from a train: a tunnel—a tunnel—a crescendo of hills.

Christmas

After dinner she puts the Christmas pine in its box. It's bent and swollen with garlands of tinsel. Last year her father had packed it away, shifting on his knees, bending the stubborn branches back on themselves until the tree collapsed down. His hands shook from the therapy, tiny earthquakes in his sleeves. They sat to finish the holiday crossword. He recited the questions, his medic's voice echoing up from childhood. How many band members were in Erasure? What game has both tricks and hoops? She carefully printed the answers. As he dozed his chin released onto the kite of his chest. A five letter word for a pretence of strength? What do you want me to do with your body?

Lullaby

The woman next door sings so slowly someone must have died. She practices her sorry aria through the walls. When we bump on the steps she is neighbourly, maybe, with her purpled eyes. She tries for lightness. The radio tells me it is snowing somewhere south. Drifts fall down for days. The presenter uses the word *ghastly* far too often. In the *ghastly* snow, he says, animals dig for their calves. When we meet on the path my own voice is chestnut and dumb. 'It's a *ghastly* thing,' I say. 'It was a *ghastly* mistake.' In the dark the woman's voice touches a sweet, high place. It's a small cupboard where her children once hid when she'd tried to explain—which you never really can—why the animals must paw in the cold, brown slush. Where are the young? Who hears their low, fallow voices?

Peanuts

At the climax of the game, as men tear and grip
each other's shoulders, she comes to the kitchen flushed

with news of the win. He is bent towards her, shelling
peanuts onto a beige mound of peanut bodies. It sits

between them. Her excitement has a physical presence
and he is reminded, all at once, of string music.

He looks up so she knows that he sees her.

*

As she chops peanuts for their evening meal she says,
without embarrassment, that the sound of rubbing
peanut skins is like the rasp of her heels on new sheets.

*

On the veranda she knows he is tired because his knees
fall to one side. 'I'm not tired,' he says, but rests against her.

He hugs her and thinks, how *f-ing House and Garden*:
the sun setting so gold, the rustic fold-out table and chairs,
a husband and wife, and a bowl of peanuts.

*

Later, in bed.

'O!' she laughs, then, 'I don't like euphemisms,'
but lets him anyway.

Clay Man

I'll admit it—that year I was obsessed with fertilisation and growth. The new flower bed had been my idea. You were kind to me—good humoured. You cut into the ground, lifted away strips of sod. Beyond our garden the crematory smoked. Ribbons of chalky ash lifted into the sky. 'You're so grave,' you joked, as I cupped my giant stomach. He swam under my hands. Do you remember that day? We'd fought that morning. I'd refused to talk about *f-ing* floral caskets, about arrangements. The poet I was reading, who'd died young, once wrote his lover shaped him like clay to fracture him later. 'Beautiful,' you said, and planted your shovel in the wound in the garden.

The Psychologist Becomes a Father

A light touch, water to her lips.

In his notebook he writes:

Humans are understood through observable phenomena.

Outside the rain cuts through irises. Sophie is soft
and smells like wet wood. Her swollen body burns.

The phenomenon must bear repetition. At the crowning, he turns
the child's head which is bloody and white. He heaves out her limbs.

The observer must know when the experience begins and ends.

That morning: the colour yellow,

the sound of bells,

the oval flesh of plums.

He wonders where their relationship exists. Is it in her? In him?

The Mother

Some things don't make sense in the singular—
there is no ringing of one cymbal,

no embrace of one body against
no other body. The idea finds her in her

hospital bed, twin girls of equal length
sleepy in her arms, their downy purple faces turned

to mirror each other, to her breast.
They shove their slow light limbs

the bleached colour of beach or bamboo.
Their tongues make the faintest clack.

One twin's foot pushes into solid air
to find the other twin, maybe, to find

they are as far from each other
as they've ever been, childhood

a separating into space, or as her mother
once said, a carving only became itself

when it finally forgot the tree. There is a sweet
dampness of sweat on her lip—out the window

a concrete sky. She strokes the birth canal
grooves chiselled along their skin.

Blue Heart

Full size model of a Blue Whale heart, Te Papa Museum

The boy enters the whale heart. He finds his way.
His hands slide down the peachy aorta, his body
swallowed into the central chamber. My face pushes
after him because it's just fibre and glass, and he's
my first child, on his knees, his back to me. His hands
perform their work of play along a smooth ridge of cartilage
like a cardiac surgeon. Interpretations of the 'whale' fall
into three categories: The whale is real and my son
lives in her heart. Or the whale is the dream
I have for my son. Or the whale is an allegory
that should not be taken to heart. Some things take time
to understand. Last time we visited my grandmother
I knew she would die before I saw her again.
She'd been having regular blood transfusions—
pulsing circles of bright red tubing— which helped
for a few weeks before another fall, after which she'd rest
one cheek on the carpet. My son sat on her lap and she played
at biting his fingers, her grey dentures clacking together,
and he squealed and pointed, and then pointed to the fireplace,
and then pointed to the window where a dried floral arrangement had sat
for twenty years. Everything was there for him.
She took his pointing finger between the soft pads of her lips.
How do you enter the biggest heart? Do you say
that it weighs up to fifteen hundred pounds? The largest heart
is like a compacted Volvo! Maybe you must imagine it beating
inside you? Maybe you find it one quiet morning,
your son asleep, his cheeks flaring the colour of summer plums.

Statues

The petite Grecian woman bent over the well
is to stand beside the front door; the matching

Grecian man sits opposite; a gift from my husband.
I don't like him: he is badly cast and his white pockmarked

hands pour a bucket of nothing into nowhere.
Perhaps from a distance the pair seem graceful.

I imagine water, and the woman watching
continents of clouds slide across the well's surface. The man,

if he were kind, would look to the curve of his wife's back,
see her hand's small efforts, before hauling his own bucket

to the fields where only that morning
he'd planted radishes, and carefully soak the tilled earth to black.

For their sake, I hope they are labouring
in the mild evening, out of the heat of the day,

that they're able to talk of family business
in a language that only the two of them know.

Is this what my neighbour
sees from her kitchen window? A man and a woman,

their deep comings and goings. Or does she see two figures
frozen in a moment of emptying and emptying?

Demolition

He works late to plan the demo of a building that has been a squat for years. It echoes as traffic sweeps a clumsy octave to the city. It's time to leave, to go home and cook dinner, to make love, maybe, to paint the spare room, but he has left his watch on the roof. He sits where the sun falls into corners and onto a school of bicycles. It is 1980 and then 1990. It is 1999 and he wanders around December. He drives his wife to a new years' party in the country. They talk about their new Spanish kitchen and how she is afraid the roots of the maple will break up the driveway. There are ways, he says, a real possibility to stop it. Along the road the imagined forest keeps on coming. Moths ghost like televised fireworks. Her knees are two pale discs in the dark: a proof of life.

Swimming

The beach is no postcard but there's always a park. She drops her mourning dress onto the sand and knots back her greying hair. At the luncheon she pretended no one said widow. Her husband is a stone square plugging the earth. She wades into the shallows. The warm morning wind feathers the skin of the water, the land. She wades up to her womanly waist and drooping hips—into the cold parts of herself. Above, the sea birds are white crosses. They carve the air, their wings performing small adjustments of release. How do they do it? How do they find the foil, the lift?

Glass

The old woman wakes into night madness break up hospitals crossing over in the next ward her nightie night time tea trolley and she tells the young nurse about a trip to Australia when she was a bonny thing with its roaring sky and nothing between them but wheeling frass moths and how for years her husband wouldn't be seen from above—because the moon lit up the railway lines—and the nurse says there may be a long wait for power and turns toward the radio to listen to an interview with a glassmaker in Stourbridge which is the woman's hometown but that's as clear as burning smoke or that red sky: after the bomb they left the house at a run so she had to leave behind the important things—the arthritis in her hands her understanding of bread—and afterward a woman with a milky cameo on her blouse said she felt her legs *just move* away from the sound.

Entry Island

The boat lands. The sandy beach sucks at her running shoes. The young lanky tour guide dives into the vegetation, and she tries to follow using her toes and fingers, to stand where the women lived during whaling times, in their brown roofed houses. They melted blubber down to oil. They transmuted their hands to scarred machines. The spades, the scrag. How beautifully they shined. The guide asks the party to shed their thermal leggings and heavy boots. The sun in his hair, a romantic aura. She pulls away her puffy jacket. Her face and body are blustered by the wind. This is how it would have felt, he says, for those early settlers. She tries to imagine their voices, the barks of their children. The high cliffs drop to the sea like the women's skirts must have, the hems dark with fat.

Rescue Story

Two men stand in a bush clearing, one
in a bright orange cycling vest. His whistle

swings on a red string—a divining rod.
The other tilts his face to the gash of blue

through the dominant and co-dominant trees
of the canopy, which he also knows as the overstory.

His skin pulls tight across his jaw. They should have
called the authorities. There's three hours until sunset, says

the older man—her father—who drops to his haunches
to rub the cold campfire ash to a smear

between two soft fingers. He sighs and looks around.
He is an accountant and his lover a barrister,

and they'd been too long—too achingly selfish,
and now the trees are starting to darken.

They beat through the layers of wet undergrowth
with old ski poles, looking for the outline

of his daughter's tiny boots. We move with them, with desire
for an ending, but they cannot see the sun,

and whether it will set this way or that, and the younger
man's cellphone reception has dropped

to one bar, but the car park is that way—right—
behind—right?

Defining *Nostalgia*

First thought is of the coffee shop down near the library
that my friend once said reminded him of a peep show
because of its mirrored glass walls. He had cancer

and the bone marrow transplant had left his body
peeling. He was six foot and rake-thin so the skin hung
from his arms like a filmy robe. Before unwinding his scarf

he put a white pill on his tongue and told me the word
nostalgia was Greek in origin. He seemed homesick
for his daughter and the affair he'd ended with a woman

who, late evening, would sit him by the fire nook
and loosen his torso with her hands. His voice shook
with such timbre that I wondered if nostalgia was a property

of the body. Or maybe, months later—I woke stiff and dull
in a single bed. From my parents' kitchen sung the metal teapot
and the regional news. I jogged out around the park at the city's edge,

the route I take every Easter: through the grey suburbs
to the Avon River where the city's settlers had planted cascading rows
of blossoming cherry trees. It was their way of resurrecting

the rank swamp as England. When I got back my father was sitting
at the kitchen stub, crying. His brother had telephoned
to say it wouldn't be long. My father talked about the girl

he knew as a teenager, before she met
and married my uncle. I still see my father that day, hacking at the roses,
the smell of freshly turned soil in his throat.

My friend is now dead. Is his lover
by the fireplace? Where is his daughter's anger?
My uncle has found another woman

Paradise Ducks

It was a secluded lake on a high country farm,
a long weekend, a way to make repairs.

They heard the pair fly over the wetlands,

the long *zeek zeek* of the female. The ducks returning
to their nest for the year, hidden in the hollow
eye of a field, a tangled circle of grass and down made solid

by their touch. This he'd learnt from the lodge guidebook,
and he, as the romantic of the two, had started to think
the birds represented a way of being, their life mating

a kind of paradise. In the morning she agreed
to go duck spotting after washing her hair, dressing and eating,
and not finding the binoculars which he promised

he'd packed. The wet tussock cut lines across her jeans,
and she wanted to turn back to the small farmhouse,
to its iron bed and musty couch, but there

was something in the glad morning air—in his promise
of sighting the imagined birds. Over the lake
an arrow of geese powered somewhere,

swerving together. *There!* he cried (did he take
her hand?), and she saw the shit-caked nest;
the ducks' eyes shining like pennies.

Kangaroos

We stop at the kangaroos. They graze
over a pile of vegetables, shift hind feet

made of bones as long as my son's arm.
Their small kind heads dip into the carrots

which makes their heavy tails sweep the dust
in a pendulum of fur and vertebrae.

Look at their fast breath. A kangaroo
breathing. Of course I knew they did, but they

were always boxing or flying internationally.
Once my mother brought me a soft toy kangaroo

from Australia. Its tiny boxing paws were
stitched to its chest—a female,

joey in her pouch. I took out the joey and held
it in my palm. It had no legs or tail. It had no hands.

For weeks I carried that furry stump, hoping for
the animal to grow. Some flies have landed on the kangaroo's ear.

Can it hear my fast breath?
The ear swivels like the a softest radio dish ever made.

Lamb

The wool is as soft as a girl's hair. The teeth scaled white. The mouth open to welcome visitors. That morning he'd carved the mannequin to shape: a rounded barrel with legs curled under its breast, the head like an oil can. The gentle lamb at rest. Without familiar sheep features—the heart nose and velvet spoon ears, the quiet watery eyes—it could be anything. A Shetland pony or a donkey. He pulls its dark fleece from the bath with two long tongs and starts to scrape away the fat. The sun streams through the high window of his workshop, heavy with smoke and tanning chemicals. He begins to shape the skin. With every animal he tries to help it become its best. He polishes until he sees himself in their eyes. It's all about how you sew the mouth shut, his father used to say. The animal must look like it's smiling.

Pigeons

One morning, probably in autumn, a pigeon appeared on my back porch. I don't know where it came from, but it was pecking at the dry nuts of cat food we'd put out earlier. It—maybe a he—looked like an average pigeon, with its wings banded black, its small bobbing head tinged green. It was curiously beautiful, but I was afraid to touch the smooth grey back as it danced around the pile of dried meat. Its feet skittered. I remembered that during the war homing pigeons delivered their messages even after being shot in the wing or breast. Pigeons were given names like Paddy and William of Orange, and received medals for valour in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace. People bent their necks to kiss pigeon heads. The bird appeared nothing like a pigeon. Its delicate frame was neatly dressed in loose and shiny feathers. Its tail could almost be called a fan. It was small enough to fit in both hands. I tried to catch the bird's black alien eye, to see myself seen. In the chilled air its beak went on hammering at the dried meat.

Cow Skin

When story books are no longer enough
I take my son to a farm stay: cattle and sheep,

the muddy growl of a tractor. My mother told
me that parenting requires an unreliable narrator.

*Mum likes eating cabbage. Mum thinks it's really fun
to buckle her seatbelt.* Mum loves walking around

the farm. In the dank hay shed we find a bull's skull
floating from a hook. It's hardly real: two shining horns

curve from the bleached bone, a magnificent
cliché from a Spaghetti Western. From this angle

the eye sockets shine like eggs. My son stops
in the doorway and points up at the skull.

The cow has lost its skin, I say. Where is the cow's skin?
We trudge around the farm looking for the cow's skin.

He urgently pulls on my hand. He searches under
the encrusted straw of the chicken house—

he digs in the sandpit by the olive trees.
He doesn't find the cow's skin. It's getting late

and a light rain has started to fall, tiny particles
settling on his eyelashes, he in a world

where a cow can step skeletal hooves back into the slack
sack of its hide, and shrug it on like a jersey.

Phobias

Something unwelcome will happen. The bedroom closet begins to breathe and out slips a small white dog. He sits in your heartbeat. His eyes are white. His anus is white. In the garden ghost cows move across the lawn, their transparent heads browsing the grass. Wet ghost tongues slide over teeth. The small dog might live in the stimuli of your imagination, but he's nudging you toward an open window. The whole world churns out there. This morning eight magnified legs fluttered up the side of the house, their serrated pincers gripping the eaves. Vampiric fish thrashed in your aquarium. Tonight the sun will collapse, the sky a gaping jaw.

Crow Experiments

Crows are considered clever, the researcher says.
He wants to test the hypothesis. He says
to put the crow in the large glass enclosure. My hands

close around its thumping breast. The crow shows
retention of memories, he says
as it slides a curved twig into an upright tube.

Up and down, the twig scrapes at a plastic bucket
that holds a beige slush of meat. And again
—it's hooked it! The researcher applauds and smiles

so his yellow canines push out from his gums.
Can you see the human-like reasoning? he says.
And it can also remember your face.

*

Pale morning. The dull grind of homesickness.
The commuter ferry cuts a ragged line down the Thames. A crow lands
beside me on the park bench. It's wiry feet

scratch at the wood as its beak worries
around a damp stain. I try to remember its face,
the sky held in the black star of its eye.

*

I want to punch the researcher in the mouth
but I need the job. The researcher points—the crow has picked
up a pandanus leaf.

The crow takes two muscular hops and twists
its head. It snips triangular arrows from the leaf's edge.
They fly at me like darts. I take notes:

The crow – black silken eye.
The crow – black silken breast.
The crow – black silken claw.

The crow – black silken wing.
The crow – black silken tongue.
The crow – black silken throat.

The crow – black silken gullet.
The crow shits on the dirt mound.
Spit congeals in the corner of the researcher's mouth.

*

Walking home I think about my parent's crow,
an Inuit carving of the god Crow holding the flower
of first light in his beak. I always wanted that crow.

For years it stood on the mantelpiece,
and then in the spare room. Eventually they moved
it to the laundry shelf, covered in dust, letters slotted

between its legs, ends of receipts, a gardening hat
over the hull of its head. Around its neck curled a shell
necklace from Hawaii.

*

The crow in the enclosure looks like a crow.
The crow i the enclosure looks like a crow.
The crow i the closure looks like a crow.

The crow in the closure looks like a crow.
The row in the closure looks like a row.
The row the sure looks a row.

T ow the sure oks a ow.
ow he su o o
o o o

*

Pale woman. The crow
from its night cage, the bird a tight ball
of black rags

in my hand. I open the window—
a final wildness
a flash of wing, a black stitch in the sky.

II

Mountains

1

Her brother sits on the couch
and suggests she climb the Remarkables
with their parents, his bare
hairy foot jiggling, and she
says 'hmmm' while her girlfriend
prepares couscous in the kitchen.
'You weren't there as a kid,' she says.

2

In the levelled lot next door, relief men
dig out stumps to make space for the marquee.
She likes to think they communicate
by pungent emission—she spends
hours against the window.

3

It takes a long time to dig out the heavy roots.

4

Her girlfriend—Sarnia—leads the way.
The system of mountains stretch like panic,
montane, a complex breath.

She watches Sarnia's thighs:
upturned stratified formations wrapping around
her flanks. Her axial crystals, a gulf
of sweetness and relief.

5

The wind unfastens a sheet of soil
from the skin of the track. It sweeps out and over the ridge:
a lifted conversation or smudges of rain.

The range grows wider and higher
as they move south. Each new face
takes on its own personality. She can't see the granite,

but a woman, and then two men in the rock.
Far below the lake rests in the basin
as the mountain replicates itself across the lake.

6

She once went to a talk at the university
about the creation of mountains. The expert
moved over the stage like a buoyant wave of radiation.
His voice intruded upward. He told them

it was fairly common for rock that does not fault
to fold. It will do this either symmetrically
or asymmetrically. There aren't other options:
it is upfold or downfold, anticline or syncline.

She left the lecture for a bar downtown.
This was during her dark phase: dark dresses,
hair dyed dark in the laundry sink. In the bar
she drank white Russians and let a man—older,

a crusher—put his hand between her legs.
He gave her a long string of beads he'd brought back
from Peru. At least that is what he said.

7

Given time, the pressure of water will invert relief.
The soft upthrust of rock is worn away and the anticlines
become gentle. She rises up and down.

Over time she dissolves mountains by breathing.
In bed Sarnia says, 'There is no universal definition

for mountain. It's okay to live with ambiguity.'

She puts on her teacher's voice with its sexy
unspoken argument over elevation and steepness.

8

Upon ascent, the women expand and cool.
The subalpine forests of needled trees break
the sun into phosphorescent waves.

'A mountain must be higher than a hill,' she says
as the track threads around an elbow of scarps.
'What, then, is a hill?' Sarnia asks.

9

Years later they climb Puncak Jaya, the highest
peak in New Guinea. It will be after the death of Sarnia's
sister, but before everything else.

The peak rises five thousand meters above the sea:
a precise measure of their strength and courage, or
Nemangkawi to the locals.

10

Outside the rehearsal guests arrive. Her parents'
car pulls up and they wave their hands
in front of their mouths. Her brother continues
to talk about mountains, and how he found
his true essence of self. 'You should do it, man,' he says
with conviction; such a small tremble.

The Geographer

Brief Historical Overview

The geographer has come to stay for a week. He is going to run the North Island Orienteering Championships. This is his first visit since the news. He opens his case: 'I'm still your Dad, just kinder,' he says.

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It is near midnight. I tell the geographer I am going for a run. In the oily rain I sprint urgent loops of the terminal and then hold myself in the marked spaces and dull windscreens of long-term parking. The airport is dead tonight, a stretch of slaggy ash on the bay. The sea is a flash on the grey seam. At a school camp, when I was a child, we played a trust game. A girl blindfolded my face and my feet stretched away in the cotton dark. How does it feel? she asked before her turn. When I arrive home I undress in the porch light. My legs have puckered into red welts, and my ungloved hands are bright and translucent.

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Through the night, rain beats the skin of the land like genetic echoes.

In my dream a man runs into a woman
with a small papoose. When he was young my father was a runner.

My father is also a woman.

'What makes someone a runner?' my friend asks.

Theories and Figures

A relaxation tape tells me to shimmy my neck and face like a horse. I close my eyes and try to find my inner horse. He is coal black. Outside cars sluice over the road. The horse is loose: a wheeled wooden mare melts into a rodeo chestnut. Huh-ha like an accordion. I shuck my shoulders and try to be the idea of *horse*: a mane and downy nose, but I slide back into a rider and look up the slope between two tulip ears. He takes off with a glide and push. He steps into my idea of his idea of horse.

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The geographer teaches human geography: the bluff of a woman's shoulder or a deposit of hair. He talks about the space between people. You'll want to see the competition course map, he says. He is wearing a blonde wig and a cerise cardigan. It's a good colour. He spreads the creased paper over the coffee table and shows me where we will stake the hills with flags and punches. I study the shape as if it were an ink blot.

In the concrete gulf of the wildlife reserve we park the car. I hide slender orange flags in bushes and behind the corpses of trees. At the stream he explains conservation. It's not what people think, he says as he leans on the bridge. Everything needs to change.

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A woman is sometimes the cartographer of her body. She shaves its slow limbs. Her cavities, a great idea, split into descendant branches. A geographer measures the way a bank shapes the water, which shapes the bank's space. At the branch mouth the groin is a shore-protection structure, narrow in width but permeable (openings). His mother's name becomes his first name.

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His face is a closed atlas. 'I never know what to use,' I say as we drive into town. 'Use either, dear. Either he or she,' the geographer says.

'Would you two ladies like to order lunch?' asks the waitress.

Models

The geographer once told me that running soothes the tidal fluctuations of the human brain. It helps focus the body until the mind spins like a wheel in water. In the blue light of the morning the pavement is broken with mirrors. The sky is an airless shield over the streets. Outside the Supersaver a queen sucks and balloons a bag like a throat. His mother had a throat of pearls. At the funeral my Aunt Shirley ate sausage rolls and told stories. Your Gran loved her stilettos, Shirley said. She wore a fur cape while doing the hoovering. The geographer stood pressed and grey at the coffin in his double breasted suit.

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The first day I met the geographer: 'Here she comes, the Queen of Sheba,' my mother said.

'It's the clothes that make the man,' I said.

Questions

A human geographer must condense the distribution of natural complexities. This requires a synoptic dance of planes and levels. My father is a dune of questions: How is a place created? Does the lateral expansion of plume block the distributary mouth? Can a bridge transform a mountain from one region to another? The river has a still surface but flows with moderate speed. We shout instructions over the bridge in echoing cascades of sand. Geography is a field of middle grounds.

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In one photograph the geographer slides on a jacket in front of a winged mirror, with the help of my mother. For a moment he is his own father, his arms raised. They are off to the musical adaptation of *As You Like It*.

'Are you going to change?' my mother says.

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A fault can be hard to fathom. The facies of features flood in generated waves. A geographer runs the length of an unobstructed sea, but can he find the wind?

Epilogue

Late evening I cook dinner and we watch a black and white Western. The geographer wears an old dressing gown and Sellotaped reading glasses. He will leave in the morning. With a whistle the cowboy turns his horse, winks from under his hat and rides homeward. As the sun compacts in tangerine slow motion the horse's legs wheel away. For a moment he exists in the air.

Glaciers

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She is a surviving remnant of a natural phenomenon:
a relict structure transformed to mineral. A serpentinite
rock. A host actively replaced and / or destroyed. She can't

tell which parts of her body are left over, the features of remote
and cold places. Permafrost can continue for hundreds of years.
The ancient soil holding the ground even as the climate

scrapes over its surface. It can't deform: new frost can't form
in its place. She is continuous / discontinuous. She is out
in the open of the distant past, on the surface of the earth.

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He moves inside the flower of her pelvis.
Her eyes open and close, his body grinds into her hips
as if to turn her to root and rain. He warms her skin.

Early spring, it started. He took a photo of her in the clear light
of her dining room. A waterfall of hair
spills into his mouth, the bristles of his beard,

across the dark wire of his iris. Between the thick
scoop of his eyebrows freckles scatter playfully.
This is where she puts her face.

Her son throws himself onto the bed like a geological force.
The breakfast plates upturn and crack
as he squirms himself under the duvet,
his plump cold feet slide under her thighs.
She opens the laptop and puts on a cartoon;
a monkey dances across the screen to the opening music.
Her son leans into her, a landslip of limbs. She can hear David
in the shower, and then somewhere in the lungs of the house.
Then he's there, and hands a coffee across the space between them.
She unwinds one hand from her son's grip to take it,
and passes David the plates, but he's turned already, his back
the back of daily partings, of their son, a back that's still lean
but a little thicker than when they met, that long haired stoner
in her cousin's kitchen. His back is wet down the middle.
You missed a bit, she says. And thanks for the coffee.
The monkey is trying to build a snowman from boulders,
but the boulders are too heavy for young monkey arms.
Her son plays with the webbing between her fingers,
an unconscious manipulation of a hand he knows as his.
Daytime clothes, she says and lifts one limp arm,
peels off the fire engine top, and he lets her—this other him—
his shoulders roll up with the cold, his face fixed
on the screen. She pulls a wool top over his head, and then
the other scraps and weaves, the mantle.
The drum of his chest trembles with laughter.
David turns. He is buttoning a blue business shirt.
'Will you see Jules today?' he asks. She nods.
His mouth a line across his chin.

Jules is standing in the kitchen
 when she arrives, scrambling eggs and singing
Country roads, take me home.

She comes up behind him,
 takes his black-clad hips and finds her shape
 against his body, this new person

she once was, this lover. He smells of cigarettes
 and vanilla. I've got a few hours, she says. She rises
 to his mouth. It's good to see you, he says.

The bed rushes. Summer gallops
 through the window, over the bolt and dart of them.
 She hears her animal cries.

Afterwards they talk. He wraps her in a soft robe.
 Their hands interlock, but gently.
 Out the window the motorway sounds like a machine.

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When she arrives at her son's daycare
 she runs the length of the pathway, propelled
 by the image of his face.
 She checks her uniform: nappy bag, flat shoes,
 smooth hair. *Mountain mamma.*
 Her son's body waits for her even in sleep, one arm flung
 from his floor mattress, palm a cup
 for her thumb.
 The trains on his blanket puff around his shoulders,
 the creamy wings of his eyelids. She gathers his clothes, shoes,
 his hand into hers. Beside the perfection of one milky cheek
 she rests her body.

She is a wintered forest. She is extensive
 / stable. She is melt /
 the parent rock. She is saturated / volcanic. She zips

up her clean suit and pulls on a pair of latex gloves.
 Her colleague has already transferred today's ice core
 from the freezer to the clean room:

Antarctica / Roosevelt: 122-124m, section 3,
 bored up from the deep flow by the drilling arm.
 She skins the core into a rectangular brick,

her first glimpse of the age of the ice,
 the pale bands of years like tree rings, each snow fall
 stacked on top of the last,

compacted and crushed by the ones above.
 Her heart flutters. This ice is old. It's brittle, thinner
 from gravity's slow downhill pull.

One band is darker, like a pregnancy test,
 the ash from a volcanic eruption. This is what she wants.
 She slides the cold dense brick into the melter.

She once went to Roosevelt Island for a drill,
 before her son was born. The island hidden
 under snow and ice, just a hump

in the whiteness. In the white tent
 droned the sleek Danish mechanical rig. The team climbed
 over its surface, stood back as the arm raised.

The weather changed hourly: from blinding sun
 to fog so solid the orange line of flags strung between tents
 faded into the suffocating whiteness.

She watched the winch slide the core
into the light, that inner barrel of the earth,
raised to be cut, measured, and bagged.

It was layered into boxes for the flight home.
It had been a good sample. Glaciers don't always move forward
in a sheet. They twist and curl around rocks and islands.

In a crumpled core it's hard to see the past.
The critical periods melt and blend. She loses the layers,
the transformations. She can't make out

the years of stability or collapse.
Six months after her son was born they asked her
to return to the ice, to head up

a team of scientists on the drill. *This is what I want,*
she thought. Her body still ached from the surgery.
Her breasts leaked a constant stream

onto the flaccid mound of her stomach.
Her son slept in fits: in the nape of her neck, in arms
that seemed to move without her

through the blackness
her hands lifting him to her, so he would be feeding
before she was properly awake.

She'd curl a blanket around their joined
bodies. She'd hum to him quietly and wait
for the sky to lighten. *This is what I want.*

Her lab performs around her.
The syphon moves the melted core through the debubbler.
Fans whir. Graphs write jagged mountains

over her screen: a hydro-chemical analysis
of isotopes, geochemical gradients, particulates.
Those precious drops.

David watches his wife throw their son into the air, the child's mouth wide in a squeal, his compact body suspended in the sunlight. He lands with a thud and arches out of her arms. She turns to David, her eyes creasing at the corners and laughs properly, a joyful noise that rises from her. She follows their son to the slide. They'd never wanted a traditional marriage, but they had wanted a child. Just one. If David's maths was right, conceived one Sunday morning that November. If only he'd been more prepared. Was that even possible? The confusion he'd felt at her swelling stomach. The hard birth. Her blackness. The night they held each other and watched their son sleep, crying together at the simple big love. Throw me his hat, his wife calls, and David digs around in the bag, balls up the fabric, and lobs it to the top of the slide. His wife pulls it onto their son's head, smoothing the hair away from his face and up under the brim of the hat. She pretends to bite him, roaring like a lion. For a long time he'd worried about her. After their son was born she took on a sadness. Her body suddenly middle-aged, torn and alien. They touched only briefly. She walked the hallways at night. Their son grew from the milk of her body. She drifted away. She became a *mother*. His son calls out from the top of the slide, the words lost over the distance. David waves, and the boy lowers himself to a seated position. His wife has moved to the slide's mouth. She crouches down, beckons with one hand, and the boy lets go. There had been other lovers. But this man, this new person. She had become sweeter. Lighter. He could see the damaged layers peeling away, the new skin underneath. Sometimes it made him jealous. Mostly he felt glad and relieved. His wife is beside him. She dips her head under his arm so it circles her shoulders. He puts his hand on her waist. He wants to play by himself, she says. Their son finds the swings at the top of the park. He has no fear, David thinks as the boy's body gains height. His feet borne into air.

They lie in a pool of sunlight on his bed sheets
 tangled around their legs they place their hands on each other,
 familiar
 her fingers rub over his tattoo an island etched broadly
 on his back
 and down the blade of his shoulder
 under a fuzzy layer of hair the jagged ink
 shaped like a horseshoe two smaller islands
 beside the line of his spine
 a fringe of cliffs along the southern coast
 red kanji float
 like clouds over the furthest peninsula
 What does it say? she asks
 Jules gives a rough
 translation
 his mouth saying, a *seat* or *cushion*; *space* or *gate*; *taste*.
 Did your body change
 after your son was born? he asks
 his hand on her stomach
 a melting point in her dense / persistent body of ice.
 She remembers moving in her own gravity
 the way her pelvis deformed the weight stress
 opening silver crevasses over her hips
 vast sheets of skin her swollen polar regions
 her mountains her mouth a reservoir of freshwater
 a release
 she was vulgar morphological
 at night she had thermal characteristics, lying in the dark
 listening to the child several kilometres deep
 trees established themselves over her surface she pulsed
 she pigmented, she formed a welcoming
 thickness before the underlying topography, the child calved
 a depression a vacancy
 that squeezed air from snow, she rose on the crests
 and swale, on ridges on her own throat's roar

she flowed over bedrock, softened, lifted herself onto hands
like sandpaper worked until he was
out, smooth and polished, a fluvial child.

Her son's eyes dilated. They retreated / rebounded. They drifted together.

The midwife put him on her chest.

They touched, they arrived at, they attained to, they came home to.

The spurs of the earth were smoothed. She melted into deltas and sinuous lakes
that floated with fine sediment,
rock flowers.

It's not the body that changes, she says.

David pulls his wife into the side of his body. She pats about to find his hand. Through the baby monitor he can hear their son breathing. 'I hope he sleeps,' she says. He thinks back to last night; they'd handed the restless boy between them, singing into the darkness. The morning had come bright and blaring. 'Yeah, I'm meeting those contractors tomorrow,' he says. He feels tired. It's a heavy happiness. 'I'm still working on that sample,' she says. 'I just keep on going. It's like a marathon.' David leans down to kiss her lips, and she kisses back. Call and return. She hasn't really aged since they first met. A few lines. A slight dulling. His beautiful wife. That afternoon they'd left their son with a friend and walked out along the parade. The ground too hot for bare feet. The beach lousy with teenagers. For a moment his wife felt like a stranger, but soon their feet fell into step. They kept pace with two sail boats that moved lightly across the water. When they'd reached the end of the parade they stopped and looked out to the lighthouse. He hadn't felt like talking. He'd always been a quiet man. He could happily spend the evening alone, painting with oils in his studio. The absence had made other women angry, but his wife let him be. As the two boats rounded the point, wing on wing, their mainsails boomed. She'd laughed, jumped up, and waved her arms at the crew. He couldn't help but laugh too.

She notes down the time, opens the aquifer sample taken from a farm west of Hastings, a saturated and fertile zone of nested multilevel wells. She pours

it into the debubbler. The team's used a direct push drill, the cleanest way to sample intensive farming regions. The water shines as it shunts through the tubes.

She builds a model on her computer, maps the geology of the region, the path rain takes under the earth, the black areas of nitrate.

It's important work. Last month they'd helped a farmer build flow barriers, shown him how to read the deep strata. She'd worked hard,

they'd found a way. Her phone buzzes: a text.
I'm smiling because I'll see you tonight.
She feels his breath sweet on her face.

A second text. David. *Can you pick me up early? We need to go to the pharmacy. I love you. See you soon.*
She focuses on the machine,

removes the sample and starts to enter the numbers: a red line of data working across the map. She identifies / inhabits. She grasps. Would this

be her life's work? Her son—
it was nearly time to pick him up. She feels the pull. Each day she knows where he will be. Yesterday,

waiting for her at the seashell window. He jumped out, his small form crumpling forward in excitement. She often imagines her son as a young man. She sees him

on a street corner. It's a few months
after he's moved out. He talks with a man
and a woman,

hands resting in his pockets. The day is warm.
He is easy with himself, almost languid, like a photograph
of herself in her twenties. He raises one arm

and lets it fall around the other
young man's shoulder. He is continuous / fluid. His laughter,
those precious drops.

Running with my Father

When I run I am an animal

 circling the hollows of my body. Deep grunts
 rise up from my pelvis to my throat. The bones
 of my spine strike up into each other. On the trails
this morning the sunlight falls everywhere,

 and I propel away from the ground. It's winter
 so the trees are undressed

as I am undressed of my husband and our son,
 whom I've left in a steamy house, noise
 from the kitchen, the rumbles
of the new train set.

 It's running away from, or running into
 Otari Bush, into the metronomic push of my breath,
into the body's slippery valves and caves
 into the stomach and sex organs
 into the hand which is not quite a fist
 and into this poem which I decide
 will not be about my father, who is still not dead
and therefore inhabits
 hope in my imagination.

Hope the phonics drop from the tongue
 and I throw my body into the run
 so I cannot hear the hush of my shoes
hitting the compacted earth of the track
 like a child's back.

When I run both feet lift from the ground,
 which is called a double float, and I wonder
 if forgiveness also involves a suspension
 of the body, a move into someone else's body.

This might describe running: I leave at sunrise.
The trees fill with light and they're gone.

 A woman leans into a bus stop
 and she's gone. The houses scattered along
 Wilton Hill begin to light up like motor neurons.

Their beacons follow me into the valley.

This might describe running: I am a lashed
horse with a foaming bit. I am a sled dog
pulling my body behind me.

At the crest of the hill my tongue
whips the dry membrane of my lips.
Momentum and work. Words my joints move through,
data points in a dialogue of impact and velocity.
Stop thinking. The body will fragment
into stride phases: a foot strike with low
breaking force, and I attract load
so propulsion starts; my chest heaves.
Mountains grow. The recovery cycle begins.

After my father had his prostrate removed
my mother asked me to call him, his voice tired
and ashamed. We talked of my son,
of academic life, their garden and building work
in Christchurch; of his students who could try harder,
and of running. That morning I'd run around
the waterfront, the bays stretching out and glistening
like a body. It had been a perfect run. The harbour
flat and still. The city at the markets. The concrete
glittered with crushed silica as it moved away.

Just before we hung up my father talked
of the pelvic floor exercises he was trying to master.
You could give me tips, he said,
before remembering the resolute biology
of our bodies. We stepped into silence.

He stepped into his study. I stepped into the long
brown hallway of my childhood.

Maybe this is forgiveness: I see my father step back
to the morning. She has showered and the house
smells of lilacs. She cannot look at his body in the mirror,
its folds on folds. She puts herself into men's jeans
and a shirt; into thick soled black lace-ups. He must go to work,

into the grey brutalism of the University, into his office.

He knots a bright scarf at his throat.

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Long exhale rhyme working into the cords of the body disorder the wind draws away words the hard push up the hill past the church work arms swing almost like wings when O run everything stretches away I become a horizon a habit in habit inhabit the breath enter the breath the nerves supply the mucosal skin stretch dilate surgical force high buttock turnover length and speed talk with the hips talk with loose arms lean bend angle the back face relaxed drive ball to foot bend under the body downswing the body midline the body caloric mileage measures efficiency compress tendons compress mathematical models of oxygen compress the body's limbic system a biological chase mechanism flows along the nuchal ligament a short shock cord stretching into epiphany into a hunter traversing the wet ventricular chamber the thickening pumps into capillaries into cells into the self and into endorphins that swell the hippocampus turn the shoulder sway the hip hairless and upright the hunter's legs a web of tendons draw light lean bones into a stick figure into a woman and into full stride.

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I am nearing the end of Otari track

when I remember being stuck in a lift

with my father. I was four. The lift shuddered still

and the doors half opened between two floors

like the jaws of a guillotine.

This is where all memory gets hazy.

I know I was wearing a brown check pinafore.

I know my father braced himself before lifting

me into the light of the Geography

foyer. I must watched my father haul and scramble

himself free, but I can't say

if I remember the event as he does:

his trembling hands and cheeks,

him bending to hold me.

I wonder, when he dies, if I will rest
in a place of judgement. He was a good father,
or he was my father, or he was the husband
of my mother, a person of small kindnesses; blues and greens—purple
flowers he dug in the garden; a son who once cried
for his mother at Christmas; who always bought
perfume for his wife. Today he is just my father
who has had his catheter tube removed
and must continue to rest. I know it is time
to turn for home. My husband will be dressing
our son and heating apples for our breakfast.
The mountain edges are sure this morning
in the slicing winter light, in the
sweeping grey of the valley.

The Pipeline

He vaults the wire fence into long grass, his boots scattering the last of winter's yellow broomweed. The wind is low but the sky is still cloudless. The pig is trapped somewhere between the Snyder and Salt Creek pump stations, caught on the lip of a dud block valve. He swivels his Mustang cap and aims for a large outcrop thrust up from the prairie rock. The pipeline must lie on the western side of the hillock.

They flew him in for the job, calling him last Friday night as he dismantled a Chevy C-10 pickup on the garage floor. Each part was positioned just so. On his knees he cupped the components quietly in his hand while using a toothbrush to scrub away the scale and grime.

Walking up the hillock he thinks about the flight in. He took American Eagle into Wichita Falls, the small craft barely shifting in the airstream. He'd requested a row to himself but mid-flight, as he dozed, a woman with thick red hair took the seat beside him. Holding a large fabric bag she did the awkward, high-shouldered dance that economy requires. He wiped away sleep.

'I get queasy if I sit in the tail,' she said.

He nodded.

'And it's such a long flight.' She offered him her hand.

'Hi,' he said and twisted to shake. He laid his head back but didn't close his eyes.

'I've just come from Dallas. I'm taking a connector through to Cedar Rapids. That's where I live. I'm a teacher.' Her wrists jangled with bracelets as she smoothed down her dress.

'I teach disabled kids. You know, special needs. And not just teaching. We do outreach. We take them to the zoo, the ballet,' she said.

'I work on pipelines,' he said.

'I guessed you were a mechanic,' she said.

'Nope.'

'It was because of your hands,' she said. They both looked for a moment at his stained nails. He crossed his arms.

She swivelled towards him.

'What sort of pipelines?' she asked.

'Oil,' he said.

'Oil?'

'Yeah. Crude Oil.'

The woman reached down and unzipped the pocket of her bag and took out a book. She left it unopened but tucked the edge of her thumb under the cover.

'You're a pipeliner?' she said.

'I'm flying out for a job near Paducah. Ranch country. All brick streets and rodeo. I'm a pigger,' he said.

'That's not a thing,' she said.

'Pigs are mechanical devices. We run them through big pipelines to clear out the wax the oil leaves behind. I mostly work with smart pigs that use ultrasonic waves to record which bits of the pipes are crushed or deformed.'

As she listened she fiddled with a thick gold ring on her finger. He noticed her nails were short and neatly shaped. She was what his ma would call, put together.

'Tell me something else,' she said.

'Pigs have launchers,' he said.

She threw back her head and laughed. 'You're kidding me?'

'No shit. They sort of look like nuclear bombs with rotating mechanical wheels. They go into a funnel shape at one end of the pipeline which shoots them into a kicker and down the pipe until they reach the trap at the other end,' he said.

A stewardess backed a drinks trolley down the aisle. The clinking bottles reminded him of sheep trapped in a truck, their sides showing through the thin metal gap. When offered the woman shook her head but he took a water. They sat quietly for some time; he sipped as she gently tapped on the cover of her book.

'Do you mind it, working for oil?' she asked.

'I worry about paying my rent and not getting my guts blown out. Couple a weeks ago a pigger opened the hatch at the wrong time and the pig shot out, oil everywhere. It crushed his chest, caved him right in.'

'Jesus. Was he a friend?'

'Should that matter?'

He stomps his feet at the top of the hill. Below the prairie dips and rises and dips before the colour shifts and a hazy steel line signs the next ranch. Beyond, he spots the faint oval of a water tower and the intermittent metallic Morse code of a road. He raises a hand to shadow his eyes. Where is that damn pipe? The horizon is blacking up as the wind swirls in cold eddies

so the straw grass blends
with the green-stemmed Mormon Tea around his boots.

The straps on his backpack
flutter

as straps do. Blue. Red. Blue. This is his first overnighter. He squints. He hates being a screw-up. He heads down the outcrop and aims for a hollow.

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He only just opens his eyes when the lantern flickers dead. It must be nearly dawn. He pats around the tent for the spare batteries and rolls onto his back.

He agrees with himself: it's been a bitch of a month. Again, his wife came home but was gone a few weeks later. That last ragged standoff left him bitter and drunk and sorry. His bedding smells of her silky deodorant: citrus and apples. He knows he should wash it but he spent the weekend taking apart cars, locked in his garage under yellow lights as the radio fizzed rock down low. He ignored calls from his ma until she finally knocked on his door.

As his eyes adjust
the dark eases and he can see silhouettes of trees
and the outcrop he walked down before camp.

The horizon is not so much a line
but a watercolour blend from black into coral

and then out into the
gulping panorama of the night sky.

To the left it appears a little brighter.
A town?

But the stars.

He has never seen them
like this, away from the city
they scatter up from the land
dense and milky
and flurried and luminous
and prickling and white
and diffuse and orange
and hot and speckled
and strewn—so many
they are almost unremarkable.

He shuts his eyes. He feels old. Not like a guy in his thirties.
His body is stiff from the chilled ground,
shoulders bruised from the pack. His bladder is full
and tender. He will admit he hasn't been sleeping
that well. At night he closes
the door and sits in the dark and listens.

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He strikes the tent as the sun touches the side of the outcrop. He pumps his elbows and jumps between boulders. He inhales deeply: there is not a human soul for miles. He never planned on being a pigger, but some jobs have their way. It started soon after his pa died and they sold the echoey overbearing house on Reynolds Street. They moved out east. It's warmer, his ma said, and his ma's sister was in real estate, as was her sister's husband John, and we all know about John; he could sell you the spots off a snow leopard. Their new bungalow sung to him with its wood siding and low pitched roof. He erected a workbench in the garage and bagged a job scouring oil off a refinery floor. That was when it started. He was eighteen. Thinking about it now, his first time was on that bench. He doesn't remember it well: the girl shut the door and shucked off her jeans. He'd fumbled with his fly and she'd laughed, but not kindly. Now, the first time he saw a pig, all burnished cylinder with its blunted front blending into riveted sensor panels; the shell of red rubber seals, scrapers and odometer wheels. He'd sucked air.

From the top of the outcrop the prairie runs in all directions. He puts his hands behind his head and feels his heart beat hard. He feels so damn good. Heading for the lowest span of land, his legs swing like a harvester, shushing through the mesquite pasture. For a time he forgets. The day turns warm and he hums into the roof of his mouth.

It was unexpected, meeting her. As the flight descended she pointed out silvery green stock ponds: flat circles set into each ranch block. From that height the land rippled with rivers and cultivation. She'd leaned across him, placed a fingertip against the window and held it there, resting on the plastic. He'd wondered what it would be like to touch her.

'There used to be a town,' she'd said. 'At Salt Creek.'

'You don't say.'

'We teach our kids about it. There was a massacre on the plains. Kiowa and Comanche war parties attacked a wagon train coming from the town. The army attacked back, of course. One of the Indian chiefs was arrested. You know that strip of land, it used to be known as the most dangerous place in Texas.'

He thought about oscillatory stresses, dents, gouges and hard spots; he thought about holidays in the coating, pinhole cracks and gaps, and ovality and porosity; small voids or gas-filled pores, wrinkles and cold bent. His eyes rested on her long apricot earlobe.

'His name was Kicking Bird,' she said.

'What happened?' he asked.

'He ended up becoming a Baptist.'

'I meant to the town.'

'Oh. They moved the Post Office and then it just fell off the map.'

He walks. His body sinks into the step and sweep as striped white-crowned sparrows careen in between fence wires. He glances at the map. In a topographic translation of brick and liquid, a water tower is a cross-hatched circle. Further on, in scrubland (hasty green dots), there she is, the pipe (a dotted line with arrows for flow). As he walks cotton sticks to the ridges on his back. It's simple, his ma said after she'd searched him out. She'd brought a tupperware of sausages. You boil it down. Do what she asks, she said, she's your wife.

'Do you have a family?' she asked.

'My ma lives nearby.'

'How about kids. A girlfriend?'

'She comes and goes.'

'I've always wanted kids. The last guy I was seeing, he had this darling son. But we're over. Just happened.'

'Sorry.'

'Well he hit me a few times. Don't look worried, I called the cops. Been in Dallas staying with my parents while friends move my things out of his place.'

'She's gone at the moment. My wife.'

'Do you want her back?'

He knew she was trying to help, his ma. She'd sighed and patted his arm. He'd felt like a pig, propelled by the pressure of oil, but, Jesus, if the bearings are fucked, the crankshaft won't turn and that's just a fact. And his wife was the one who wouldn't budge. She didn't want him to go, she'd said. It was too dangerous, look what happened to Ted, and what would she do? What would she do without him? She wouldn't sleep, she'd said, and then made a show of packing her clothes, throwing bright sweaters onto the bed. It was them or her. Them or Fucking Her.

He must be close. The land starts to level and change to crop dotted with windmill grass. The stems burst in propeller stars. Sometimes essential parts cannot be seen: the curve-bill thrashers who watch him from a distance with orange eyes; the pocket gophers that disappear into complex networks of burrows across the panhandle. And there, rising from behind a ridge is the pipeline.

'We're landing,' she said. Some time during the flight she'd put her hand on his arm.

'What's the book?'

'Oh, just some stories. You know, boy meets girl.'

'Never turns out well,' he said and she laughed.

'Here, you should have it. It will give you something to read while

you're being all cowboy out on the prairie,' she said, and placed the book on his lap.

He felt about in his jean's pocket and then in his coat. He handed her a stubby piece of metal.

'It's a spark plug. It's all I have,' he said.

'I wasn't expecting anything,' she said.

He climbs up the side of a water tower to get a better view: her round body, steel bulk borne by russet double struts, cuts deep into the soil. He whistles and vaults onto the roof. At her closest she is a quarter mile away so he can see the lumbering curve of her. But soon she dog-legs around hills in the prairie, her profile flattening out, she draws a line over the land, her shadow a giant centipede before tapering down to a stock stream, and then a kite thread he has to squint to see.

As he pulls out his canteen he sees the woman's book and digs it from the bottom of his pack. He turns it over in his hands, skimming the pages. It is slim and well loved. He doesn't make time to read. Experience has taught him that books just give the best or the worst of it, and usually it's both. He runs one thumb over the cover and, as it bends, he thinks, *maybe*—

He opens

to the first page, and there is

no name.

For her, this was something

she just carried around

like the idea of a man.

As the wind stirs up

he notices how the grass

tangles in waves

the ground disappearing

in a rolling demonstration of relief. He sits with himself.

Appendix One: Publications

The following publications have arisen out of this work. The poems are listed alongside their original place of publication, although some were featured in my debut collection, *A Man Runs into a Woman* (Hue & Cry Press, 2012). “Mountains” was also selected for *Best New Zealand Poems 2012*, and “When the Sister Walks” was selected for the anthology *150 New Zealand Poems* (Random House, 2014).

Barnett, Sarah Jane. “Bees.” *A Man Runs into a Woman*. Wellington, New Zealand: Hue & Cry Press, 2012. 14. Print.

---. “Blue Heart.” *Sweet Mammalian* 1 (2014): Web.

---. “Christmas.” *Turbine* 13 (2014). Web.

---. “Clay Man.” *Turbine* 13 (2014). Web.

---. “Demolition.” *Trout: Online Journal of Arts and Literature from Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* 17 (2011). Web.

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---. “Glass.” *Trout: Online Journal of Arts and Literature from Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* 17 (2011). Web.

---. “Kangaroos.” *Hue & Cry* 7 (2013): 20. Print.

---. “Lamb” *Segue* 11 (Fall 2013). 5. Web.

---. “Lullaby.” *Sport* 40 (2013): 383. Print.

---. “Measures.” *Trout: Online Journal of Arts and Literature from Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* 17 (2011). Web.

---. “Mountains.” *JAAM* 29 (2011) : 173-176. Print.

---. *Paradise Ducks*. 2013. Hue & Cry Light Box Installation. Courtenay Place, Wellington, New Zealand.

---. “Peanuts.” *New Zealand Listener* 8 Jan. 2011: 30. Print.

- . "Rescue Story." *Segue* 11 (Fall 2013). 4. Web
- . "Relief." *Landfall* 227 (2014). 60. Print
- . "Statues." *Segue* 11 (Fall 2013). 6. Web.
- . "The Fire." *JAAM* 30 (2012): 27. Print.
- . "The Geographer." *Sport* 39 (2012): 231-234. Print.
- . "The Pipeline." *Hue & Cry* 5 (2011): 77-83. Print.
- . "Voices." *Hue & Cry* 6 (2012): 3. Print.
- . "When the Sister Walks." *A Man Runs into a Woman*. Wellington, New Zealand: Hue & Cry Press, 2012. 33. Print.
- . "Running with my Father." *Sport* 42 (2014): 188-191. Print.