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Critical and Creative Explorations of the Role of Environment in Ecological Fiction

Comprised of:

“The frailty of everything revealed at last”;  
Environment as Antagonist and the Warnings of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

And

*In the Distance, Smoke*

A Novella

A thesis submitted to the department of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing at Massey University, New Zealand.

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## Abstract

The critical portion of this thesis aims to examine the use and depiction of the natural world in Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road*, as well as the impacts that the state of the environment has upon the novel's characters. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the environment is positioned as the primary antagonist, and the role of memory and dreams within the text for adding nuance to the novel's exploration of our species' reliance upon nature. Unfortunately, in the course of my research I have been unable to identify any critics who argue that the environment is positioned as the antagonist of *The Road*. Due to this gap in current scholarship this analysis is mainly supported by the ideas of ecocritical academics, as their ideas are the most relevant to the ideas I am exploring because McCarthy's text is primarily concerned with the impact of the state of the environment upon its characters' lives and well-being. By proving that the environment occupies the narrative niche of antagonist, as well as examining the mechanisms by which this is achieved, this analysis looks to make up for a gap in existing academic discourse around McCarthy's novel.

The creative portion of this thesis is a post-environmental-collapse novella, which aims to expand upon McCarthy's innovative use of environment. By foregrounding the threat posed by the natural world, and ensuring that moments of significant tension are at least partially driven by need or threat generated by the environment, I hope to emulate the way *The Road* positions its environment as antagonist. However, where McCarthy creates an environment so utterly hostile that the only thing the characters are able to care about is their basic needs for survival, I have tried to craft a slightly less harsh one, in order to explore other facets of the characters' experiences and the human psyche. This has enabled me to explore some tensions between survival and emotional needs, and examine the way characters interact in situations where their basic needs are not guaranteed, yet are still striving to have their emotional needs met as well.

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Contents:

“The frailty of everything revealed at last”; Environment as Antagonist and the Warnings of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

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“The frailty of everything revealed at last”;  
Environment as Antagonist and the Warnings of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

## Introduction

In 2007, British environmentalist and author George Monbiot described Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* as "the most important environmental book ever written" ('The Road Well Travelled'). In the same article, Monbiot argues that McCarthy's depiction of a world stripped of its biosphere forms a "thought experiment" which reveals the "terrible fact" of our civilisation's dependency upon the environment; the fact that we are "never immune from being rubbed against the sleeve of environmental change" (RWT). Monbiot supports this claim with damning evidence from the UN's 2007 climate report, citing increasing carbon emissions and dwindling species numbers as reasons for the novel's relevance. This assessment of both the novel's importance and our fragile position on Earth was certainly true in 2007, and has only become more so in the last fifteen years. However, in this thesis I hope to take Monbiot's claim further. While many critics have examined the depiction of the natural world in *The Road*, none have investigated what to me is its most interesting feature: the positioning of the environment as the primary antagonising force. Therefore, this thesis seeks to explore McCarthy's depiction of the environment in *The Road*; to prove that the environment occupies the role of the novel's primary antagonist, to investigate the role of memory and colour in the depiction of the environment, and the ways these elements work to invite contemplation of our dependence on the natural world, in doing so working to fill what I perceive to be gap in the current academia surrounding *The Road*.

As Ursula K. Le Guin writes in 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,' "all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on" (*E.R.*, p.154). This is true of *The Road*,<sup>1</sup> its depiction of environmental collapse and our planet subsequently becoming uninhabitable mirroring contemporary anxieties about the existential threat posed by climate change. At no other point in recorded human history have we faced such a significant challenge to our collective survival as a species. The *Sixth Assessment Report*<sup>2</sup> compiled by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides stark evidence of this. Due to rising sea levels, one billion people could be at risk from "coastal-specific climate hazards" by the year 2041 (*S.A.R.*, 'Fact Sheet: Responding to Sea Level Rise'), while "extreme climate events comprising conditions beyond which many species are adapted are occurring on all continents, with severe impacts" (*S.A.R.*, 'Fact Sheet: Biodiversity'). Climate change no longer exists in hypothetical terms: it is here, and happening now.

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1 Although I doubt *The Road* has ever been accused of humour.

2 The IPCC's most recent report at the time of writing this thesis.

This is a terrifying reality,<sup>3</sup> and as the situation has become more immediate more writers have begun to work with ecological themes. Over the past thirty years there has been an increase in books in which environmental collapse or threat plays a significant plot role, from Margaret Atwood's 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*, to Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), and Neal Stephenson's *Termination Shock*, published in 2021. However, McCarthy's vision of total environmental system-collapse is by far the most stark and innovative. In 'America's Future as a Wasteland in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*', critic Radwan Gabir El-Sobky argues that McCarthy's novels often touch on themes relating to humanity's relationship with nature, most significantly in *The Road*. I am inclined to go further; in *The Road*, our species' reliance upon nature is foregrounded, forming the core of the novel's matter. This is achieved through the ways McCarthy communicates the relationship between his protagonists and the destroyed world, placing the environment in the role of the antagonist, and making effective use of description and memory to explore the necessity of the environment to the well-being and future of humanity. McCarthy's novel shows us that without a stable biosphere, systems and constructs which we hold to be concrete will break down. Human structures such as morality, laws, and society itself cannot exist without the foundation of the natural world to rest upon, all of which is illustrated by the challenges, people, and places encountered by the father and son on their journey throughout *The Road*. With its focus solely on the minutiae of survival against the elements removing all grand protagonist/antagonist struggles and significant character drama from the thrust of the narrative, as well as its emphasis on the contrast between memories of the pre-narrative past and realities of the narrative present, McCarthy's novel directly confronts its readers with the consequences of the loss of the biosphere.

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3 Emotive language must be used, but how does one capture the true bonedeeep fear of seeing a planetary extinction event unfold in real time? Not only that, but how does one convey in language the species guilt of knowing we are responsible?

Critics and Terminology

Given that *The Road*'s thought-experiment hinges on an environment-based conceit, it makes sense to ground this thesis with the work of eco-critical academics. In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty writes that "Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture" (*E.R.*, Intro.Xix), a central concern of McCarthy's novel. Radwan Gabir El-Sobky puts it elegantly in his essay 'America's Future as a Wasteland in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*,' when he writes "Ecocriticism is an appropriate critical approach to the novels of Cormac McCarthy for two reasons: the first is the strong presence of nature and environment throughout his works; the second is the important influence that nature and environment have on the thoughts and actions of his characters" (p.1). Indeed, in *The Road* the environment is the primary concern which dominates the thoughts and drives the actions of characters. While many critics have examined McCarthy's novel, I have chosen to explore a facet about which scant critical discourse exists; the fact that the environment itself is positioned as the novel's primary antagonist. Thus, we must take what we can from the existing literature, and try to extend it where possible to this argument. Of particular use will be Cynthia Deitering's essay 'The Postnatural Novel; Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s'. Deitering argues that in the aftermath of events like the 1979 Three Mile Island accident, a partial nuclear meltdown at the Three Mile Island power-plant in Pennsylvania, "U.S. novelists showed an increasing concern with the pervasive problem of toxic waste," forming the genesis of what she describes as a new, evolving "toxic consciousness" (*E.R.*, p.196). While *The Road* postdates the novels Deitering examines, its vision of biospheric collapse far more stark, as she discusses the impact of environmental change on characters' minds, Deitering's ideas are valuable when examining the father's psyche, and his intrusive dreams and memories of the pre-narrative world.

Other critical works, such as Gabrielle Blasi's 'Reading Allegory and Nature in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Vision of the Language of Nature,' will be important for supporting analysis of the fact that survival is a central concern of characters within the novel. Harold Fromm's ideas about the interrelatedness between environment and society in 'From Transcendence to Obsolescence; A Route Map' will also be valuable, as will Radwan Gabir El-Sobky's analysis of the relationship between environment and characters in his essay 'America's Future as a Wasteland in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*'. El-Sobky's work is of particular relevance to this thesis as he suggests that McCarthy asks the reader to consider what life might be like if nature were to become the "enemy" ('America's Future as a Wasteland,' p.68), although he does not

take that reading any further, simply arguing that it “serves to enhance the mood....to enhance the time and place of events” (p.67). Finally, the ideas about narrative conventions in Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots; Why We Tell Stories* will be essential for illustrating parallels between McCarthy’s positioning of the environment, and typical narrative conventions relating to antagonists.

For the sake of clarity when discussing the novel, “environment” and “biosphere” will refer to the natural world unless otherwise specified. I will endeavour to distinguish between the environment of the narrative-present and the natural world of the father’s memories by referring to it as the pre-narrative environment, and to things in the memories as existing within the narrative-past. Additionally, when exploring resonances with our own contemporary climate crisis, and the increasing pressures we are exerting upon the biosphere, I will take my cue from J. R. R. Tolkien’s essay ‘On Fairy Stories’, referring to our real world as the “Primary World” (p.37). This decision reflects the fact that the world of the story, the “secondary world” (p.37) to use Tolkien’s terms, is merely an extrapolation of our own; it is our own world, with recognizable cultural items like supermarkets and Coke cans, with a simple ‘what if’ applied to it. Another terminology point to note before we go any further is the matter of how to refer to the protagonists. The two focal characters of the novel are a father and son duo simply referred to as “the man” and “the boy”. While this is effective in a narrative sense as it positions the focal characters as Everyman figures, this also presents some clarity issues when it comes to constructing an academic argument; save for one old man who calls himself Eli, none of the other humans the man and the boy encounter are named, and instead are simply referred to as women, men, or children. In order to distinguish them from the other men and boys encountered in the novel, the characters McCarthy calls “the man” and “the boy” will be called “the father” and “the son” respectively for this thesis, to avoid confusion. As the novel’s focal character, and the figure whose psyche we are afforded the most access to, the father is the primary focus of this discussion, although some time is spent with the son when examining the impact of the environment on how the characters view the world.

'A long sheer of light' – The Unnamed Apocalypse; or, Setting the Scene

In order to examine *The Road*, we must first establish its basic narrative facts. *The Road* takes place in a near-future version of our world in which the biosphere has been destroyed by some unspecified disaster. The planet has been reduced to a burnt husk, shrouded in ash which fills the atmosphere so that little light reaches the ground. Plants and animals have been almost totally eradicated, few humans are left, and nothing new grows. Cities are populated by “the mummified dead” (*TR*, p.23), while the novel is dominated by descriptions of the razed environment the characters navigate. The story follows two unnamed protagonists, a father and his son – a boy probably no older than five or six – as they move through what is heavily implied to be the remains of the United States with the aim of finding somewhere warmer in order to survive the oncoming winter. Carrying all of their belongings in a shopping trolley, they scavenge through carbonized cities and decaying houses which have been “rifled years ago” (p.83) in the hope of finding food and supplies, resources ever-dwindling and nothing new grows or is produced to replace that which is used up. Of the event which has plunged the world into this apocalyptic state we are told little: fragments of the father’s memories show us “a long sheer of light” and several percussive sounds (p.54). This is the only glimpse we get of the event itself in the novel: a few lines in a short paragraph almost a quarter of the way through the book. The trigger event being obscured ensures that the focus of the novel, and of readers’ attentions, is on the horrifying reality of the characters’ struggle for survival in a world which has shrunk “down about a raw core of parsible entities.... In time to wink out forever” (p.93).

Interestingly, despite the event itself occupying an incredibly small amount of discourse time, a large number of critics have theorized about what this trigger event may have been. A common idea which many, including Monbiot, have espoused is that it was some sort of nuclear war or disaster which plunged the world into a nuclear winter (*The Road Well Travelled*). However, it seems clear that the cause is a minor aspect of McCarthy’s novel. In her essay ‘All the Things he Saw and Did Not See’, critic Hannah Stark argues that “In many ways, it matters little what the precise event is; what is significant is that the world that is described to us is a world without either an ecosystem or natural resources” (p.8). I am inclined to agree. The event is merely a means to achieve a narrative end, existing to provide a cause for the story but vague enough so as not to divert our attention from its real matter. What matters more is the aftermath, and the warning that the depiction and the role of the environment convey. Adeline Johns-Putra argues that by “refusing to depict catastrophe, let alone name it, the novel even foregoes the appeal of spectacle that

apocalypticism might afford” (‘Climate Change, Humanity, and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*’, p.9). By making the root cause ambiguous and instead focusing on the state of the environment in the aftermath, *The Road* confronts its readers with the horrifying reality of ecological collapse and “the frailty of everything revealed at last” (*TR*, p.28), as well as the implications this would hold for our species and society. Foregrounding the natural world instead of relegating it to a more typical position as mere backdrop for the events of the narrative is central to this, and is something which I explore further in my own creative work written as part of this Master’s degree. I too ignore the trigger event in favour of exploring the impacts a degraded and challenging biosphere on human lives, needs and relationships. It is also for this reason that, unlike other critics, I will not focus this thesis on *The Road*’s trigger event. What is primarily important to this study is the text’s approach to the natural world, and the humans’ relationships with it. To briefly voyage into the realm of psychology via Abraham Maslow’s theory of the Hierarchy of Needs, by creating a world in which survival is, necessarily, the motivation of all characters, McCarthy introduces a tension between the father’s basic physiological needs, and his unfulfillable higher emotional needs represented by his dreams and memories. As his physical needs are not consistently met, survival is the primary motivation of the father (Maslow, *Theory of Human Motivation*). In my own work I explore this tension further by creating a secondary world in which characters’ survival needs are more consistently met, so they, and by extension the plot, can also be driven by their emotional motivations, to a degree that these two motivating forces, two levels of need, are at times more in conflict than in McCarthy’s novel.

*Fear in a handful of ash: Environment as Antagonist*

The primary motivation of the two main protagonists in *The Road* is simply to survive for as long as possible in the face of the state of the environment. It is this need which leads them to undertake their journey which occupies most of the novel, “moving south” (*TR*, p.2) across the “barren, silent, godless” (p.2) remains of the United States in the hope of finding warmer climes because “there’d be no surviving another winter” where they had been living (p.2). Over the course of their journey the father and son face numerous threats to their survival, such as starvation, exposure to the elements and weather like rain (p.14), as well as ragged bands of other humans referred to as “bloodcults” (p.15) who have turned to cannibalism. The father constantly watches for threats, even clamping a mirror to the handle of their cart “to watch the road behind them” (p.4) while they walk in daylight. It is significant that all of these threats to their survival stem from the state of the environment itself, as even the actions of the cannibal groups are a direct response to the pressures of the destroyed biosphere. This all serves to position the environment as the novel’s primary antagonist, a significant element of the ways McCarthy’s novel explores and draws attention to ideas about our collective reliance upon nature. The ideas of critics Blasi and El-Sobky can be brought to bear here, as they both discuss the way the natural world is centred in McCarthy’s work. However, I hope to expand upon their ideas here by exploring the ways the environment occupies the role of the primary antagonist within *The Road*, as this seems to be an obvious gap in the academic discourse which surrounds this novel.

In order to examine the ways the environment is positioned as the antagonist, we must first briefly consider what an antagonist actually is. Broadly, an antagonist in a narrative sense is “the principle opponent or foil to the protagonist” (‘Antagonist’, Encyclopedia Britannica). In *The Seven Basic Plots; Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker describes the ‘monster’ type found across fiction as a figure which is “deadly” and often threatens “an entire community or kingdom, even mankind and the world in general” (*Seven Basic Plots*, p.23). Both these broad definitions help us to define antagonist in this thesis as the primary force which opposes the goals and well-being of the protagonist, and at times humanity at large. Before we advance further, it is important to differentiate between antagonists, criminals, and villains. While these categories often overlap in fiction there are clear distinctions between the three. Writing about classic detective fiction, Alyce von Rothkirch argues that ideas of “degeneracy”, generally a moral concept, “greatly influenced the depiction of villains” (‘A Typology of Villains,’ web.) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this can be extended to all genres of modern fiction. Thus, villain is a title with moral implications,

those to whom it is applied acting against social ideas of morality, while criminality is a category defined by legality; characters cast as criminals act against the laws set within the secondary world of the story. As Rothkirch rightly points out, there is often a lot of cross over between criminality and villainy (A.T.o.V. web.) as laws and morals tend to be interlinked, so literary villains can be, and often are, criminals, such as in the case of Arthur Conan Doyle's Moriarty.

While villains and criminals often occupy the role of their texts' primary antagonist, it is important to remember that these categories are not synonymous. Criminality and villainy are not prerequisites of antagonism, and, conversely, it is possible to be a villain or a criminal without being the primary antagonist. This is the case with figures such as the DC Comics superhero Batman, and the medieval English rogue Robin Hood, who both regularly break the legal codes of their respective fictional worlds so technically sit within the realm of criminality. However, they are positioned as the protagonists of their stories, their legal transgressions no impediment to this. Thus, when broken down to its barest essentials, the defining feature of the role of antagonist is simply opposing the protagonist (Encyclopedia Britannica). This brings us to *The Road*. In McCarthy's novel there is no singular, consistent, recurring human force which stands in opposition to the two protagonists throughout the narrative. Rather, it is the environment itself in its destroyed state which most consistently opposes the father and son's well-being. As the environment is not a sentient being it is not bound by human concepts of laws or morality, nor can it be said to consciously defy them, thus it is neither criminal nor villain. Yet, as it is the motivating force behind the father and son's journey, and the only consistent, overarching barrier to their well-being and goals across the narrative, it is the environment itself which is positioned as the primary antagonist. The roving "bloodcults" (*TR*, p.15) who engage in cannibalism could be categorised as villains from the perspective of the protagonists for their moral lapses, but not as criminals as there are no laws left in the world of the novel to forbid their cannibal actions. Nor can these cannibals be classed as the primary antagonist, as it is the environment which drives the actions of the protagonists throughout the entire novel, while the cannibals are secondary threats which the protagonists only encounter occasionally.

In *The Road*, the environment is positioned as the primary antagonist from the beginning of the novel. Within the opening pages we are told that "there'd be no surviving another winter here" (*TR*, p.2), as the father looks out across the ash-choked landscape, communicating that basic survival is the most immediate, pressing need concerning the protagonists. This need and struggle for survival against the elements is something which is directly addressed multiple times within *The*

*Road*'s opening pages. On page nine there is a brief exchange of dialogue between the man and the boy, which runs

“And we’re still going south.

Yes.

So we’ll be warm.”

This exchange reinforces that the protagonists’ journey is driven by need produced by the environment – in this instance the need to avoid the harshest weather. While the environment constantly presents a challenge to the protagonists’ well-being through the simple fact that its conditions are antithetical to those necessary for human survival, there are certain moments in which the danger is amplified. This is particularly clear in the section where the father and son begin to climb through the mountains. As they begin the ascent the father considers how “very cold” it will be as they climb higher, privately acknowledging that “there was a good chance they would die in the mountains” (p.29). The higher they get the harder things become, “the air [growing] thin” while “pushing the cart up those [steeper] grades was exhausting” (p.33). This shopping trolley carries all their food and water, the tarpaulin they camp under (p.31) and the blankets which keep them warm (p.32), and the father worries they might “have to leave it” (p.33), which would have serious implications for their survival. This is a recurring fear in this section, and, as more snow falls “in the deeper drifts the cart wouldn’t push at all” (p.35). As the cart allows them to carry a great number of things vital to ensuring their continuing survival, if it were to be lost or have to be abandoned death would likely come swiftly. Thus, the cart being threatened, damaged, or challenged is a direct threat to the protagonists’ lives.

As the snow is both part and product of the environment, it is the environment itself which is directly opposing and threatening them, in doing so fulfilling the role of the antagonist. I use the word ‘fulfilling’, rather than the more typical or elegant ‘performing’, intentionally. ‘Fulfilling’ has less active, intentional connotations than ‘performing’ or similar verbs. As the environment is not a sentient, intelligent actor within the text (or our primary world for that matter), it cannot act with intent; I am mindful of this fact when it comes to the language I choose, though of course when we are used to using language of intent when discussing an antagonist it can be challenging to find the right terms to describe something which, by its very nature, lacks the capacity for intent. As critic Gabriella Blasi writes in ‘Reading Allegory and Nature in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Vision of the Language of Nature,’ “McCarthy’s novel forces the reader to contemplate nature” (p.93), and moments like this where the environment is presented as a direct obstacle to the protagonists are a key part of this.

Scenes like the mountain crossing in *The Road*, where the antagonistic force which motivates the protagonists' actions takes up more direct opposition to their wellbeing or goals, can be found throughout literature. These sorts of moments are examples of what Booker calls the "confrontation" or "frustration stage" of the narrative (*Seven Basic Plots*, p.39). An obvious example of this is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo and the Fellowship are motivated to walk across Middle Earth by the rising threat of Sauron, just as *The Road*'s protagonists are motivated to walk across the remains of the United States by increasingly inhospitable environmental conditions. On their journey, Frodo and company are at various points threatened more directly by agents of Sauron, such as the Ringwraiths which attack them on Weathertop (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, chapter xi). This is much the same as the way in which the man and the boy are threatened more directly by environment-based challenges over the course of their journey in *The Road*, such as the snow which stops their cart. Thus, the environment is full-filling the narrative niche typically occupied by a human or monstrous antagonistic force.

There are many other moments throughout *The Road* in which the natural world is established as being the most direct challenge to the well-being of the protagonists. Indeed, the whole novel seems to be one long "Nightmare stage," to use Booker's terms (*Seven Basic Plots*, p.44), as the protagonists are constantly confronted and challenged with almost no reprieve. At one point the father wakes in the night to the sound of thunder, suggesting the threat of a rainstorm. In response, the father "pulled the tarp" that he and his son sleep beneath closer "about them" and "lay awake for a long time" (*TR.*, p.14), actions which clearly communicate that he is frightened by the possibility of heavy rain. As the scene progresses, we learn that "if they got wet they would probably die" (p.14). The rain is a direct threat to their survival, as in this apocalyptic waste they have no way of drying themselves or keeping warm if they get wet. Interestingly, while the father and son have many conversations about death, with the son asking "are we going to die" as early as page nine, this scene is the first time that the death of the protagonists is mentioned as a potentially imminent event. The fact that this potential death would directly result from an aspect of the environment once again cements its position as the primary antagonistic force. Significantly, when the thunder wakes the father his first thought is of the direct danger the weather poses to their lives, rather than worrying about whether there might be people creeping up on them through the rain. In the morning he briefly thinks about "the bloodcunts" and "marauders" (p.15), but this is a passing consideration as he surveys the landscape, only noting their absence. It is the weather itself, a part and product of the environment, which is his primary concern.

Another element of the environment worth closer examination is the ever-present ash. “Shoals of ash and billows of ash” (p.13) drift across the ruined landscape, rendering everything in shades of grey and dimming the light of the “dull sun...unseen” (p.13). The protagonists wear masks (p.3) to prevent from inhaling it, but despite these measures the father regularly coughs “until he could taste blood” (p.56), while other humans they encounter are also seen “coughing” (p.63) signalling that prolonged exposure to the ash is damaging their health. The ash even impacts the cannibal bands, showing that the environment poses the most significant, overarching threat to well-being in *The Road*. As they walk through a destroyed city the father “kept constant watch behind him in the mirror” attached to the side of their cart, but “the only thing that moved in the streets was the blowing ash” (p.24). The juxtaposition of the act of watching with the absence of people to observe reinforces the emptiness of the world. The ash which moves in the street where before people would have been also reflects the degradation of the world, emphasising the decay of the biosphere via absence. In this world ash is ubiquitous; along with the cold it is one of the only constants in their journey. In an earlier scene the father watches “the ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds” (p.10) blowing across the barren landscape. The ash is the burnt remnants of plants, people, cities; the carbonized remains of the pre-narrative world which now form part of the environment of the narrative-present. On a surface level it is just another part of the environment which can cause the protagonists harm, yet its state as both symbol and remains of the world’s metamorphosis gives it greater significance, inviting contemplation of the fact that the destruction of the biosphere is the reason why the environment is now the primary barrier to the protagonists’ well-being. As with the snow which later impedes their cart’s progress, the ash and rain are not people or groups which can be fought against or hidden from. They are part of the environment, and in many ways that makes the environment a far more terrifying antagonist than a more traditional humanoid or sentient one. According to El-Sobky, in *The Road*, “McCarthy focuses only on the enmity of nature for human beings by looking at the negative,” (‘America’s Future as Wasteland.’ p.67) presenting readers with a warning of what life could be like if nature were to become the “enemy” (AFW, p.68). This is a perceptive reading, and certainly the case throughout *The Road*. Unsettlingly, McCarthy’s thought-experiment warning is rapidly becoming a reality with climate change’s growing impacts. However, El-Sobky stops short of calling the natural world the antagonist itself, a missed opportunity to examine the nuance of McCarthy’s vision. The environment is not the ‘enemy’ in a traditional sense, for it cannot act with intent or be fought against in any meaningful way, and it is this complexity which makes McCarthy’s exploration of our dependence and fragility in relation to the natural world so impactful.

In her essay 'Reading Allegory and Nature in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Vision of the Language of Nature', Gabriella Blasi argues that "The catastrophic event per se is not given prominence; the central action concerns the consequences of the apocalypse and its effects on the lives of a father and son" (p.91). The narrative's central focus is not on war, or human quarrels, but on the protagonist's desperate efforts to survive, centring our reliance on the natural world. However, Blasi fails to note that this effect is compounded by the fact that, rather than there being any one specific human figure acting as the antagonist, it is the environment itself which fulfils this role. While it could be argued that, because the environment is in this state as a result of implied human actions, the antagonist is, at its root, a human force, as there is vanishingly little discourse time spent on the trigger event these possible human origins have no weight in the narrative. The father fixates on the environment, and the threats it poses, rather than the world leaders who launched the nuclear weapons. The protagonists' actions are therefore driven by the pressures of the state of the world, rather than any human or evil force. While the father and son do encounter figures who intend them harm within this hostile landscape, it is an opportunistic sort of violence. The cannibalistic groups they encounter and flee are not pursuing them across the landscape, nor moving with the intent of finding our protagonists. Indeed, these groups are driven to violence and morally reprehensible actions by the very same force which drives the father and son: the environment itself. By removing intent from the antagonistic force, shunning typical conventions of the antagonist/protagonist struggle, McCarthy draws attention to the biosphere's importance. The environment is neither villain, nor criminal, and has no grand agenda or plan. It simply is, and in its disrupted state that is enough to threaten.

By positioning the environment as the antagonist without anthropomorphizing or personifying it, McCarthy emphasises just how much of a different scale it exists upon. Nature in its broadest sense cannot be bargained with, nor threatened or 'killed' in any meaningful way which does not also threaten the protagonists. Though we expect that, in line with story conventions, the protagonists will have a miraculous escape from death, that the story will culminate in the antagonist being "killed... its dark power overthrown" (Booker, *Seven Basic Plots*, p.23), the story ends with the father's death. We are not afforded the satisfaction or catharsis of a triumph or restoration at the end of the nightmare; instead, the focalisation of the nightmare is passed on to the son. McCarty's subversion of reader expectations and narrative conventions, including typical antagonist/protagonist struggle patters, contributes to the framing of the natural world as a source of fear and danger. Unsettlingly, the danger posed by the environment in *The Road* increasingly

mirrors our present reality. Human-driven climate change is disrupting natural systems around the globe. Weather events are becoming increasingly severe, taken to dramatic extremes, displacing communities and destroying lives on an increasingly frequent basis. As Blasi suggests, *The Road* makes its readers think about nature. I would take this further: McCarthy's novel not only makes us consider nature but establishes the environment as the primary antagonist in *The Road*. In this reading we are forced to think about what could happen to us if the biosphere collapsed entirely, to contemplate our collective species mortality, truly making Monbiot's assessment of the text as the most significant environmental novel ever written ('The Road Well Travelled') ring true.

*The Collapse of Civilization, and the Absence of Human Antagonists*

*The Road*'s exploration of environmental collapse's impact on society is aided by its depiction of people-groups and places. Employing vivid descriptions of the remains of civilisation, "mummified dead" (*TR* p.23), "charred ruins of houses" (p.137), and coins discarded in the ash (p.22), McCarthy illustrates how laws, social constructs like money and morality, and communities such as cities have vanished from the secondary world. In his essay 'From Transcendence to Obsolescence; A Route Map', ecocritic Harold Fromm writes that in our contemporary society "as more ... basic materials are rendered unusable by man, it becomes apparent that man has failed to see that now, as in the past, the roots of his being are in the earth" ('From Transcendence to Obsolescence; A Route Map', *E.R.*, p.35). *The Road* is this scenario taken to its extreme – as the environment has become not only 'unusable' but hostile to human life due to an implied nuclear war, society and culture have collapsed, unable to exist without a stable environment. While other people survive within this ruined land, occasionally threatening the protagonists, these groups are not the primary threat. Instead, the way they and their cannibalistic actions are presented – keeping people alive in cellars to cut off pieces of their flesh for food (*TR*, p.116), bearing children just to eat them (p.212) – adds complexity to *The Road*'s exploration of humanity's reliance on nature, as their actions are driven by scarcity created by the degraded environment. The depiction of moral and cultural breakdown combined with the absence of structured society in *The Road* confronts the reader with our species' collective vulnerability to and reliance upon nature. It is only after the natural world is disrupted that society collapses, a particularly relevant warning to readers today.

The first suggestion that other survivors exist occurs early in the novel. The father reflects that there are "no more balefires on the distant ridges" and that the "bloodcults must have all consumed one another" (*TR*, p.15). These lines imply the current or recent existence of other humans – "balefires", another word for bonfires or large campfires, is a word which connotes human activity and suggests groups of humans gathering, while the particle "cult" in "bloodcults" also implies a group of people. As "bloodcults" is pluralised, this then suggests multiple groups of survivors, at least in the initial aftermath. However, both bonfires and cults exist in the past-tense here. There are "no more balefires" (p.15) visible on the ridgelines, communicating that that which used to be prevalent has now diminished. That the bloodcults "must have all consumed one another" (p.15) not only betrays their cannibalistic nature through the use of the word "consumed", but also suggests they are no longer present in the land, as consumption carries connotations of destruction. Through this, McCarthy's novel illustrates that if we consume all of earth's resources,

eventually all that will be left to consume is ourselves. While this passage introduces the possibility of other, hostile, human presences, it also simultaneously undercuts the threat by suggesting that it is dwindling as the few surviving humans slowly vanish from the earth. Even these small, uncivilised groups are disappearing, the lack of a stable natural world rendering society of any sort unviable. Thus, this places the emphasis not on the threat posed by these other human groups, but on the fact that the very existence of organized groups is challenged, and the survival of humanity itself is in jeopardy because there is no stable natural world to support them.

The speed at which society as a whole collapsed following the apocalyptic event is emphasized as the father reflects on how things changed in the immediate aftermath. The day after the event there were people “sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolated and smoking” (p.32), burnt by the horror which disrupted the natural world. The father reflects that “others would come to help them” (p.33), expanding on the implication that people initially tried to band together. However, this is immediately undercut by the father recalling how “within a year there were fires on the ridges” along with the sounds of “deranged chanting” and the “screams of the murdered” (p.33). This passage communicates just how swiftly human society and constructs of morality collapsed following the event and the subsequent breakdown of nature: in less than twelve months society had broken down to the point that murder and cults were widespread. El-Sobky writes that “The relentless competition for survival causes moral disintegration and loss of humanity” (‘America’s Future as Wasteland,’ p.67) in *The Road*. As there are not enough resources to go around, and the natural world has become incompatible with human needs, humans have either perished or reverted to a state best described by philosopher Thomas Hobbes’ concept of the ‘state of nature’. In his 1651 treatise *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes that, were society to cease and structures such as governments to be destroyed, humanity would revert to a primal state in a “return to Confusion .... to the condition of a War of every man against every man” (*Leviathan*, p.137). In this state, there is “no Arts; no Letters; no Society,” while people live in “continually feare,” their lives reduced to something “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (*Leviathan*, p.84). This could well have been written to describe *The Road*, as this certainly encapsulates the experiences of humans in the novel. As the destabilization of the natural world is the root cause of the destruction of society, McCarthy’s novel explores some ways our contemporary world could revert to this theorized state, revealing the many unacknowledged ways in which we are reliant upon the biosphere.

In one scene, the father and son pass through the outskirts of a burnt-out city. Even the language McCarthy uses when characterising the settlement is telling – it is merely “the city” (*TR*,

p.21) when the father thinks about it, showing that place-names are either vanished or useless in this post-collapse world, suggesting both a lack of humans, and the absence of organized society. Moving through the remains of a supermarket searching for food, the father notes two vending machines which have been tipped over and pried open. They have been emptied of food, while there are “coins everywhere in the ash” (p.22) around them. It is significant that the food has been taken but the money left, as it communicates that in the narrative-present food is far more important than money. Money is of course a societal construct – as a society we all believe that coins have or represent a certain value and can be used to acquire goods and services via a system of exchange. Thus, the fact that the coins have been left “in the ash” tells us that the system which gives money its value has broken down or vanished, burnt up and turned into ash like that in which the coins lie, in the apocalyptic event which has left the world a shell. The abandonment of coins in favour of food also reinforces the role of the environment as the primary antagonistic force. As human constructs such as money have been abandoned, in this case literally, this shows that people’s primary concern is survival. Money will not aide in this, as wealth has no use when there is nothing to buy in such a destroyed environment. Thus, society has broken down as a result of the disruption of the balance of the natural world. Cheryll Glotfelty writes that “all human culture is connected to the physical world” (*E.R.*, Intro.Xix), and this is certainly a central concern of McCarthy’s novel. His depiction of social collapse following swiftly on the heels of environmental devastation confronts the reader with precisely that interconnect between the two, emphasizing our reliance upon and vulnerability to the natural world. This exploration of the dependence of human society on the natural world continues throughout the novel. A significant part of this is the grisly, and at times horrific, imagery which McCarthy employs to communicate the social collapse which has occurred as a result of environmental destabilization. As the father and son move through the unnamed city they encounter various tableaux of horror which add to our understanding of the state of humans and human society in the narrative present. Along the roads they find “the mummified dead everywhere”, their flesh “shrivelled and drawn” with “ligaments dried ... taught as wires” (p.23). The fact that McCarthy devotes time to describing the state of the bodies in horrific details means that readers cannot escape their presence, mirroring the experience of the protagonists.

In the world of *The Road*, humanity has reverted to something resembling Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’. The lives of the people in this world are defined by scarcity and fear, with no room or time for art or creation of any sort. They are in constant competition with one another for food and resources, most resorting to murder and cannibalism in order to survive. The fact that the collapse of settlements occurred as a result of the destabilization of the biosphere communicates that nature’s

degradation into an antagonistic state is the cause for humanity's collective disintegration into the state of nature. To return to Fromm's ideas, the absence of nature leads to the absence of society, and subsequently of human life, reminding the reader of our own "roots" in the earth, our own dependence on nature. By illustrating the swiftness with which society degenerated into the State of Nature, McCarthy strengthens his novel's didactic theme of revealing humanity's collective reliance upon nature. *The Road* therefore mirrors some of our contemporary eco-anxieties as discussed by Fromm, and urges its reader to pay attention to just how dependant we are upon nature.

*Memory, Colour, and the Dual-Vision of the Father*

Memory and the past are important aspects of the exploration of ideas about the natural world in *The Road*. Throughout the novel there are many dream-sequences, flashbacks, and other forms of memory which offer glimpses of the pre-narrative past, almost exclusively through the eyes of the father. These fragments add complexity to the novel's exploration of humanity's relationship with nature, and colour plays a significant role in this. The colour palette of the narrative-present is oppressive, devoid of colours of life and growth. Dominated by greys, blacks, and the omnipresent ash, the world has been reduced to shades and gradients just as it has been stripped of life and vitality. There are few moments where colours are actually mentioned, and the majority of these exist in the pre-narrative past, as part of the many flashbacks and dream-sequences which the father experiences throughout the novel. These are significant moments, not only intensifying the sense of destruction of the natural world through the juxtapositions they create, but also communicating the psychological tension within the father<sup>4</sup> as he attempts to understand the hostile place the world has become. These can be read in the context of critic Cynthia Deitering's ideas about a growing "toxic consciousness" in literature following environmental disasters in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ('The Postnatural Novel.' *E.R.* p.196). Through imagery and language associated with death in these flashbacks, McCarthy foregrounds our present inability to comfortably coexist with the natural world, inviting contemplation of how we interact with nature, and the path we may be heading down.

The first mention of colour in the novel occurs during a flashback sequence in which the father recalls an autumn in his childhood and the "yellow leaves" (*TR.* p.12) around a lake. The use of yellow, a colour associated in English-speaking nations with hope, happiness, and life, here serves to intensify the depiction of the decaying environment of the narrative-present, as McCarthy juxtaposes the descriptions of the world which was and the world which is, creating a contrast between the two. The inclusion of colour in the memory emphasizes its absence in the present. Interestingly, even the father's memories of the old world are touched by death, and an awareness, or at least a suggestion, of the uneasy tension between humanity and nature. In this flashback the father also recalls a "dead perch lolling belly up" (p.12) in the lake, while the trunks of birch trees are described as "bone pale" (p.11). The inclusion of death undercuts the otherwise idyllic scene in unsettling ways, while the trees like bone seemingly foreshadow the dead trees in the narrative-

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<sup>4</sup>The character of 'the father', as the primary protagonist and rare survivor becomes a sort of everyman figure and stand-in for all humanity, which in turn makes his relationship with nature stand for that of our entire species.

present. Other memories also draw our attention to this tension between humanity and nature. Later in the novel, the father recalls a winter's day when he was "the boy's age. A little older" (p.200), before the collapse event, watching while men "opened up the rocky hillside" (p.200) revealing "a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number" (p.201). As the memory progresses we learn "men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive" (p.201). Just as the autumn memory is infused with the death of creatures of the natural world, this memory contains similar themes. However, unlike in the autumn memory, here death is centred, being the core matter of the scene rather than simply part of the scenery in the way the dead fish and autumnal trees are. The father reflects that the snakes were burnt as the men had "no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be" (p.201) – in other words because the snakes looked hostile. This destruction out of fear in this winter scene, and to a lesser extent the dead fish in the autumn flashback, show how memory in McCarthy's text functions to draw attention to the relationship between humanity and nature, and our present inability to coexist with any degree of symbiosis. In addition, the winter memory invites contemplation of how the power dynamic between the environment and humans has reversed in the time elapsed between the memory and the narrative-present. In memory, humans hold all the power, able to destroy elements of nature at a whim, and harness elements like water for their enjoyment, such as the father rowing on a lake. By contrast, in the narrative-present humanity is vulnerable to nature, inviting us to think about how this could happen to us.

It is not until page twenty six that McCarthy uses a colour other than black or grey in the narrative present, writing about firebricks "in the hearth as yellow as the day it was laid" (*T.R.*). This is an interesting moment, as these firebricks, the only colour in the decaying world, also provide a link to the past: they are in the house which was the father's childhood home. In addition, the colour here is the same as the colour described in the autumn memory scene. Yellow, while often a happy shade, is also a colour associated with decay. Dying foliage, like the leaves in the autumn memory, is often yellow, and thus this use of colour coupled with the fact that the firebricks are located in a half rotten house means that even this miraculously preserved relic of what once was is linked inextricably with decay. Nothing is free from the spectre of death. It is an irony that in the razed world the firebricks in the hearth remain untouched by flame. They, like his memories of the former world, are all that is left of the world which once was. The father, through his memories and moments like this, becomes a conduit to the past, caught between the two worlds and reminding us the reader of what has been lost. In the pre-narrative past, humans are shown either taking nature for granted – fishing without a care in autumn – or treating it as something which should be tamed or disposed of, like the snakes in the winter memory. By contrast in the narrative present the father

longs for nature, treasuring his memories like relics, holy things which both provide comfort and incite greater hopelessness in equal measure. He even fears that recalling them too often will lead to the present corrupting them, thinking that “each memory recalled must do some violence” to the memory, so he must “be sparing” (p.139). As the protagonists’ situation becomes progressively more desperate across the novel, the father experiences increasingly “rich dreams... which he was loathe to wake from” (p.139). These dreams, as with all of the flashbacks and dreams in the novel, are of things in the past which are “no longer known in the world” (p.139). He longs for his memories of his wife “crossing the lawn toward the house in the early morning” (p.139), caught between what once was and the reality of what is.

The father’s inability to come to terms with the state of the environment can be interpreted with the aide of Deitering’s ideas about the impact of climate change, pollution, and a growing awareness of broader environmental issues on contemporary American literature. In her essay ‘The Postnatural Novel; Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s’, Deitering argues that in the aftermath of environmental tragedies and nuclear powerplant meltdowns including the Three Mile Island accident “U.S. novelists showed an increasing concern with the pervasive problem of toxic waste” (*E.R.*, p.196). This formed the genesis of what she describes as a new, evolving “toxic consciousness” (*E.R.*, p.196) in American fiction, an awareness of the dangerous ways in which we are altering our world with our waste and industry, jeopardizing our own well-being and collective future as a species. This concern, Deitering posits, stems from our “culture’s shifting relation to nature and to the environment” due to the fact that “the imminence of ecological collapse” and other environment related issues have increasingly become part of our social consciousness (p.196). Texts such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid’s Tale* “mirror a shift in our cultural identity” as we have increasingly become “a culture defined by its waste” (p.196) Deitering argues. While Deitering is only focussing on texts written by American authors in the 1980s, this trend has clearly continued. It can be seen taken to extreme lengths in *The Road*, as McCarthy depicts with complexity an incredibly hostile setting resulting from ecological collapse, with the natural world itself becoming the primary antagonist, as well as the impacts this has had upon civilisation and the psyche of his protagonists. Much like the novels Deitering discusses in her essay, it is clear that the matter of *The Road* is informed by this “toxic consciousness” (*E.R.* p.200). The magnitude of McCarthy’s vision – characters are not only aware of the issue of humanity’s waste and our impact on the ecosphere, as in the novels Deitering examines, but act out a narrative in which the environment itself is so damaged that it has become the antagonist – can be explained by the fact that *The Road* was published two whole decades after the novels which form the core of Deitering’s analysis. In that

time, the human-made environmental crisis has worsened, now presenting a very real existential threat to humanity, and as a result has also become far more present in our collective cultural consciousness.

Deitering's essay also serves as a valuable tool for interpreting and better understanding the role of the father's various memories and dreams within McCarthy's novel. According to Deitering, many novels which are informed by a 'toxic consciousness' depict societies which have "fouled [their] own nest" (*E.R.* p.200), and characters who sit on the boundary, part of a generation who know the earth as home and "as toxic riskscape" (p.200) in equal measure. These figures, Deitering says, are paradoxical characters who "remain "dreamers of nests" even though theirs may be fouled" (p.201). They still cling to old, pastoral ideas and memories while simultaneously acknowledging the degraded state of the worlds they inhabit. The father in *The Road* can certainly be seen as falling into this category – he very literally dreams of the way the world once was, providing interludes and visions of the pre-narrative past which often focus on nature and depict it as something tame or controllable, a highly pastoral way of imagining nature. The father is the novel's only nest-dreamer. His son has never known an un-burnt world so cannot dream of it, and we are not afforded internal access to the psyches of any other humans in the novel. The father thus bridges the two worlds via his memory. The father's state of being suspended between two ways of life, two utterly different relationships with the natural world, can also be read as mirroring our own contemporary climate anxieties, which are growing ever more pressing and real. Events such as the cyclone and severe flooding which impacted New Zealand's north island in February 2023 make it increasingly hard to ignore humanity's negative impact on the planet. Our species influence is rapidly turning the natural world into more of a threatening force, a "riskscape" in Deitering's terms, which challenges people and prevents self actualisation, much like the environment in the narrative present of *The Road*.

The novel ends with a paragraph about trout, which, like the contents of the father's dreams, are yet another thing "no longer known in the world" (*TR.* p.139). The speaker of this scene is ambiguous, unspecified whether it is spoken by the father, the son, some spiritual relic of the father lingering after his death a few pages earlier, or another narrational voice entirely. However, the orator of this passage matters less than its content. "Once," the unnamed narrator tells us, "there were brook trout in the streams" (p.306). This first sentence establishes that this passage reflects on what once was, and what has been lost, in what Blasi describes as an "elegiac ending" ('Reading Allegory and Nature.' P.90). The use of "Once" (*TR.*, p.306) is also an interesting choice, echoing

the ‘Once upon a time’ formula common for opening fairy-tales and fantasy narratives. Trout are of course not creatures out of fantasy, or in any way supernatural beings, yet this opening puts us in mind of that, othering them and removing them from the sphere of reality into the realm of myth. The elegiac tone established by the opening line is cemented by the content of the rest of the paragraph. We are told of the patterns on their backs, which the unknown narrator describes as being “maps.... Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (p.307). This “thing” which has been lost and cannot “be made right again” can be interpreted as either simply the trout, which have vanished from the secondary world, or more broadly as nature as a whole, which has been irreversibly altered to reach the state depicted throughout the story. Trout, and other fish in streams and oceans, are something which exist within the primary world in our present day. By reminding the reader of our contemporary world, and the natural wonders which it still contains, the novel’s final scene also serves as a warning. These things, familiar, living creatures which we take for granted, have been lost in the fictional world of the novel due to the total ecological and environmental collapse which has rendered the setting almost utterly devoid of life. Blasi argues that this final passage “suggests an optimistic view of nature” (‘Reading Allegory and Nature,’ p.90), but I would argue that, rather than being optimistic, it serves as a warning. While the cause of the collapse is unexplained in the novel, in the real world we face the threat of irreversibly altering much of the natural world by our own hand. We too are losing the fish in the streams; destroying things which cannot “be put back” (*TR.*, p.307). In a world where all UK rivers are deemed “unsafe,” and only 14% meet the criteria for “good ecological status” (‘Chemical Pollution; The Silent Killer.’ *Wildlife and Countryside UK*), we live in a time now where we risk turning trout, and many other wonders, into myths. By framing familiar creatures as something which only exists in the past, this final passage serves as a stark warning that we too could very easily find ourselves in a world like that of *The Road*.

Interestingly, the phrase “not be made right again” (*TR.*, p.307) echoes a very similar phrase used earlier in the book. Roughly half way through the novel the father and son are once again very close to starving, with the father thinking to himself “How many days to death? Ten?” (p.141). However, the characters must repeatedly pause their search for resources because of the boy’s constant state of fear and anxiety. He expects danger and hostility everywhere, “bobbing up and down with fear” (p.142) as the father goes to open a cellar door buried in a dead lawn. He begs “dont [sic] open it, Papa” (p.142), and the father tries to explain that “there was no one buried in the yard” (p.143). Looking at his son’s face as he attempts to allay his terror, the father fears “that something was gone that could not be put right again” (p.144). The phrase “not be put right again”

(p. 144) is almost identical to the phrase “not be made right again” (p.307) which appears in the novel’s final scene, referring to trout which have disappeared, symbolic of all of that has been lost with the biosphere’s collapse. This similarity thus creates a parallel between the state of the boy’s psyche and the state of the natural world, suggesting that the two are in some way linked. A stable natural world, McCarthy seems to suggest, is important for our emotional well-being just as much as we need it for physical survival.

While the father dreams of the past, the boy has only ever known a world populated by burnt wreckage and corpses, with danger at every turn, and so it is logical that he would expect to encounter a dead body under the door in the yard. However, when read in conjunction with Deitering’s ideas, this relationship between nature and psyche takes on greater weight. Throughout the book, the son, who has no memory of Before, and thus no concept of the natural world as we know it, has less hope than the father, and is regularly depicted expressing a desire to die and to be with his mother who committed suicide. While the father is tortured by the memories of what was, having known nature in its pre-narrative form, he also has greater determination than the boy to keep moving, to keep striving to survive. This suggests that knowledge of nature, even if in this case the nature itself no longer exists, is essential to well-rounded psychological development and general mental well-being. The father, having known the world in a less befouled state, can be a “dreamer of nests” (*E.R.* p.200), can harbour vain hope that things may improve, can find solace in his memories of what once was which are shown throughout the text; the boy, having never known any other world, cannot. Later, the father reflects that “to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed” (*TR.*, P.163). To his son, the idea of nature in a healthy, proper state is utterly foreign, a thing for which he has no frame of reference. In his essay ‘From Transcendence to Obsolescence; A Route Map’, Harold Fromm writes that “To the average child of the United States in the present day Nature is indeed a great mystery, not insofar as it is incomprehensible, but insofar as it is virtually non-existent to his perceptions” (*E.R.*, p.33). The son in *The Road* can be read as embodying this to the extreme, as well as reflecting the consequences of it. However, in the world of the novel perhaps the son’s lack of knowledge of the natural world is a blessing as he “could not construct... the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well” (p.163). To be aware of what is gone is to be aware of its absence, yet to not know it is also to not know the “pleasure [of] the world he’d lost” (p.163). In Deitering’s terms the father is an “environmental exile” (*E.R.* p.200), aware of how drastically all has been changed and of how things used to be, a fact which provides both comfort and pain in equal measure.

### To Conclude

Through its use of memory, colour, descriptive language, and narrative conventions, Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* innovatively positions the environment as the story's primary antagonist, to great effect. By positioning the environment as the antagonist, McCarthy invites contemplation of just how utterly humans rely upon nature for our survival, and how our well-being both as a species and as individuals is contingent upon the state of the natural world. Although in the contemporary world we may act as though we are apart from nature the truth is that we are a part of it. All things are inextricably interlinked in a delicate balance of mutuality, which, as McCarthy's novel shows, can and will collapse if that balance is disturbed. If the environment is destabilized human constructs of morality, laws, and society will crumble, and the future of Homo Sapiens as a whole will be placed in jeopardy, a fact starkly illustrated by *The Road's* depiction of humanity having returned to what Hobbes would describe as the State of Nature. This was a relevant message in 2006, and one which has only become more urgent in the decade and a half since the novel was published. In the face of drastically rising emissions, a global population fast approaching eight billion,<sup>5</sup> and climate tipping points tumbling like dominoes, our existence on this planet seems increasingly fragile. Indeed, while in 2006 the premise of McCarthy's novel may have been a thought-experiment or metaphor for climate collapse, far removed from present reality, in 2023 it reads more like a reflection of climate change reality. Our time is short, and growing shorter, and too little action seems to be happening to prevent this. But art, like McCarthy's novel, which confronts us with a vision of the sort of horrors which may await us in the not so distant future, also holds the power to transcend social, ideological, and geopolitical boundaries, to make us think and feel, to empathise, to see beyond ourselves, and thus is perhaps one of the most vital tools which we possess to shock ourselves into action. We have been walking in a collective dream of consequenceless excess and unending consumption, and now we must wake up.

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5 As of the time of writing. By the time this thesis is read and assessed the global population may well have surpassed this benchmark.

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*In the Distance, Smoke*

Erin went out just after dawn. The flood was choppy, flecked with spume. A bitter wind twisted its way through the drowned streets, whipping her dark hair across her face, while squalls of rain draped themselves from a low ceiling of cloud. No shadows but only silvered light. Rivulets of water from last night's rain drew lines in the windblown ash on the sides of half submerged buildings. It was a risk, voyaging for salvage in this weather, but need drove her. Their little settlement was low on resources; the fire needed more fuel, the jetties needed patching, and there were only two other punts without holes in them now. Unusable scraps of refuse floating everywhere, catching on the square prow of the raft. Eyes flicking left, right, left again. Water dark below her. Sky dark above. There. The splay of a new collapse, a confusion of building rubble fanning out into the channel ahead of her. There might be something useful in there.

Erin lashed the punt to a twisted metal beam protruding from the wreckage so that it wouldn't float away while she searched, before climbing onto the heap. She was only just above the waterline here, the sea lapping at her feet through gaps in the rubble. Fragmented bricks. Stones she'd need another person to move. Always the too-small scraps of plastic. Ahead a dark something sticking out of the mess. A long plank of wood. She tested it with a finger, expecting it to be soft with rot. Most timber was too water-soaked to be of any use now, bloated and spongy with moisture, crumbling the moment it dried out. This though, this was good and solid. It must have been deep inside the building, something structural, only revealed by the house's collapse. Good for firewood. She felt herself warm as she thought of how pleased Kay and Todd would be when she brought it back to the caves. She took a firm grip on the plank, twisting and turning, inching it free by slow degrees. A deep growl echoed from the stomach of the world, making her start. Thunder. But she'd almost managed to free the plank, miraculously solid. Just a few more minutes would do it. She pulled at it again, trying to coax it out of the rubble. A block of stone was jamming it in place. Could she lever it out? Experimentally she put some of her weight on the protruding end. Thunder again. Louder this time, and a few raindrops with it. How long did she have? Twisting around, she looked over her shoulder. Her heart clenched. Lower, darker clouds were devouring the northern horizon, eating up the curving wall of the mountains as it advanced. Shit. Storm coming. And fast too. She'd delayed for too long. Should've gone with the first thunder. Leave the wood. No time now to untie the punt from the rubble. Cut the line instead, precious fibres dividing with a few swipes of the knife. She wasn't far out from the caves on the hills, the little settlement within them, and the full force of the storm was still yet to arrive. She might make it. Feet firmly hooked under the lines on the deck of the punt, Erin pushed off from the rubble with the pole, thrusting the craft out into the open waters.

And she was in it.

Immediately she lost control. The waves were pushing the small craft sideways, cresting over its patched deck, the water rising as the storm pushed more of the sea in to the city. Her pole almost didn't reach the bottom and with every stroke she feared it would be ripped from her hands. The waves were tugging at it and tugging and tugging again. She couldn't steer. The water was too strong. Push and drag. If she tried to fight she would lose the pole, and then everything would be lost. Could she get into one of the buildings and ride it out? No. That would mean moving against the current, impossible now. Behind and around her the encroaching sea growled. Loose cladding rattled and slapped against anorexic high rises. The constant roar and smack of waves breaking. Rain in her eyes, mouth, plastering her hair down, seeking out her skin through her clothes. Ahead, the low hump of the hills rose dark through the lashing rain. The hills. The caves, shelter, somewhere low on their flanks. Warmth. Home. Erin tried again to dig the pole in deep and point the punt in their direction, but the water almost twisted it from her grasp. Scum was being whipped up off the water, tumbling through the air in foamy grey chunks. The hills were growing larger. The storm was pushing toward them, she realised, taking her with it.

She couldn't fight it.

She had to let it carry her. And hope.

Erin crouched low on the centre of the punt, knees bent and feet set wide apart. Move with the water. Balance. She had to stay balanced. If she lost it, got tipped out, she'd be gone. Another set of bones for the waves to gnaw and scatter. A piece of metal cladding shot past, torn off by the force of the wind, almost taking her head with it. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but her mind was numb to it. She pulled the pole up, holding it across her body as she hunched down onto the deck, and let the water take her.

Immediately the waves caught the craft, spinning and tossing it. Buildings flashed up and around her. She was just another piece of flotsam in the maelstrom. Whirl and wash. Helpless. The constant swirling sickening. Her cloak snapped on the wind, one moment blowing out behind her like a sail, the next plastered tight around her body. The rusted hulk of some great structure loomed and she spun the pole around, fending the punt and herself away and back into the roar with a sound of wood on metal. The shock of it jarred her, her numb hands almost losing their grip on the pole. Siltwater churned beneath and around her. Sucking at her feet. Her shoes sodden with it. The storm was all around her now, everything a blur of water. Air and sea almost the same. Thrashing elements driving her on. And then suddenly the hills were right there. Immediate. Bare

rock slick and dark with rain, towering out of the roiling flood. She could see the cave mouth now, reduced to a darker smear against the rocks through the rain. There was the L of the outer jetty clinging to the hillside. Were the storm barriers lowered across the cave mouth? She couldn't tell.

Without warning, a swell took hold of the raft and heaved her toward the rocks. Rising, rising, then suddenly the bottom dropped out of the world, tumbling her and the punt over and over. Crack and splinter. The shock of impact. Saltwater in her nose, scouring her throat, pressing on her eyes, trying to know her lungs, twisting and pulling her over. Rough grain of rock under cold fingers. Grab. Cling. The waves sucked back out, trying to draw her with them but Erin clung on desperately, hauling her body up the ruckle in the gap between the breakers. A surge again, another wave shattering on the rocks, clutching at her feet. The punt was gone, precious salvage with it, tossed away by the raging water. But she was alive, alive, lungs and body screaming it and the jetty was right there just along the waterline. She was shivering now, teeth chattering violently. Slip, scramble across the rocks. Hail was mixing with the rain, stinging her skin, hissing into the sea.

Now she was at the end of the boulders, the shore ahead just sheer cliff, a meter or so of water between her and the wooden landing. She'd have to swim for it. Pausing, Erin pulled her cloak off, letting the sodden fabric fall behind her. It was a loss, but it would sink her if she kept it. Doing her best to breath deep and slow, she stepped up to the brink. If she could jump far enough she might just make it. Breathe. With as much force as she could muster, Erin flung herself out into the gap.

She smacked into the water, the shock of impact knocking the air from her lungs. Her left hand caught one of the uprights, wood slimy against her skin. Erin wrapped herself around it, trying to regain her breath. Almost there. Twisting around she lunged upward, trying to grab onto the decking. But the timing was wrong, and she slipped back into the water, the waves pulling her out before thrusting her back against the jetty. Grab. Clutch. Numb hands struggling to grip. This time she caught it, clinging tightly as the wave withdrew again, trying to pull her with it. They were dragging her, drawing her back out, like hands around her waist, beneath her arms. Her fingers felt like blocks of wood, numb and waterlogged. Erin thought her elbows might snap from it. But her grip held. The returning wave hit, carrying her loose body up and on to the jetty.

The boards were slick with algae and foam, the whole structure shifting with every surge. She didn't dare stand, unsure if her legs would bear her, instead crawling up toward the cave mouth. One hand in front of the other. Shuffle forward knees. Another wave, pause, fingers between the boards. The cave a dark smear through the lashing rain. One hand. One knee. Again. Again. The cave mouth never seeming any closer. Hand. Knee. Another wave broke itself across her, flattening

her body against the wood, trying to force its way into her mouth, her eyes. Her nose was bleeding now, hot against her cold lips, the taste of copper in her mouth.

The storm barriers had been lowered across the cave mouth; she'd have to climb. The wall of heavy plastic barrels packed with stones wasn't easy to navigate, despite being held together in a frame of wood and netting. Slippery with rain it shuddered under her, flexing with every surge, the base of it grating against the floor of the cave-mouth. Thankfully it didn't stand too tall above the jetty and the water; not much more than a few hands on her own height. She was up, tumbling over the top, sliding down the ropes on to the inner boardwalk where, finally, she lay still. Wind whistled through the gap between barrier and rock. The sound of the waves muted. Her whole body felt like a bruise. One of her fingernails had torn, she realised, distantly, the pain a concept somehow removed from her. Overhead, the rock shifted in and out of focus. Noises were distant, unrelated to her, growing faint. Darkness, creeping up around the edges of things. Everything was underwater, fading, spinning, sucking her down and down and down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thick yellow light. The impression of softness. Sharpness of smoke, catching in her throat, making her cough. A shadow blocking the light. Erin blinked, trying to bring the world into focus. A dampness on her brow. She raised her arm to brush it away, sending a lance of pain shooting down her side.

"She's awake."

That voice. Slow recognition.

"Steady," the voice's owner took her hand, gently coaxing it away from her face. "You're okay. There's a poultice on your forehead, to help draw out fever."

"Fever?"

"You were burning up. Mum thought you might have swallowed some water, got an infection, but it looks like you've been lucky." The shadow gradually resolved itself into a face.

"Todd? How long?" The effort of speaking was too much, and she lapsed into a fit of coughing. Unseen hands propped her up, supporting her head while Todd handed her a dented water-bottle. It tasted brackish and tepid, boiled out from seawater like most of the water their little settlement used, but she drank it greedily. She hadn't realised how desiccated her throat was. "How long was I gone?"

"About a day."

Another face swam into focus. An older woman, grey hair. Kay. She must've helped her up, Erin

realised.

“Todd got to you just after you came over the barrier. We all thought you’d been taken by the storm.” Kay squeezed her hand gently, a rare show of affection making Erin’s heart warm. She craved, clung to, small gestures like that, so rare in this hostile world. The older woman had taken her in when she was small after grampa had died, when no one else had wanted to. Her manner could be blunt, but Erin knew she always meant well by her.

“Storm’s starting to blow itself out now,” Todd said, “Should be gone by the evening. If the water goes down enough I’ll check the jetty and the barrier as well.” He nodded to Kay. “Got to check the outer cave. Do you want me to get Will or one of the others?”

Kay shook her head. “Now she’s awake I can manage by myself. Put some more fuel on the fire as you go, though.”

Todd nodded, and left them. A moment later there was a crack, and sparks scattered through the air before dying. She was in the big cave, she realised, propped on a pile of blankets not far from the fire barrel. At the back of the cave stood a handful of partitions, makeshift walls woven out of scrap built against an overhang where the rock tapered in. She wondered briefly why they hadn’t taken her to the one she usually slept in, but realised they would have needed the light to tend to her. Just beyond the fire the bare stone floor sloped down toward the outer dock cave, and the open water beyond. A thin draft of cold air rose up through the opening, carrying with it the smell of salt, a suggestion of damp. She could just make out the sound of waves, turned round and hollow as the noise echoed around the bare space between her and the sea. Across from her, the stacks and boxes of salvaged material. So many empty shelves. She thought of the cape she’d lost, and grimaced.

“Erin?”

Kay had been talking to her, she realised.

“I said, could you move your left leg for me?”

Erin gave it an experimental bend, raising it up toward her chest then dropping it again. It ached, but no more than sore muscles should, and she said as much to Kay.

“That’s great, ‘Rin. Now the other one.”

She repeated the performance, Kay watching the movement intently before making her do a series of motions with her hands and arms. Her limbs ached in protest.

“Good. Who lives here?”

“You, me, Todd, Will, Jacob, Lina -”

“You’re good,” the older woman cut her off before she could finish the rest of the small list. “Just bruises I think. You’ve been lucky.” She passed her a bowl of stew, and another bottle of water. “Seaweed, nothing exciting, but you need to eat, and rest, to get your energy back.”

Erin propped herself against the wall in the flickering light, downing the slimy, chunky broth. It tasted of the smell of ocean, heavy and sharp. Her thoughts were fixed on the other people, out on the flood. There weren't many. Figures sighted in the distance which vanished as fast as they appeared. A few scattered pilgrim cults; itinerant believers in a god who no longer answered. One or two hermits who mainly kept to themselves, and Eli, the old man she'd befriended and traded with a few times. Eli. Her stomach twisted. The only person outside the settlement that she'd had anything to do with. He'd been nice to her; shared stories, food. Promised he'd teach her how to read. With a pang she thought of the paper hidden in her alcove. Had he taken shelter in time? Probably. She hoped so. You didn't get old here unless you knew how to look after yourself. He was probably fine. Would be fine. She'd never been caught out that badly before, and she'd made it home. She could look for him.

"When can I go back out?" A half formed plan to find him. To know.

"Once you've rested," Kay said, firmly. That was it then. Erin knew there was no use arguing; Kay always made the decisions about what was best for the settlement, and everyone knew she was usually right.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next night Kay let her go back to her own alcove at the back of the cave. Hooking up the length of cloth which acted as a sort of door so that she was out of the way of prying eyes, she pulled the thin plastic slip out from under her bedding. There was the page, still safe inside, as it always was, as it had been for years since grampa died. Its one jagged edge from where she'd ripped it from his book before they burnt it. The words like black insects. Incomprehensible. She tried to remember her letters. That swoop was a J, maybe? A curve like a cresting wave an r? She could recognize them, but not the words as a whole, crawling across the page in lines of black ink. The plastic was bubbled and warped at the edges from where she'd melted it together to keep the page sealed in, and she ran her thumb over it, feeling the texture change from smooth to rough and back again. Todd or Kay could've done a better job of it, but it was something she'd needed to do for herself. Hadn't even really been supposed to keep the page. They could have used it for something else, something useful. Keeping it was almost stealing supplies from the settlement, if you looked at it the right way. She knew Kay saw it like that, always looking to protect the caves. But she'd never said anything about it. Erin interrogated the letters again, searching for meaning, as though it might bring some of grampa's warmth back. Still no more sense to it. How many times had she done this, over the years? Too many and always the same incomprehensible swirl of half-recognised words.

One night, then two, stuck in the cave under Kay's watch. She was anxious to be back out on the water, anxious to know what had become of the city, and, privately, but most anxious of all, to know what had happened to Eli. Finally on the third day the older woman looked over her, prodded her bruised limbs, had her answer the same questions again, and decided she was fit enough to go out. Erin pulled on her plastic over-trousers and hurried through the main cave, past the fire barrel and the shelves of salvage, the plastic scraps and twists of metal ordered with precision, and through the narrow mouth which sloped down into the dock cave. Reflected water shimmered on the roof, and the whole space was filled with the slap of water on rock. It was empty except for Todd, who was looking over the boardwalk built along the side up to the storm barrier.

"Tee!"

"You're alive still," her friend grinned, and she realised she hadn't seen him since the night she'd woken up.

"Looks like it." She walked over to where the long, flat-bottomed punts were pulled up on to the lip of dry rock. Only two left. Her heart twisted guiltily at the memory of the one she'd lost in the storm. They took a lot of resources to make. She slid the smaller of the two into the water, stepping on to it once it had stopped rocking. Its rectangular deck had been much patched, and it was missing its curved bow.

"Pass me one of the poles with a hook end."

"You alright to go out so soon?"

"Kay said it was fine. I haven't broken an arm or anything like that." She reached out to take the pole from him, but Todd didn't let go.

"But are you rested enough? It's only been two days."

"Tee, we need the salvage. Go get the gates."

Her friend let go, walking down and scaling the barrier at the end of the cave. A moment later, the gate began to swing outward with a great complaint of stressed wood and ropes. Displaced water foamed and surged around it, hissing through the gaps between the barrels. Erin hooked the metal end of the pole over the jetty to anchor herself against the swell.

Todd was at the end of the outer jetty, securing the rope which held the gates open, as she propelled her way back out into the pale morning. She paused by him for a moment.

"What do we need?"

"Hop off and I'll show you."

She lashed the painter to one of the struts of the jetty, and clambered up. A very different experience to trying to climb it in the storm. She trailed Todd as he examined the storm barriers and the outer

jetty, her leg muscles complaining.

“We’ll need more boards, or fibreglass panels; anything which will patch a hole really.” Her friend gestured to a section where the decking had splintered, leaving foot sized gaps through which the turbid water was visible.

She eyed up the broken planks. “But these gaps aren’t big; is there really nothing left that you can use for patching, Tee? That cabinet I brought in last week maybe?”

Her friend shook his head. “Gone.”

“All of it? Already?”

Tee simply nodded. Erin took a moment to process that. The rate at which things were salvaged was rapidly being eclipsed by the speed at which things were being broken or lost. She already knew this, or had a sense of it, but being reminded of the fact anew was sobering.

Climbing back down to the punt, she talked up to Todd as she cast off the line. “Is there anything else we need?”

“Anything you see. Low tide’s just past midday.”

“Alright, I’ll ride the current back in in the afternoon when it returns, save some effort.”

“Try not to drown this time.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Take this,” Tee shrugged off his cloak, and tossed it over to her. “Until I can make another one.”

Touched by the gesture, Erin tied it around her shoulders, the heavy patched cloth still holding some of her friend’s warmth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark water. A chop to it. The sky heavy, grey and oppressive with residual anger from the storm. More glass and cladding gone from the high rises. Away over the plains to the west, a plume of smoke smeared itself along the wind. Fires from lightening strikes perhaps. The plains were always alight. The hills too sometimes, filling the cave with the hot stench of burning. Everywhere on the dry was prone to it, but it was worse during and after the storm season, like now. Grampa had explained it to her once, when she was only little, but she couldn’t really remember or understand. Not that it mattered. Even if she understood it it wouldn’t stop it happening. The why changed nothing. In the razed and drowned world there was no restoration to be had, no absolution through the sacrament of knowledge, but only bitter survival. Pushing through the water, thick clumps of greenish algae snagged on the pole and the front of the craft, the water heavy and jellyish with it from all the mats washed in from the open sea. In the front of her mind the thought of Eli.

She was at the old cathedral now. The walls of the nave and the entire east end were haemorrhaging resources – giant stone blocks almost as long as she was tall, large sections of beams, and even a few lengths of what looked like copper piping tumbled among the rubble. Newly exposed stone stood pale and pure, naked edges bright. The collapse was mostly fresh, the rubble not yet settled into a comfortable semblance of permanence, so Erin circled it slowly, looking for a part which looked more stable. Around the front the long tongue of shattered stone was only one or two blocks proud of the water at most points, which seemed less precarious. From the punt she used the hooked metal end of the pole to snag a length of pipe, drawing it toward her with a horrible scraping sound until it was close enough to grab by hand and pull onboard. She repeated the process with a couple of warped sheets of copper, corroded and green from the salt water, but still useful for something. The sun had crept up the sky, heating the earth and setting the foul water stinking. Erin shrugged off the cloak she'd borrowed, securing it along with the salvage. She moved deeper into the city, following the wide, flooded roads into its heart, alert for any sign of movement in the blank windows or on the dark water. Other people were rare to encounter, but a storm passing through always presented fresh opportunities for looting. Secretly, she knew she was hoping to see him. Ahead and behind stretched out rows of dying buildings, with more rows branching off to her left and right, their windows empty of glass, sightless and blind, slowly decaying into the water, frames warping as they sloughed off their rotting cladding like lepers. All of the flooded roads empty. The sun had fought its battle with the clouds and won through them, turning both water and sky to blinding light held apart only by the wreckage. In the height of the day, the high-rises stripped of their skin by storms and earlier salvagers were like great skeletons against the horizon, ladders drawn by children reaching desperately up to nothingness. She pulled down her hood over her face, squinting through the slits in it to see against the glare.

Erin attempted to work through the central district systematically, moving block by block, aided by the grid layout of the streets. In some places the ways were blocked by old collapses. There were new obstructions too. A whole building had slumped and splayed itself across an entire road, its floors compacting into so much strata. Twisted metal, ragged edged concrete, not yet worn smooth by exposure. Here she had to stop and change direction. Eli had saved her from a collapse, she recalled. Her covered in splintered wood, mouth and nose full of the must of rot, him all patched gumboots and oilskin, pulling her free of the crush. Fixed her up, a well wrapped bandage on a suspicious wrist, and, most memorably, a cup of hot water with precious sugar in it. She'd forgotten to ask where he found it. It had been so sweet and warm, like a bright white sunrise. That had been

their first meeting, a year ago now. She'd been lucky he'd seen the building fall out across the waterway she'd been moving down. Didn't like to think what would have been if he'd not been there. He'd been waiting for her, the next time she came that way a few days later. Her hand had immediately gone to her knife. Last time someone had been on her route multiple days running they'd been gearing up to rob her. She'd been lucky, that time.

"What do you want?" Staying her punt a few lengths from his so he couldn't reach her without pushing forwards.

"Saw you coming up from my window. I wanted to check you were alright."

"You've checked." What was the swiftest way away from here? She didn't want to go past him, but she also didn't feel comfortable turning her back on him. Was there a side road she could go down? She tried to look around without making it obvious.

The old man had held up a small bundle of cloth. "Here. For your bruises."

"What is it?"

"A salve." He made as if to pole toward her.

"Don't move."

He let the pole drop back to the deck. "I'll throw it to you."

"I've got salves. I don't need yours." Perhaps she could reverse her way back down the channel while keeping her eyes on him?

"Take it." With a movement surprisingly fluid for a man with a grey beard he tossed the package underarm so that it arced across the short distance, landing with a clatter on the wood before her feet, making her flinch. He picked up the pole again, and she stiffened, but he was moving away, turning his punt and pushing back up the channel away from her. Hand still on her knife she watched until he turned the corner.

That night she'd handed Kay the salve, still wrapped in its bundle of cloth. She watched as the older woman carefully unpicked the layers, revealing a battered tincan with a jar lid tied on with string. Opening it revealed a gritty grey mixture, and released a salty but not unpleasant smell with a strange edge of sweetness to it.

"Probably water, clay, and some sort of plant." Kay dipped a finger into it and smudged some on the back of her hand. "Maybe an iceplant. That's what I use. It's safe. Wonder why he gave it to you?"

She wondered that too. She didn't even know his name. So she'd used it, and it had worked a bit, though no better than the salves Kay made. He hadn't been out there the next time she travelled that way, or the next, and for a while she thought that might be the end of it. But then one day he'd called out to her from his window, and she'd begun to encounter him on the flood regularly, each

time a little less anxious. The salve had worked, hadn't it. Eventually he'd managed to coax her in to coming in to his home, once the distrust had faded; he was lonely, he said, wanted for a friend, and in the past few months she'd gotten into the habit of visiting him often to see if he had anything to trade, or just to wait out the time between tides by talking.

A rough wave brought her back to the present. She wasn't far from his place now. There ahead of her was that strange archway of smooth, water-stained white stone, standing alone apart from the buildings, and tall enough that she could steer through it without ducking even though the flood was deeper here. The tower block he'd made a home in wasn't much beyond that. Moving with greater urgency, Erin pushed on through the arch, propelling the craft up the stretch of water beyond it, before turning larboard down a narrower street. There on the corner stood Eli's place. The building seemed to have slumped to one side, listless, askew. Something in its foundations must have shifted; a pile knocked out of place, or the land beneath it subsiding from all of the water. She eyed the structure up. No obvious fractures in the concrete near the waterline, though there was no telling what lay beneath. A few higher up, spiderwebbing their way between the shattered windows. It would be stable enough, for now. The water was high from the storm, despite the tide being out, and she had to crouch down as she steered the punt into the flooded lower floor and to the base of the steps. Something beneath the stairwell seemed to have slipped or broken. One of the walls bowed inward, while a long crack ran the length of the other, dividing many of the hand-prints stencilled in reds and browns on the bare concrete. The uneven stairs creaked dangerously beneath her.

"Eli?"

No answer. The door at the top wedged ajar. "Eli!"

Heart her throat, she stepped into the room.

Destruction. Sanctuary ravaged by the elements. The storm had blown the boarded up windows open, spraying fragments of wood and glass across the room. Water had gotten into everything, the books and wooden furniture bloated and fat with it, the painted figures on the walls smeared into long shadows. The lamp toppled and extinguished. Loose pages slowly turning to mush on the floor. But no body at least. Erin let out a long breathe which she hadn't even realised she was holding. Underfoot, the carpet squelched as she picked her way across the room toward the door on the other side, trying her best to avoid scattered glass, broken containers, sodden remains of food souring into the rug.

"Are you here, Eli?", she tried the handle but the whole door was jammed shut from the damp. What if he was wounded in there? She rammed the door with her shoulder, once, twice, three

times, the wood around the hinges splintering but holding fast. Breathing hard, she cast around for anything which might help. The bench? Pots no use. She toyed with the idea of using her knife to pry out the hinge pins, but quickly discounted it. If the blade slipped she could end up injuring herself. There was nothing else for it. Backing up a few paces, she dropped her shoulder and charged at the door. With a great crack and splinter the wood around the hinges finally gave way and she tumbled into the room.

It was empty. And in just as much disarray as the main room. Discarded clothes were scattered everywhere all mixed up with bits of tarpaulin, while the buckets of nails, tools, and drying wood for the fire were shoved to one side. The pile of blankets Eli slept in lay abandoned in the corner. Some of them were missing. A blue one, and one with stripes. And the patched oilskin. Slowing down and taking in more of the space again, she noticed other absences. Looters? No. His pigments were gone too. He must've taken them himself, no one else would've bothered with them when everything else in the room was far more valuable. So he'd gone out then. But when? After the storm? Or before, caught out in it? Stupid, stupid. Why hadn't she thought to check whether his punt was stowed when she first came up the stairs? She could've saved time. No. A craft could break its moorings. Presence or absence would not elucidate. Slow down. He was gone. Dead most likely. She sat for a while on a slightly broken chair in the middle of the main room, taking in the state of things. The carpet, saturated and dark. The wall paintings. Figures in black and red dancing between the boarded-up windows, through forests and fields of startling green, while all around them animals she had never seen moved – peering between leaves, beneath bushes, hanging from branches. He'd shown her how he made the colours for them, the third, maybe fourth time she'd visited, she remembered. She'd asked about the hand-prints on the walls.

He'd shuffled over to the corner where a lopsided table held a collection of rocks and earth, picking up a lump of something yellowish and a bowl and stone before beckoning for her to follow. Erin had followed him through the house back to the stairwell. They sat together on the top step, Eli balancing the bowl awkwardly on his lap. She'd watched, fascinated, as he pared powdery fragments off the lump into the bowl, grinding it with water into a thin paste. Next he'd taken her hand, dipped it into the bowl, palm-first. A baptism of sorts, coating her palm in cold, gritty mixture, before leading her to the wall, pressing her hand to a blank spot on the concrete. He'd held it there for a moment, then let her pull away. She hadn't been able to take her eyes away from the wall, from her hand-print. Yellow, five-fingered, and overlapping slightly with a larger, orange print beside it; holding hands across time. A declaration of being. That she was. That she had been, and had been there.

He was gone. There would be no more of that. So. What to take. A small part of her twisted away from the thought. It seemed wrong, somehow, to take from someone she'd known. But really it was no different from taking from those she hadn't. Sometimes, in bad storm seasons, she'd enter likely looking buildings only to come across a body. Sometimes they stank badly, blotched and corpulent with decay. Sometimes they were fresh. She'd found some not too damaged clothes that way. Back to the task at hand though. What could she take. Lots here of use, but not so much space on the punt. Small things then. Blankets. Dry blankets were better, but they could string damp ones by the fire. Where did he keep his medicines? Bandages? Clean water? A battered plastic bottle, miraculously whole, was tangled up in the clothes on the floor. She twisted the lid off, the sharp smell making her recoil. Spirits. Strong ones, moonshined. That was just as good. Good for wounds. Moving in to the next room she also picked up the bucket of nails, working to make it all fit into her bag. There was a book which had avoided the water here, and she paused, her heart twisting as she leafed through it. She knew her letters, but couldn't read much more than recognising the shapes of important words like 'poison'. Eli though, he'd been able to read books. Sometimes, when she was waiting for the tide to turn, sitting on the rotting couch in the corner, he'd read something to her from one of his little collection of books. He'd promised to teach her how the last time she'd seen him. Something clenched in her chest, throat tightening about a hard core of emotion. Loss, yes, but also a new, deeper fear. A hope that she hadn't really allowed herself to feel fully had opened up when he had offered to teach her, hope that one day she might be able to read some of the page of grampa's book, and now it was gone again, probably for good. Enough of that. She snapped the book closed and tucked it under her arm. It would make good kindling. Glancing out the broken window, Erin went to check the tide. Was that a figure by the turn back to the larger road? A dark smudge on the water. Her breath caught. Hastily she slung another blanket over her shoulder, and hurried back down the stairs. Onto the punt. Fumble with the rope tethering it to the stairs, cold fingers slow, clumsy. Push back out onto the flood. But there was nothing. Only another floating matt of algae, and some waterlogged pieces of wood. She tried to pretend that she hadn't hoped it was him.

More debris. More scum on the water. More fragments of things devoid of use. No sight or sign of any other humans, the world silent but for the churn of the distant sea, the groan and call of the wind through the tower-blocks. The tide was on its way in now, pushing through the wreck. She let it carry her back toward the hills. As she went, she snagged a few decent sized sheets of flexible, yellowing plastic out of a pile of rubble that she hadn't checked properly earlier. Todd or one of the other makers would find a use for them for sure. But too little, too few. The crate on the punt was barely half full. She should have taken more from Eli's place, would have to return tomorrow. It

was all scraps, nothing of substance, bare refuse drawn from the belly of the anorexic world. A starved and withered mass. Almost at the hills now. Away to her right the sun was sinking, turning the brown water to a sea of yellow flame.

\* \* \* \* \*

“This stuff is perfect.”

Todd had laid out the ragged sections of plastic across one of the benches in the communal area of the second cave. Erin watched him measure it carefully with his hands, walking them palm by palm along it lengthways and widthways. It rustled as he held it in front of the lamp, tilting it back and forth to search for any rips. He nodded to himself, seemingly satisfied. “Here, mum, come have a look at this.”

Kay unfolded herself from where she was counting things out by the shelves, peeling off her mittens as she made her way over. Todd passed her one of the sheets. Her hands were pale as fishflesh, thin fingered with prominent knuckles. Dirt caught under the ragged nails. Erin realised she was staring as Kay flexed and folded the plastic, testing it for properties she’d never been able to discern. She and Todd, her adopted family in a way, seemed to be able to look at a thing and know exactly how to turn it into something useful. In their hands, scrap was transmuted, performing metamorphoses, became clothes and tools, bowls, hooks, anything their little settlement needed. Kay, trying to do her best by Erin, taking her up as her own child, had always tried to teach Erin her skill. But, Erin had never been able to perform the trick of making things in the way Kay or her son could. She’d always envied Tee that skill, and, if she was honest with herself, the closeness and approval it won him with his mother.

Kay set the plastic down. “Yeah, that’ll make good waterproofing. Well done, ‘Rin,” the older woman directed a rare smile at her, and she felt herself warm. “Maybe we can finally fix some of the bags or rain cloaks.”

“Don’t forget shoes,” Todd said.

“Don’t remind me. Was there any more of it?”

Erin shook her head. “I didn’t find any.”

“Pity.” The older woman looked ruefully down at her feet, wrapped in scraps of fabric held together by twine. Erin’s own feet were encased in actual gumboots, much patched but still whole, which she’d found on a body in a half collapsed building two storm seasons ago. A better bag would be nice though. The one she’d been using the past four years had been handed down from salvager to salvager, and repaired and repaired and repaired again, the straps wearing through and the

waterproof lining fragmenting. Most things in the settlement were like that; falling apart, or about to. Nothing new came of anywhere any more. All the world was refuse, sifted and sorted through, split again and again until there was nothing left to take or use. What would happen to them when the city was eventually exhausted? When all that was left was the shells of buildings, the broken scrap and effluvia of generations filling up the earth? She tried to push the thought away. There was nothing she could do. They had inherited this earth, and all that was left to them was to survive it. Todd had folded the plastic sheets, now stowing them with almost reverent caution on a shelf among the racks and piles of supplies at the far end of the cavern. How long could they live off that store alone, if today's plastic was the last thing of any use they ever found again? Years? Months?

"It's getting worse out there, Tee," she said, as he and his mother rigged up a drying line for the blankets. "I went as far as the middle of the city, and this is everything I got."

"Did you try out the east side?"

"Closer to the proper ocean? That's suicidal. I already took too much of a risk by staying out when the tide started to turn."

"I'll give you a list of things to look for when you go out tomorrow." Kay said, neatly cutting off the argument Erin could feel brewing between her and Todd. It probably wasn't worth reminding Kay that if she'd seen anything useful she would've brought it in.

The blankets she'd taken from Eli's place were suspended over a line of rope strung across the cave, near the fire barrel. They were already steaming slightly, the smell of hot, damp wool filling the air. Kay was sorting through the small woodpile up against the wall, selecting pieces of broken timber until she had just the right amount to keep the fire burning throughout the night, without using up too much. Todd was mending the knee on a pair of trousers, and four or so people, most of their little settlement's population, were gathered around the fire looking at something.

"Hey, 'Rin" Tee broke through her reverie. "Game of dice?"

She shook her head. "I'll pass."

"Your loss. We're playing for food. Will caught a fish today. Fish! Can you believe it? We haven't had any in almost six months. It's a big one too." He mimed the size, holding his hands about a brick's length apart.

"It's true," Kay said. "We're going to cook it on the fire. Whoever wins gets the biggest piece."

"See, 'Rin? Things aren't all that bad if we're getting fish."

She didn't reply. What use was there in pointing out that every time they had fish the gaps between them grew longer and longer? That, surely, eventually the gap would last forever? Tee had always

had more faith that things would get better, or at least stay the same. Her stomach growled, swaying her. It had been ages since she last had anything other than seaweed, shellfish, and the ubiquitous dried algae blocks. "Alright. I'll sit in for a bit."

The fire in the barrel crackled and sparked, stretching their shadows out across the rough floor like shifting ash. Fish flesh spat. Skin tightened in the heat. It smelled so good that she almost opened her mouth to taste the air. Most of the settlement were here, all drawn by the promise of fish. Bone dice clattered across the floor, spinning through the light. The last time she'd played anything had been with Eli, she realised. Her head felt hazy, and she found it hard to pretend to be interested in any of the conversations. All of the stories were the same. Talk of repairs. Things counted. Things lost. Nothing like Eli's tales. She dropped out of the game fast, with nothing to show for it, but Todd won the largest piece and shared some with her. It was hot and good, scorching her fingers and tongue. Had Eli been able to eat tonight? She couldn't get him out of her head.

Something on her face must've told Todd that something was wrong. "You alright?"

"I'm worried about Eli." It was mostly the truth. She didn't want to mention the page. Tee knew about it, of course, but she knew he didn't like it; thought she was too obsessed with it, and mentioning the fact that Eli had promised to help her learn to read it would only make that worse.

"The old man? You're still visiting him?"

"Maybe not any more." Her eyes felt hot and prickly.

"You think something happened to him in the storm?"

She gave a tiny nod. "His place was empty today. Things everywhere. The water got in."

"He probably got caught out then. It happens."

She wiped her nose with the corner of her sleeve, leaving a smudge of dirt across her cheek. "I just, I don't know, some of his stuff was gone. He could be out there somewhere."

"He probably took it with him before he got caught in it. Most likely he's gone."

"He's good at surviving though. He has to be." Something clattered on to the floor and she realised, disconnectedly, that it was the plate she'd been holding. "He's got to be out there. I need him to be. He'll be fine. Right, Tee?" The last words cracked and broken.

Her friend took her gently by the shoulders, but the sensation seemed somehow far away, removed from her as though it were happening to someone else. Her throat felt tight, and her heart seemed to be trying to escape her chest. If he was gone she'd never be able to make sense of the page. Would lose grampa for good this time. Everything was blurry, the weight of sudden fear pulling her down to the floor. If he couldn't survive, what hope was there for them? It could have been her, out there in the storm, the blur of the wind, the thrash and whirl of water. She had only just gotten in in time.

"Careful." Hands bore her up, propped her gently against a wall, wrapped something soft

around her. Tears. Tears. The tears wouldn't stop. How could one body hold so much liquid? Someone folded her hands around a bowl of something hot, and she drank it mechanically, vaguely aware of people moving about her; smears of movement, like shadows, like silt.

Gradually, a tide pool filling, she came back to herself. Todd was there next to her, looking worried. Aware that other people around the fire cave were watching, she tried to pull herself upright.

"Take it easy."

"You need to rest." Kay was there too, she realised.

She shook her head, trying to indicate that she was fine, that it wasn't tiredness which had caused this, but only succeeded in making the cave warp and spin.

"You do. Maybe I sent you out too soon."

"I'm fine." How to explain that it was just her emotions?

"I can get her to her bed," Todd said. He hooked her arm over his shoulder, ignoring her weak attempts at protest, pulling her up and proceeding to half-pull, half-carry her across the cave to her alcove. Brushing the cloth door aside, he went to help her on to the pile of blankets which she used as bedding.

She tried to push him away. "Stop. I'm fine."

"Clearly you're not," her friend said, as she folded over onto her bed. She waved a protesting hand, causing the room to wobble again, as he arranged the blankets over her. "You need to forget this, 'Rin. He's gone and that's all there is to it. You know that's how things go."

"He can't be gone. I need him to be alive."

"So he can tell you stories? Read to you? I remember what you've said about him. None of that helps keep our settlement going. It's like mum says, we have to look out for ourselves first."

"I want more than this." Sobbing again now.

"There's nothing else, Erin."

"But this is just survival Tee. It's not really living. All we do is pick over scraps and worry about whether there'll be enough food for next winter. I want it to mean something."

"This is all there is." He was raising his voice now, something he didn't often do, but she kept going, all of her anxieties pouring out of her now in a flood of words. "And we don't have enough, do we. No one in this hole has enough of anything. Kay isn't always right. It's all running out, and I find less and less every time I go salvaging. Some days I don't find anything useable at all now. What happens when eventually I stop finding anything for weeks, months? What if yesterday was the last day I'm ever going to bring anything back?"

"You're not thinking right."

“What if I am?”

“Erin, you need to rest. Please. Try to stop thinking about this.”

She'd gotten carried away. Too tired to argue any more, she allowed herself to be covered up with the blanket, one hand slipping beneath the bundled cloths under her head to feel the reassuring presence of the paper in its plastic home. She could still taste the oil of the fish flesh on her tongue. It was cold tonight despite the fire in the cavern outside and their position underground. Yellow points of light scattered themselves across the rock. Constellations of a kind, made by gaps in the lattice wall. Were the stars themselves simply holes in the sky, the moon a window, all apertures for light from some other, greater fire? This world merely a room in a larger house? Were there people in the other rooms? Were they any better off than here? Or was this everything, all that there was? No other way of being but to spend a life in constant struggle.

The sounds of the cave gradually quietened, and the light of the fire dimmed, but she couldn't settle. Her mind felt cluttered. Images of Eli's home. His things scattered across the floor. The great black wall of the storm bearing down on the city. The wave which had knocked her from her punt. Handprints and smeared paint and shattered concrete and spongy wood and the stench of rot on the water and the glitter of light and glass. Her lower stomach cramped, and she pulled the page out to look at it again in the faint light.

Eventually she gave up on sleep. Experimentally, she propped herself on her elbows. The room remained reassuringly static. Urged on by her stomach, she wrapped one of the blankets around herself like a cape and stood up. The floor was a shock of cold beneath her feet, her chilblains stinging. Her boots were sitting neatly by the door; Todd must've taken them off for her, but the memory was hazy. Pulling her shoes on, she slipped back out into the main cavern. The fire had fallen away into red embers. All of the alcoves were shuttered and dark, and there was no one on any of the benches. She picked up one of the pieces of wood Kay had set aside, stirring the glowing coals with one end of it before dropping it in to them, sending sparks leaping up in to air. She considered seeing whether Todd was still awake, but decided he probably wasn't. Instead, she settled herself by the fire, watching the wood catch and flare then crumble away into papery flakes of ash. How long until they ran out of things to burn as well? There were some times now where the fire was little more than embers for days, the cave dark and cold. All wood and paper had to be dried for weeks so they wouldn't choke on the smoke, and they couldn't burn plastic because of the fumes – she'd heard stories about the first people who settled in the caves, how burning the plastic rubbish they found had made them sick, from her grampa. He'd been one of the first. How many years had it been now since he died? She would only have been eight or nine winters old. Time was hard to track. She supposed it didn't really matter. He was gone, and she was losing her memories

of him, the sound of his voice and the shape of his face, just as she was losing the hope of ever reading the page. She'd thought being able to read it would help bring some of that back, restore him to her by reading the words he once read, but now there was no hope of that. People wanting too much had done this to the world, he'd said to her once. The sin of greed, Erin, and for it we were punished. We reap the harvest sown by avarice. She still wasn't sure how true that really was. He'd been a god believer, after all, one of the rare ones who still clung to the old religions without going off to join the pilgrim cults. Always keeping his little book close. They'd burned it, the winter after he died, the pages with their cramped words curling away from the flame before succumbing. All except the one she'd torn out before they fed it to the fire. And did the why really matter? The world was eating its own corpse and eventually that would be gone too, regardless of the cause. She wished they hadn't burned the book though, even though it was only useful as kindling. She picked at the dirt under her nails morosely. This world was not a place for stories any more. Stories didn't put food in the cookpot, or water in the barrels, as Todd had taken to reminding her when he thought she'd been spending time with Eli rather than salvaging. Kay didn't comment, as long as she brought something useful back with her, but she knew she thought the same, Todd always parroting her words with greater vitriol. What must it have been like, to live when people made tales and treasured them as though they were as precious as firewood? She knew they must have; she'd found a whole room full of books a few years back, miraculously dry, and what else could explain that sort of hoard? That'd seen them through an entire winter, the main cave warm and full of light.

"Hey."

She looked up, startled out of her reverie, but it was only Will. He looked tired and anxious.

"You okay?"

"I don't know." He sat down across the fire from her. "Got a splinter in my hand last week but Kay couldn't get all of it out. Like what happened to Alba last year?"

Erin grimaced at the memory. That had been horrible.

Will continued. "Thought maybe I'd be lucky, you know? I was feeling fine and I've had cuts and scrapes worse than this before, but -" he lifted his hand up into the light. There was a large welt on his palm, a large smear of red stretching from it down to his wrist. "I've been feeling off too. All sort of foggy. And my skin, it feels like there's something hot, like an ember's stuck in there and won't go out."

"Go and rest."

"You've had things like this happen to you before, right? You must've, you do salvage all the time. And you got caught in the storm recently, that must've scraped you up. How do you, you know, stop this?" There was a terrible note of desperation in his voice.

“Rest and luck I guess.” It was probably better not to tell him that every time she’d managed to sterilize the wound immediately after it happened. That the last time it had happened she’d gone to Eli’s within minutes and had him dig the twisted metal splinter out with a burning hot knife to seal the wound. She scratched the lumpy red scar absent-mindedly. Better if he still held some hope.

Alone again, the caves were suddenly too oppressive and stifling, and she felt a powerful urge to get outside. She made her way across the rough stone floor, and out into the dock cave. It was colder here, water and wet stone sucking the warmth from the air. Both the gate-net and the heavier flood barriers were pulled closed across the opening to the dock cavern tonight. Erin pulled herself up onto the top of the barriers, before clambering up the latticed net and wriggling through the gap at the top. Outside, the air was still, and the noise of the open sea mere rumour. The moon was up, blurred by clouds but still casting a strong light, reducing the world to flat panes of silver and grey.

Part way along the jetty was a little lean-to made of scrap metal and plastic. It didn’t get used much, except to shelter in from the sun or wind by people who wanted to come outside for a moment. Erin curled herself up in the doorway, and let the night flow around her. It was cold out on the water tonight. A slight breeze stirred the flood’s surface, blurring the reflected moon, and setting the plastic on the roof of the watch shelter flapping. Stars slid across the darkness. The pale disc moon slipped behind the distant mountains, dark wall rising up to meet the sky. A red glow flared up on the western horizon; another fire out on the plains. Water lapped and lapped and lapped at the dock, at the rocks, meeting the bare cliff again and again, reshaping it slower than any human could see. Smell of seaweed. A waft of something dead from the direction of the unseen houses. Sickly and putrid. Nose-coating.

Roll of waves.

Sound of water.

No.

Of something, someone, moving through the water, trying their best to blend in with the night sounds of the flood. A shadow moving along beside the far end of the pontoon. Erin’s hand went to her knife.

“Who’s there?”

No response. The figure hauled itself up on to the jetty with a creak of wood.

“Don’t come any closer” She raised the knife higher, stepping forward. Her heart was in her throat. Thieves? No one would be foolish enough, surely. Theirs was the largest fixed settlement she knew of in the flood. But perhaps, in desperation, following the storm, someone, or a cult maybe

might try it. The figure took a step forward. Grip knife, blade out, crouch, ready to spring. But the figure stumbled, their feet seeming to catch on nothing, legs collapsing out from beneath them. There was a heavy thud as they fell to the boards. Erin's knife was still raised. A trick? Then, a groan. No. That was real pain. Holding her blade out, she crouched by the figure's side. They were wearing a patched oilskin jacket, which had bunched up around their neck, covering their face as they fell. She shoved the knife back into her belt, using both hands to roll the person onto their side. Body loose and heavy in her arms. Mended gumboots heavy on limp feet. Long bearded face. A jolt of recognition.

"Eli?"

He groaned again, eyelids fluttering open and then drooping again.

"Eli, it's Erin, wake up." Hope and fear in equal measure. She tapped his collarbone, the way Kay had taught her, trying to rouse him. A heartbeat thudded under her hand, strong and sure. That was good. He stirred feebly, and she realised he was trying to speak. Erin lowered her head closer to his.

"Rin." His voice barely more than the suggestion of speech.

"Yes, I'm here."

"Water."

She unhooked her canteen from her belt, twisting the cap off and supporting his head on her knees so that she could raise the bottle to his slack mouth. Carefully, she helped him drink. "Just take it slowly."

Eli took a few sips, then lay back on the decking. His skin was clammy beneath her hand, but his eyes were open now, and focussing on her. This was the first time she'd really looked at Eli's face this closely. His beard was knotted, and his lips were cracking. Had grampa's face been this weather worn? She tried to recall, but realised she couldn't draw his face to mind. No memory remained, only vague impressions of a crooked smile, a faded beard, the rest eroded by the wash of time. Strange, that she could remember the stories he told, the things he taught her, but not the colour of his eyes.

"The storm," his voice was stronger now, but she still had to concentrate to understand what he was saying.

"Yes, there was a big storm."

"Caught out. Hurt my head, I think."

"You're hurt?" She realised there was a gash just above his left eye, crusted blood turned black in the darkness. Her mind immediately went to Will, the way his hand had looked in the firelight not long before, and she gave him another look over. "Your arm too." He was holding his

left wrist strangely against his body, favouring his right hand.

“No food.”

“Look, stay here. I’m going to go get some help.”

“Friends.”

“Yes, my friends. They’ll be able to help you.” She helped him pull himself across the jetty, propping him up against the wall of the lean-to under the overhang. Safe enough, for now, far away from the water should he collapse again.

The dock cave was utterly dark, illuminated only by the thin moonlight which filtered through its mouth, catching on wet rocks, the edges of ripples. Hope leaping within her, Erin half walked, half ran, through to the main cave, trying not to slip on the damp stone. Todd’s alcove was the closest, curtain door drawn closed.

“Tee, wake up. Wake up!”

Todd pushed her away blearily, eyes still half shut.

“Don’t you dare go back to sleep, wake up.”

“Rin, it can’t be morning yet.”

“No, but it’s him. He’s alive. He needs help.”

“Your old man?”

“Just collapsed on the jetty.”

Tee was awake properly now, rubbing nightsand from his eyes. “You’re not seeing things? You’re sure it’s not a trick?”

“No, Tee, he’s injured.”

“Pass me my belt.”

Out on the jetty, the wall by the shelter was empty.

“Looks like he’s gone.”

“His punt’s still here.” She cast around. “Look,” the door was standing open. Together, they stepped forward.

Something smelled bad, a cloying, rancid sweetness which cut through the miasma of salt and fish. Gradually, the darkness resolved itself into shapes. Eli was huddled in the far corner. His face looked pallid in the light from the fire outside the door, a concerning shade of grey. Moving quickly to his side, Erin bent over him. His eyes were shut, but his chest was moving beneath the blankets; rapid, fluttery motions, all shallow breathes.

“Eli?” she shook his shoulder. “It’s me, Erin. Can you hear me?”

He mumbled something indistinct. His eyes were open now, but they slid over her, fixing on nothing.

“Todd, there’s something wrong. His eyes won’t focus on me.”

Todd knelt next to her on the boards. Gently, he pulled the blankets away from the old man’s upper body. “Look for other injuries. That’s what mum always does. I remember her doing that with you.” She had no memory of that. Strange, to think that Todd knew of moments in her life which she knew nothing about. Working systematically she peeled back Eli’s shirt, checking over his left arm and shoulder while Todd examined the right. There were bandages, rough strips of cloth, on his left wrist which she hadn’t noticed in the dark earlier. She unwound them carefully. A ragged scratch ran diagonally across the top of his wrist, the skin around it crusted brown with dried blood.

“Tee, look. There’s some red around this wound.” Again, in her mind Will, the way his hand had looked.

“You reckon it could be infected? Doesn’t look like enough to cause him to be like this though.”

“Well what else could it be?”

“That head injury,” Todd gestured to the small cut above his eye. “Do you know if he passed out when he got it?”

“I think he needs an actual healer. We’ve got to take him back inside, to Kay or maybe Jarod.”

“No.” It was not Todd who had spoken, but Eli. He reached for her hand. “I have to leave.” His voice was thin and wavering, but he sounded lucid at least.

“Eli,” Erin was thrilled to hear him speak, but still worried. “You need someone to take a proper look at you. That cut on your arm looks bad, and your head too.”

“Have to go home.” He was gripping her wrist now, surprisingly tightly, ragged fingernails digging in to her skin. She tried to twist her hand away, but couldn’t shift his grip.

There was a clattering on the deck behind them. Kay had emerged, as she did every morning, and with a start Erin realised that day was beginning to creep up on the world again.

“Todd? What’s going on?” She caught sight of Eli. “Who is he?”

“Kay, it’s Eli; he needs help, medicine.”

The older woman hastened into the small room. “Did he just turn up here?”

“While I was out here because I couldn’t sleep. Kay please, at least have a look at his wounds, he’s not right.”

Todd jumped in. “We can’t bring him in. What if he’s sick with something and we catch it? What if he’s trying to rob us?”

“Todd, stop.” Kay held up a hand. “Just, step outside. You’re not helping.”

Todd didn’t move, standing obstinately by the door, his face a stormcloud.

“Please, Todd. I need space to check him over.”

Todd gave a single, curt nod, and stepped out. Erin shuffled over so Kay could join her at the old man’s side.

“What happened?”

Erin explained how he’d come to be here, and pointed out the two wounds she’d noticed earlier. She moved away so Kay had enough light to see by, and rubbed her face. How long had it been since she’d slept?

“Has he been conscious at all?”

“On and off. He was talking just before you arrived.”

“Can you hear me? What’s your name?”

Eli stirred and mumbled. Kay looked to her for confirmation, and she nodded.

“Well, he knows who he is at least.”

The old man murmured again, trying to push the blankets off himself.

“We’re here to help you, Eli,” Kay said. “Erin says she knows you.”

Eli was reaching out a hand now, palm outward, blueveined fingers fluttering, clutching at nothing. Erin leaned forward. “Did you want more water?”

He nodded slowly. Kay’s brow furrowed slightly, and she knew the older woman was weighing up how many days of water they had left, but she didn’t try to stop her. Lifting his head up again she was able to get him to drink a little, before lowering him back on to the blankets, where he lapsed back into unconsciousness.

“We can’t just leave him here like this.” They’d been sitting in the doorway, watching him, for a while now. The sun was sliding inexorably up the horizon, and despite the growing clouds and the haze of smoke it was starting to get uncomfortably warm. She shuffled around the frame, trying to stay in the shade of the roof.

“We can’t let him join the settlement.” Kay responded, firmly. “We don’t have the resources for that.”

“No, I’m not asking for that. But what’re we going to do?”

“I think,” the other woman said slowly, “that with food and rest he’ll get better.”

Todd had reemerged from the cave, carrying the bandages and extra water they’d sent him off for.

“We’re feeding him now?”

Kay continued talking, apparently ignoring her son. “We can make him comfortable in here for a

day”

Erin’s heart sank. “A day? He won’t be strong enough in a day.”

“Two then. But no more.”

“Will that be long enough?”

“It’ll have to be. We don’t have enough for anything more than that.”

“Thanks,” Erin said quietly. She knew Kay was stretching it by letting him stay for any time at all. But only two? Her stomach roiled. That couldn’t be enough time. He seemed so weak, so worryingly pale. And only two? She’d hoped she’d have him for longer, so that she’d have a chance to ask him about the page.

With Todd’s begrudging help they set up a better bed for him inside the shelter, so that his head would be propped up. Eli was awake again, and able to move a little, shuffling his body up and lifting his arms so they could raise his torso to slide bundled blankets underneath. The others had caught wind that something was going on outside, ripples of rumour spreading through the little settlement, and occasionally someone emerged, blinking in the light, to see the stranger for themselves. Kay stationed her at the entrance to the lean-to to keep them out. Some looked fearful, minds heavy with stories of cults and the dangers of outsiders, but most were merely curious. Most of the settlement had never gone far beyond the rocks around the caves, she realised, had never seen another person they hadn’t known their whole lives, alive or dead. Jarod, like Tee, seemed upset that there was another mouth to feed. She waved them all away, explaining that Kay had it under control. People accepted that. Kay knew the most about healing, so even though she wasn’t officially their leader most deferred to her anyway.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Erin came out to check on him in the morning, Eli was sitting up, bolstered by blankets, telling stories. He only had an audience of one today, Jarod, the settlement’s other healer, but she was sure more would come later.

“The traders have all sorts of food and cloth at their village. And ducks, scores of them.”

“I’ve only seen a duck once,” Jarod said. “What’re they like?”

Eli had started telling stories the day before. As he’d gotten stronger and word had spread that there was a new person outside, people from the cave had come out to see him, all looking variously intrigued and disbelieving as they listened. Most of the stories seemed to feature this trade village, or various animals.

“Trusting. The traders keep them for their eggs. Once, one even ate from my hand.” Eli’s

skin had more colour to it today, she noticed, and he was speaking in full sentences, his voice stronger

Jarod frowned. "I don't believe that."

"It's true. Like this, see," he held his hand out, palm flat. "And then they take crumbs right from you."

Erin was fascinated. She hadn't heard this one before. "How big are they?"

The old man gestured vaguely, drawing a rough shape about the size of her head in the air before him. "They make a noise too."

"Fish don't sing, why would a duck? And what about the flu they all have?"

"It's true." Eli seemed agitated, eager that the other man believe him, raising his voice and sending himself into a fit of coughing.

Erin stood up, "I think that's enough stories for now." She shot Jarod a meaningful look, and he quietly showed himself out. Under the jetty, water slapped. She could feel the cold, rotten damp rising up through the gaps in the floor as she knelt beside Eli, helping him drink. They sat in silence for a while.

"Do you remember how you were going to teach me to read?"

Eli nodded slowly, all of his movements still very tentative.

"Do you think you could teach me later today?"

"Takes a long time."

She shuffled closer so she could hear him better. "But if I just had a page, would you tell me what it said at least?"

The old man nodded, and looked like he was about to speak when Tee came through the doorway, a bag slung over his shoulder, interrupting them.

"Where's Kay?" She'd hoped the older woman would be able to take another look over Eli now that he was spending more time awake.

"Mum's tending to Will," her friend set his bag down, pulling out a jar of stew, and some dried seaweed. "He's not got long now."

Her mind flicked back to the cave the night before, the way Will's hand had looked in the firelight. Her chest clenched, and she looked over to Eli, eyes jumping from headwound to scratched wrist and back. No more red than yesterday, or the day before when he came in. Wrist still showing no swelling. Good. Good. Reassured, she poured the lukewarm soup into a bowl. Strips of seaweed. Grey, slimy flesh. Someone must have found some snails, or another sort of mollusc, and added them to the pot. Eli spooned it into his mouth eagerly.

"He's got to go tomorrow." Todd said quietly to her.

“I want Kay’s advice.”

“No. Mum said two days. We’re running out of everything. You need to get back out and find stuff. Two days taking care of him is more than long enough.”

“Todd.”

“No.”

They lapsed back into silence again. Erin stirred her stew morosely, wishing Tee would leave so she could ask Eli about the page again. It wasn’t that she wasn’t supposed to have it; he knew about it, but she also knew he thought it was a useless obsession, and had told her as much many times. The decking shifted and creaked beneath them, and eventually, inevitably, her thoughts turned back to salvage. There was so little in the city now. On this side of it anyway. A thought struck her.

“Eli, how far away were the traders?”

“Last time, a day there, a day back. No more.”

“Where?”

“Near the rivermouth. Other side of the city.”

“Rin.” Todd’s voice held a warning.

“It could be an option.”

“No one’s gone out that far or been away from the caves for that long before.”

“I’ve been having to go out further, closer to the middle of town, to find good stuff.” She intentionally didn’t mention that a lot of that recent stuff had come from Eli’s house. “Things are changing. We need to change too, move with it not against it, like a wave, if we want to hold on.”

“I still don’t think things are that bad.”

“You can’t see what’s in front of you, can you. You keep telling me about how little we have but won’t accept that things are getting worse.”

“Look,” Todd started, but was interrupted by Eli having a deep, hacking coughing fit.

Erin moved back over to where the old man was huddled, holding her wrist against his forehead to check his temperature. No fever that she could feel. His heartbeat fluttered rapidly against her palm as she tried to sit him up further. “Alright?”

The old man nodded, wheezing slightly, wind through a broken window.

“Tee, I’ve got to do it. The way he’s told it they have lots of stuff from travelling upriver and gathering things which wash down in storms. And I can find new salvage spots too.” She paused for a moment, “I could even take him with me.”

“What good would that do?”

“If I go to the traders he knows, they might have healers who can look at him.”

“Upriver.” Eli had been paying attention.

“Upriver?”

“Home. Where I came from.”

“What do you mean?” This was the first she’d heard of anything like this. “You came to the city?”

“They can take me upriver. Village I came from, near the mountains.”

Tee raised an eyebrow at her. She knew what he meant. It sounded wrong to her as well. Had Kay missed something? She pushed that thought away, more excited by the realisation that spending time travelling out across the city would give her the perfect chance to get him to read her the page.

“Alright. He can get on a boat going upriver, and we get salvage, Tee. This could be the answer.”

There was a long silence, but finally Todd nodded. “Only if mum agrees.”

The old man seemed to have fallen back asleep, so they moved outside.

“I don’t know if I believe all that about a village.”

Erin shook her head. “I don’t know what to believe. Perhaps it was in a story he read, and he’s got confused.”

“That head injury you think?”

“Not sure.”

“But you believe that stuff he was saying about traders?”

“He’s mentioned them before, before the storm I mean.” Looking out across the water, the crumbling bones of the city she’d known her whole life were turning red with the dusk. She walked to the end of the jetty, stretching out her legs stiff from a day spent sitting on the floor. Below, the water was dark, foam flecked. For a second, the silver flash of a sprat. A dream, a trick of the light, or real? See a fish, make a wish. Grampa’s saying. Fish so few she’d almost forgotten. A memory rose, unbidden, of him teaching her the trick of holding balance on a raft. All in the knees, it is. Him, sat on the dock in the cave, making waves in the water for her to ride. Pulling her out when she fell. Move with it, ‘Rin. The wave is always stronger. Let it flow around you. Then, Eli, pulling her out from the shattered wood and wrack and siltdark water.

Todd had stood up too, joining her at the edge. “We should go in. He can look after himself until tomorrow.”

She ducked back into the hut. Eli’s eyes were still closed, the lids veined, wrinkled like sunbaked seaweed.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll help you get home.”

His cold hand squeezed hers. “Thank you.” Thin voiced, an unfamiliar hoarseness to it. For the first time since she’d seen him step onto the pontoon two nights before it truly occurred to her

that he could still die. That the hope of reading might be gone again. That survival of the storm did not guarantee anything. That death was only ever delayed, not escaped, always there in the coldness of dark water, in the shadow behind the fire. In the weeks where food dwindled. Waiting.

She squeezed back. "Don't go anywhere."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Absolutely not."

"But all the resources. Kay, please." She and the older woman were standing on either side of the long trestle bench Kay always worked at when making things. They'd been at this for a while now, but she'd had no success in convincing Kay to let her take Eli to the traders.

"It's just too far out. We have to put the settlement first."

"I am!" A lie and she knew it. But not a complete one. "Kay, I've barely been finding anything more than scraps close to the caves for months. We've got to start going further out, so why not at least try to find these traders he's told us about?"

"How would you find them?"

"He can tell me the way as we go along. Look, he says they gave him paints, they might even have things like shoes to trade." She held her breath. Kay looked down at her own feet, and the rags and plastic wrapped around them held together with twine. Erin knew she always left her own needs last when there wasn't enough to go around, and hadn't had shoes in almost a year. It was a long shot.

"How long would it take?"

"Just overnight I think." Truthfully she had no idea if that was the case; Eli had made it sound like they weren't too far out from the city, but she didn't know that for certain.

The older woman was quiet for a while. "Alright. I think we can spare you for a day or two."

"You're sure?" Trying not to sound too excited.

"I'll give you a list of things we need."

\* \* \* \* \*

Early morning, a clear day. Light from the rising sun streamed directly in through the cave-mouth, turning the bare rock into sheets of rust and flame. With Todd's help she uncovered the larger punt, a hauler which could carry more salvage, and slid it into the water of the dock. It'd been a while, two years at least, since she'd helmed this one. She'd tucked the page in its protective slip into a

pocket inside her shirt, up near her skin, before she left her alcove, and it rustled slightly as she moved.

What would they need? Water for sure. She filled a pair of the metal canteens and slid them into the base of the hauler. Tee had gone back to the main cave, and no one else was around yet, so she refilled the canteen on her belt too for good measure. More wouldn't hurt. What else. She scanned the shelves. Every month they seemed to get emptier. But that was a worry for later. A bag of medical supplies went into the punt, followed by a length of frayed rope, and a set of poles and square of patched tarp.

Kay had emerged, carrying a satchel full of blankets.

"What do you want me to look out for?"

"I'll tell you as we go along."

"We?"

"I'll be happier if I come too."

"You're not needed here?"

"We were going to mend some of the shoes but we haven't figured out what to use on the soles since we ran out of rubber last week. Todd can handle it."

"You're not confident on the water." True, but she realised she was also reaching for an excuse, a deep fear twisting up inside of her that she wouldn't get a chance to talk to Eli alone about reading after all.

Kay waved her concerns away. "I can swim. If the old man gets worse you'll need help."

Erin frowned. There was something else in Kay's voice, a worry, or a warning. "You don't think he's going to do something to me?"

"No. It's just that you've never gone out for this long before, 'Rin. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Erin felt herself warm, clinging to the rare admission of care she forgot for a moment her misgivings about Kay's lack of waterskill, and her need to get Eli to read. "I'll pack extra food." Todd was eyeing the pile on the jetty. "Looks like you've got enough already, with some to spare."

"We need something to trade with." She braced herself, knowing her friend wasn't going to like it.

"You want to give food away?"

"Only a few blocks."

"We can't spare any blocks."

"Do you think I don't know that?"

"What's he done to you?"

“Nothing! He’s my friend. He tells me stories. That’s all.”

“Friend? I’m your friend.”

“Todd,” Kay said, warningly.

But Tee wouldn’t be stopped. “You’re fine with this? Erin, he’s not one of us, you barely know him. And stories? Stories are no use when we need food. He probably makes them all up anyway.”

“We should get going.” Kay said, breaking them apart.

Erin took a deep breath, steadying herself, before stepping on to the punt. She wished Todd would be less vitriolic. She wanted so desperately for him and Kay to be warm towards her, for there to be any sort of tenderness in this sharp-edged world. She clung to rare gentle words, praise, from Kay. Tee looked out for her but he had been hardened, his core turned stoney, by living in this place. Really, she supposed, they all had been, one way or another. Digging the pole deep, she held the punt steady while Kay climbed in, setting the craft rocking as she lowered herself off the dock.

“Just try to stay low and close to the middle if you can. Don’t move around too much or it’ll make it harder for me to steer straight.”

“I don’t plan on moving at all.” Kay was hunched in the centre of the raft, as far away from the edges as she could get. She looked pale.

“Alright?”

“These things always make me feel a bit sick, that’s all.”

“I’ll try to make it an easy ride.”

Kay simply nodded.

Erin pushed them away from the rocks, digging deep with the pole to propel them out through the cave mouth and into the morning. She pulled in by the end of the pontoon, and lashed a rope around one of the posts which supported it, tying the other end to one of the metal bolts hammered into the deck of the punt. She gestured for Kay to stay onboard. “I’ll get him. If I need a hand I’ll yell out.”

The sour urine smell she’d noticed yesterday was worse. She stood blinking in the darkness, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

“Is that you, Erin?” Eli’s voice came from across the shack. She could just make out his shape, leant against the wall.

“Yes. We’re here to take you to the traders, like I promised, remember?”

“Of course. I haven’t packed anything I’m afraid. Can’t seem to find my paints.”

She frowned. “Did you bring them when you escaped your house?”

“I suppose I didn’t,” he said, slowly, after a pause.

They made their way back out into the light, the old man leaning heavily on her shoulder. Once they were both on the punt she got Kay to check over his injured wrist. The redness didn’t seem to have

advanced or deepened, which had to be a good sign, and the scratch above his eye seemed fine as well.

With the punt untied, and both passengers seated she poled forward a couple of strokes to get a feel for how the weight was sitting. The hauler felt sluggish, and water was slopping over her feet. “Kay, shuffle further forwards. I need to balance us out.”

The older woman looked nervously at the edge of the punt.

“Not that far, just a little bit further so we’re not all sitting at the back. You’ll be fine. Just hang on to the straps.”

Kay shuffled forward, and with the weight redistributed they were off, making easy progress on relatively calm water. They made it past the drowned arch, and through the tall skeleton buildings in the heart of the city, and now they were starting to move through streets that Erin only half recognised. The skies were clear enough, the usual stained grey, no sign of denser cloud. Kay was silent at the centre of the punt, fingers clenched around the straps which ran across the decking. Beside her, Eli sat serene, moving in tune with the punt, clearly far more experienced and at ease on the water than Kay. The tide was slack, the refuse on its surface floating idle, and they made good time to the bridge, a hunch of concrete arching out and back into the water, spanning from nothing to nowhere. Erin had only been beyond the bridge once, and that had been an accident, years back now. It marked the path of a deeper river channel, or at least where one had been before the land flooded. Her stomach was churning. She’d never gone out further than the middle of the city before, and wasn’t entirely confident that she wasn’t about to get them all lost. She’d seen old maps though, carefully kept in plastic pouches, like her page, to keep them safe.

“Hang on for this one,” she called out to Kay and Eli.

The tide was just beginning to show signs of turning, and she could see the glassiness over the channel which spoke of a moving current. Tightening her grip on the pole, she pushed them through the deeper water, the punt catching on the current and beginning to swirl. In front of her, Kay was hunched on the boards, legs and arms tucked in though she was trying to stay as far away from the edges as she possibly could, knuckles turning white from how tightly she was clutching the straps. Then the pole bit into the mud, and she was able to steady them, push them in a straight line, and they were across. There was a horrible gouging noise as they crossed the other side of the channel. Kay looked around, her eyes wide. “What was that?”

“Something scraping the bottom of the punt. I’ll check it over later.” Unusual for her to see Kay out of her element. She twisted around. “Which way from here, Eli?”

The old man pushed himself up on his elbows, looking around. “Through. Keep the mountains to port.” He gestured vaguely toward the mess of buildings rearing up ahead of them. “After that, a

dead zone, then reed-marshes.”

“Alright.” That didn’t help much, but she’d figure it out. Mountains to port. Easy enough. She dug in deep, and pushed them forward. The hauler had taken the incoming tide well, still moving fine, the scrape probably nothing to worry about. As they went along Erin noticed that Kay seemed to lose some of her uneasiness, sitting less huddled on the deck and spending more time looking around at the flood. The older woman was squinting hard against the brightness she realised, unused to the way the reflections of the water surrounded them.

“Pull your coat over your head, and try not to look too directly at the water. If you want to you can borrow my goggles, but I’ll need them when the sun gets higher or I won’t be able to steer us because of the reflections.”

“Keep the goggles. This helps.”

It felt good to be able to give Kay advice for once. She was so used to being like a child to her, or at least someone to supervise.

It took longer than she’d expected for them to get through the rest of the old city. Despite having Kay at the front to spread the weight, the punt was becoming unwieldy with three people on it as her arms began to get tired. It sat lower in the water, its handling muddy and far more sluggish than she was used to. That could be a problem out here. Feet wide on the deck, she poled the craft along with measured strokes, Slap of water. Saltbrine, rot. Smoke hinted at on the wind. The sun had passed well over its zenith by the time they finally cleared the city, reaching the estuary hinterlands. Out here the world couldn’t decide whether it was land or water. Small islands came and went with the storms and tides, shifting spots of bare stone and sand. They had reached the edge of the great expanse of drowned land which bordered on the saltmarshes. She’d never been out this far before, had only heard the name and seen the old current map drawn up by some salvager from before her time. She had to keep alert. Bleached trees. Straight pines like bone and others she couldn’t name, clots of refuse – strips of plastic, burnt rubbish, anything with no use left in it – snagged on their trunks. A ghost of the old line of the riverbank. This looked like a deeper one than that marked by the bridge, but all old waterways were things to treat with caution. The old river was now just a deeper, swifter channel of the flood. Erin kept well clear of it, always keeping the pale trees to her left as she steered the craft through the saltmarsh. Her knees felt wobbly. How long had it been since she’d eaten anything? Some of the communal stew last night. Nothing today. In the caves she could go days without, had done many times in hard winters, but being out here used up energy. She cast around for some-place to tie up. Surely they could afford to spend a few minutes on food. She poled them slowly toward a patch of water under which she could see the thick green

strands of eelgrass. The brine would be shallower there. Dark stems hissed against the bottom of the boards. Holding the pole with one hand she grabbed the painter and looped it around the hook, jamming the other end into the mud to anchor them. Reassured that they weren't going to drift off, Erin turned to Eli. The bandage on his wrist had begun to unravel. She retied it, checking the colour of his fingers to make sure it wasn't cutting off blood-flow. He seemed distracted, looking out over the water.

"Eli?" She gently tried to get his attention. "Which way from here?"

"Further up from the coast, I think."

"You think?" Kay said sharply, "I thought you said you'd been there before?" She sounded like her son.

Eli nodded, apparently ignoring the woman's tone. "Not for a few years now."

Kay looked as though she wanted to say something more, but held her tongue.

"Okay. We'll head up that way – northwest you think?"

The old man nodded again.

"Great. Northwest then, once this tide is all the way in. I don't want to have to deal with any swells."

The three of them settled into silence. Eli took to a piece of driftwood with his knife. Kay was doing something with her belt. A blister was coming up on her palm, and she picked at it absent-mindedly while watching a plume of smoke smear itself along the horizon. To the east, the buildings of the old city and the hills behind them shimmered through the heat, as though submerged. The air was heavy with the smell of decay. Eli's uncertainty worried her. Back in the city, before the storm, he'd seemed so knowledgeable, and she had felt so sure of him. To see him not know was strange, concerning even. She tried to brush the feeling away. Water changed things fast, especially out here, of course he wouldn't recognise things after a few years. It'd be fine. It was fine. Trying to settle herself, she turned to the old man. "What're you making?"

He passed it over to her. The dead wood was spongy with moisture even where Eli had chipped at it. It had clearly been long in the water. She turned the thing over in her hands. It had a strange shape to it. Rectangular, with a large protuberance at one end, and four smaller, more slender ones beneath. Not a fish, or a waterweed, or even a land plant. An animal perhaps? She tried to remember animals she'd seen or heard about.

"A horse?" There had been one in the settlement, used for hauling things when she was very little. She'd seen in once or twice on the wharf when big salvage was brought in. A tall thing, all knees, strange fingernail feet, and deep pools for eyes which seemed to look right through her. Then there'd been that harsh winter after grampa died. People had to eat. No more horse.

Eli laughed. "Right number of legs. No, it's a cow."

Cow. It was a strange word. Round. Like a river stone. Erin turned it around in her head. "What's a cow?" Out the corner of her eye she saw Kay pause whatever it was she'd been doing to listen as well.

"A great big animal, taller than you or I. People farmed them here and all over the plains."

Beside her, Kay snorted. "You can't farm on the dry."

Erin hushed her, annoyed. She'd always thought Kay was less argumentative than Todd, but apparently some traits were stronger than she'd realised. "Let him talk. You farmed them like seaweed?"

"There used to be thousands of them, that's what my mum used to tell me. Can you believe that? Animals everywhere, fields upon fields of them. She said she'd seen it; I never knew if she was telling the truth. I saw one, once."

Fields? Erin wasn't familiar with the word, but didn't want him to change the subject. "What did it look like?"

"Tall. Very round in the belly, like a boat without a keel. It was black and white, spotty almost. A man brought it to my town when I was a boy. He said he had a field of a few, a day's walk away. Some of our people left to go with him, because all we had were chickens. I remember I thought it smelled strange, like dirt and dry leaves and warmth. Its side was warm, so warm to touch." He was looking at her but she could tell he wasn't really seeing her. He was seeing through her. Beyond her. Looking at something she could only somewhat conceive of.

"So not a horse then," said Kay.

"Oh, no." Eli said. Kay's words had clearly broken his reverie. "I would love to see a horse again though. In my town, when I left, there were horses. People would ride them."

"You can ride them?" She'd never seen that happen.

"Just as this boat rides the water."

Erin lay back on the deck, thinking about animals. Chicken. What was a chicken? A small version of a cow perhaps? Cow. Field. The new words were like talismans. She repeated them to herself, turning the sound over in her mind. Field. Cow. Horse. She tried to imagine what it would be like to ride one. Could you ride cows too? Beneath her the boards were warm from the midday heat, rocking gently with the water. Would you roll back and forth on a horse like you did on a choppy tide? Or was it smooth, like sheltered estuaries on glassy, millpond days? Were there still horses, somewhere, elsewhere, in a less blighted land? She would dearly love to see one. She slipped her hand under her shirt to check that the paper was still safely tucked away. Had grampa known you could ride a horse? Were there any on the page, in the writing she couldn't read? She tried to

remember if he'd ever mentioned them when he read to her from the book at night, but nothing came to her, the past a blank page, a clouded night ever-darkening.

Eventually the tide had finished moving in, filling up the land with water again as the sun began its slow tumble toward the western horizon. Erin used its position to set a heading norwest, and following Eli's directions they made their way deeper into the saltmarsh. Remnants and wreck became fewer. Soon they were entirely surrounded by reeds and eelgrasses, dead trees and mud. Salt and sky merged together away to the north east. At one point they came upon a long line of metal and concrete pillars with hooked tops, like giant versions of her punt pole, marching in rows toward the dark wall of the mountains.

"Is that a cult thing?" Kay asked.

She shook her head. Of course, she hadn't seen the fallen ones she'd taken apart when she worked in the city. It was easy to forget that Kay didn't know very much about things in the world that she saw most days. "No. Old. Some sort of electrics. Wires and things. For light at night, I think. They make good salvage."

"We're getting close" Eli said.

Sure enough, it wasn't much longer before they came to a clearer cutting running through the reeds. Erin followed it, poling the craft carefully along the channel. It seemed to narrow at first, and she thought she might have to turn around, but soon it widened out, opening on to a large, clear expanse of shallow water. There, at its centre, improbably, was a settlement.

They'd found it.

A string of small, curiously shaped islands stretched across the marsh in front of them, the gaps between them spanned by wooden pontoons and walkways. The islands were strangely tall, with hard edges, mottled red and brown by the last light of the sun. No. Not by the sun. Metal, she realised. Rusting into the water. These were boats, ancient metal boats, sunk into the thick silt of the marsh to create false islands. She'd never seen, never imagined so much metal in once place before. Such riches! The things which could be made from that. And for it to be used to make land? If she hadn't seen it for herself she would never have believed it. Perched atop the islands were collections of planks, corrugated sheeting, and occasionally faded scraps of tarpaulin. Buildings of some sort. She found herself marvelling at the scale of resources. "Kay."

"I know."

"I've never seen anything like this." The people who lived and traded here must be wealthy,

comfortable, and want for little indeed. What things must they be able to afford from upriver?

But something was off. There was no smoke coming from any of the islands, no smell of cooking, no sound of people. The docking points were empty, and there was no sign of life or movement on the decks. Her companions had noticed it too. To her left, Kay had brought her hand up to rest on her knife. “Rin, I don’t like this.”

Eli was looking around, leaning forward on the raft to get a better view, setting the punt slopping from side to side. “This isn’t right. There were people here. Whole families, traders, last time.”

“This isn’t last time, this is now,” Kay said, putting a hand on Eli’s shoulder and pulling him back from edge. She was taking charge again, Erin realised, like she did whenever there was an emergency in the caves.

The old man was still looking, growing increasingly frantic. “It’s all wrong. Where are the boats?”

“You’re asking me.”

“Kay, stop, now.” Erin interjected. Couldn’t she see how distressed Eli was? “Maybe it’s just the wrong season. Or they might’ve left temporarily to avoid the storm.”

“Erin, this place has been abandoned for ages. Either that or it’s a trap.”

Kay was right, at least partially. From where they were amongst the reeds she could see that the water around the pontoons was thick with mats of algae, a sure sign that no craft had docked there for months. But a trap?

“Who would want to ambush us? Think for a moment. Look at all the resources on those decks. If they live here what could they possibly need from us?”

“Food. We’ve brought a lot with us. If someone knew about it - ”

“You think he’s setting us up?” She stepped closer to her friend, protectively.

“No! I mean someone might’ve seen us coming.”

“Okay. Sure. Let’s imagine somehow someone saw us and we didn’t see or hear them. They’d still have had to move fast to get out here before us, and it doesn’t look like any boats have moored here recently. I don’t think we’re in much danger.”

“They could’ve tied up somewhere else.”

Erin took a deep breath to still herself. Millpond. Clear skies. She didn’t want to be turned around so soon, before she’d had a chance to find anything, and, most importantly, before she’d had a chance to get Eli to read the paper to her. She tried to remind herself that it wasn’t a surprise Kay was so jumpy. The older woman barely left the caves; all of this was new to her. Beside her, Eli was staring blankly out toward the settlement, seeming to not hear anything she and Kay were saying.

“Eli?” She touched his arm gently. He appeared listless, his eyes not entirely focussing on her as he turned toward her. “I think,” she said, coming to a decision, “that we need to stop for

tonight. Eli's tired, and it'll be dark soon. If you and I take watches we can keep a look out on the settlement."

She nudged the punt back into the reeds, just far enough that they would be somewhat protected if the water turned choppy, but not so far as to hide the settlement from view. Once anchored they set about making the shelter. From the lockers set into the centre of the deck, Erin pulled out poles and a tarpaulin. She and Kay lashed the poles together, anchoring them to the deck so that they formed a long, low latticed arch. Over top they secured the sheet, leaving one edge at the end untied to act as a door. Kay and Eli had bedrolls in their packs, which they unfurled and slid inside. It was getting dark, but the older woman didn't want the fire or lantern lit. Erin didn't have the energy for another debate, and she knew Kay's fear came from unfamiliarity, and being in a situation outside of her control, so she simply broke one of the seaweed blocks up in a tin, and mixed it with a slosh of water from her canteen. The mixture was thick and gelatinous, and coated the back of her throat. There was just enough for a few spoonfuls each.

The old man crawled into the shelter while Kay took the first watch. After double checking the punt was anchored properly, Erin followed the old man inside. Heavy, eyeless dark in the tent. She had to see with her hands, navigate by touch.

"Eli?"

No response. Then, a snort. Eli was snuffling gently in a dream of some sort, but her mind was full of thoughts of words and pages and what they might find in the settlement tomorrow. She wished he would've stayed awake for a while so she could talk to him. Her stomach still felt like it was eating itself, a horrible, deep gnawing sensation, and her head felt light. Not enough food. Gently, she shook Eli's shoulder, hoping that maybe he wasn't as asleep as he looked, but not luck. No reading tonight then. Perhaps he would have needed more than moonlight to read by anyway. She tried not to feel disappointed. There would be tomorrow. Giving up on sleep for now she shuffled back out into the open. Kay was sitting at the far edge of the punt, looking through a gap in the reeds toward the settlement.

"Seen anything?"

Not turning, the older woman shook her head.

"All those boats out there make me wonder what we'd get if we did more overnight runs like this."

Kay didn't answer. She was busy laying out her knives, tucking them under the straps on the deck in order of length before pulling out a long rectangular stone.

"Yours too."

She passed them over. "You really think we'll have trouble?"

“Nothing wrong with being careful.”

“You still think this is all some sort of trap, don’t you?”

Kay didn’t say anything.

“Look,” she paused, and shuffled across the deck so she could whisper. “Look, I know you haven’t really done a trip out in a long time. Most of the time I don’t meet anyone, and when I do most stay out of my way. I’ve never had a fight. And I know you don’t trust him, because you’re frightened of being out here, but he saved me when he had no reason to, and that’s good enough for me. He’s safe – we’re safe with him.” Tentatively, she placed a hand on Kay’s arm. The older woman didn’t shrug it off.

“I just don’t like how little he knows about this place. How little we know. We’re blind here, ‘Rin.”

“I know. I know.”

They lapsed into silence again. She watched Kay sharpen the knives, longest first, pushing the blade across the stone in broad sweeps. Behind her in the tent the old man seemed to still be asleep. Metal glinted in the dark. Kay had pulled out her belt now, and was stropping the first blade, steel hissing along the leather. It was still tonight, a relief. All around the gentle slap of water, the blue glitter lines of phosphorescence where small waves lapped at the punt.

“So what’s our plan?” Kay asked, passing her back her long knife.

Erin nodded her thanks, accepting it for the peace offering she recognised it to be. “Tomorrow, at sun up, I say we take a good look from here and decide whether to move closer or not.”

“Swimming in? Or are we taking the whole punt?”

“I don’t feel like swimming in this water. If there’s anything rusting under the surface we won’t know about it until we slice ourselves open.”

“You’re the expert.” She was finishing up the last knife now, stropping it on the belt before tying the whole thing back around her waist and slotting the blades into their places one by one. There was a faint greyness to the eastern horizon already. The nights were growing shorter again, a sure sign that the hot season was almost upon them once more.

\* \* \* \* \*

No time to ask Eli about the page in the morning either. He was still asleep when the dawn woke her after a short sleep, and only roused as she and Kay were preparing the punt to get closer to the settlement. Erin nudged the punt carefully out of the reeds, aiming for the nearest and largest island. There were plenty of places to dock at the empty pontoon, and she drew them alongside,

choosing a spot at the end farthest from the mudsunk boats.

“Alright. Eli, you stay here while we have a look around.”

“I’m fine. I can come with you.”

“Sorry,” Kay said, jumping in before she could say anything. “Better if you stay here, in case anything happens to us.”

“But these people are kind. They won’t do anything.”

“I know. We just want to be sure.” Erin decided not to point out how abandoned the settlement looked. Neither she or Kay had seen any sign of life during either of their watches, and there certainly wasn’t any now.

“They’re harmless. They got me a paintbrush.”

“Just, stay with the punt, okay?” She handed him her bag.

The boards were spongy with the suggestion of rot under her fingers as she pulled herself up onto the jetty. “Watch your step,” she said, helping Kay up after her. Together they made their way toward the island of boats. It seemed to consist of two levels; a rough platform which created a floor held up by struts and the roofs of the boats on which a cluster of low shacks had been built, and then below it, just above the waterline, the decks of the boats themselves. Now that they were closer she could see that the boat cabins had been patched up with planks, and in some places sheets of corrugated plastic. People must have been using them for rooms, she realised, as well as the buildings on top. The jetty they were on led toward the bottom level. Planks and metal bars had been hammered into the sides of some of the boats, forming rough ladders to the upper floor.

“Where do you think we start?” She had her own ideas, but thought it might make her companion feel more at ease if she felt like she had some control.

Kay gestured with her knife. “Bottom I think. If anyone’s up top we might hear them coming and have some warning.”

“Alright. Let’s stick together.” Despite herself her heart was beating hard. She gripped the hilt of her knife but didn’t draw it. They had stepped on to the first boat. Flakes of rust crunched and snapped beneath their feet, their footsteps setting the old metal hull ringing. Ahead, a hatch hung open, its hinges rusted into position, gaping onto darkness.

“Hello?” Erin called out. Only the echo replied. With that she stepped forwards, in to the dark.

The first thing to come was not sight, but smell. The air was stale and sour; layers of old sweat and oil, and beneath it all the suggestion of something rotten. It felt stale too, heavy against her skin with the deep, clammy cold of a room that hadn’t known a fire in a season or more. She blinked rapidly, willing her eyes to adjust. Vague shapes began to resolve themselves. Low huddles

of boxes. What looked to be a table or a bed against one wall. The hint of another doorway opposite. The air stirred behind her, making her twitch for her knife instinctually, but it was only Kay following her in. This room seemed clear, so they moved toward the doorway on the other side, slowly, cautiously, her in front and the older woman following, walking half backwards after her in case, against all likelihood, anyone came up on them from behind. The next door led back out on to the deck of the boat on the opposite side from which they'd entered. It was dark here too, cut off from the outside by the cabin and the walls erected on either end of the deck, presumably for extra shelter. Thin lines of light ran across the floor, slipping through the gaps in the boards of the platform above. Other boats lay in front of them and to port and starboard, pressed together with their decks aslant.

She turned back to Kay. Her knife was looser in her hand now she noticed. "What do you reckon?"

"The one in front seems bigger than the others," the other woman said. "Think we go that way."

Kay was right. This boat had two rooms inside the cabin rather than one, and there was also an open hatch in the floor of one of the rooms, with steps descending into the hull. They didn't go down; a foul smell emanated from it, accompanied by the wet slap and pull of water.

"The old man seems like he's only half with it," Kay said, her voice bouncing strangely in the confined space.

"He's fine." She pushed ahead through the hanging cloth doors. Another room, again no people.

Kay batted the cloth aside, following her. "'Rin, I think I was wrong. I think he's got a head injury. Maybe a concussion, I don't know. I wasn't exactly thorough with my questions."

"I don't know what you mean." There were plenty of boxes in here. She cracked the lid open on one of them, which turned out to be full of empty metal cans.

"He doesn't seem to know what's going on half the time. That's never a sign that things are right."

"He's probably still got some shock from the storm. Let's check the other boats." Pushing aside the fear in her heart. If his head was injured maybe he'd never read again. Might stop telling stories. Might die. She felt a pang of guilt for thinking of her wants first, and she tried her best to bury it. Back to the task at hand. Both rooms were empty, and Erin moved through the boat quickly. She wanted to get off this one as soon as possible, unsettled by the way it seemed to shift slightly against the marshbed as they walked its length. Perhaps there was a hole somewhere in the hull, the water having slowly devoured the metal, lapping away at it year after year until it finally gave up. Emerging out on the other side of the deck, rather than being faced with another boat directly in

front of them they instead found a roughly circular platform, composed of planks and sheets of metal. It was ringed by four other boats, all about the same size as the one they were on, and piled with more crates and refuse like that they'd encountered in the boats. This must be the middle of the island. There was more light here, especially in one corner, where the sun shone through a series of cracks creating a strange square outline. A hatch, she realised. It had to be. Jumping down from the side of the boat, she hurried across the floor, steps ringing whenever she crossed one of the metal plates. It was. A series of metal bars had been bent into loops and forced in to one of the props which supported the upper level, forming a ladder of sorts.

"I'm going up." The rungs of the makeshift ladder were rough with rust beneath her hands. At the top the trapdoor resisted her efforts to push it open with one hand, and eventually she simply tucked her head down and pushed her shoulders into it as she climbed the final rungs. It swung open, hinges protesting loudly in her ear. Sun streamed through the opening. After the darkness below everything was suddenly too bright; even once she'd pulled herself through the hole and rubbed her eyes the after image of the open hatch still hung in her vision, a ghost laid over the world in front of her. The platform hadn't looked all that high from the jetty, but now that she was up here she could see that it held a commanding view of the saltmarshes. Whoever had come up with the idea had built it just high enough to be able to see anyone on the approach through the marsh grasses, but not so tall that it could be seen from a distance or be easily damaged by the winds.

"Kay, look at this."

Kay had made her way up the ladder now too. She squeezed Erin's arm. "I haven't seen plastic like that in a long time."

"There's so much of it."

In the same formation as before they moved toward the huddle of shacks. Their wooden planks were bleached to silvered bone, like the trees they'd passed the day before, and one of the corrugated plastic sheets used for the roof appeared to be working its way loose, one edge clattering against the pallet-board with the wind.

Another empty room inside. Bones on the floor this time, beneath her feet with a horrible slippery crunching sound before she saw them. She examined them. Small ones, a translucence to them. Remains of a large fish perhaps. Her stomach growled. Kay was examining the ashes in a fire barrel, holding her hand just above it for a moment before sifting through. "This hasn't been lit in a while."

She nodded vaguely. That was information she could've told her herself; there was no smokescent clinging to the air, a sure sign there'd been no fire in at least a couple of days. She was paying more

attention to the rest of the room. There were a few doorways leading off, most of them covered with a hanging cloth which acted as a sort of screen. Perhaps the huts were all connected.

She started down the ladder, aiming for the thin causeway which spanned the water between this island and the next largest. "Let's check this one next."

"Rin, there's no one here. What's the point?"

Kay was right of course, and a treacherous part of her was happy about it. "For salvage? And what do we do if there's no one here to help Eli? Take him back to the cave?" She tried not to sound too hopeful.

"We'll have to drop him in the city."

"How much of this stuff is useable?" Erin gestured broadly back at the mass of boats they'd just traversed.

"A lot I think. The plastic definitely. We might be able to flatten the tins and make tools from them. There's a lot of tarp and fabric scraps too, that's always useful. And there might be stuff on the other islands if we have time to check them."

"Alright. You know best."

"I'll go back and grab the rucksacks."

Erin waited on one of the rusting decks, looking out over the marsh. Kay was on the punt now, talking to Eli. She turned away, putting the mountains to her back, her face toward the unseen ocean and the low shadow of the hills away over the grey sea of mud and reeds. Would Kay have told him they were going to have to take him back to the city? Or was she going to have to break that news herself? A dark bank of clouds was sitting heavy on the seawards horizon. Those hadn't been there earlier. She wetted a finger and held it up to test the air; the reeds and the muddy water were both still, yet the side of her finger toward the hills had dried and cooled already, a sure sign that a breeze was coming from that direction. Nothing strong though. She shot another glance at the horizon. If the clouds were moving their way it wasn't obvious yet. There was a clatter behind her on the deck. Kay was back already, one bag on her back, swinging another down off her shoulder for her. "How do we want to do this?"

"Look," she pointed toward the clouds, Kay's gaze following her outstretched arm.

"Not good?"

"Not sure yet. I only just noticed them."

"Right. What's our plan?"

"Move fast I think, and keep an eye on them. I say we go top down, so we don't have to carry stuff up the ladders. If the clouds get closer we move out." She picked up the rucksack by its

metal frame, tying the braided rope straps together around her shoulders and waist. One foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, she paused. “Kay, did you tell him?”

“No, I thought you’d want to do that.”

Want? That was the last thing in the whole, atrophied world she wanted to do right now, but she nodded anyway. She knew what Kay really meant. He might be difficult to manage, become angry, fearful, if he realised they were going to have to leave him alone in the city on their way back. Her stomach twisted at the thought. It felt like a betrayal, or a killing.

Erin led the way, shadowed by Kay as they moved across the upper deck. Working systematically, they emptied the boxes of tins, laying them out on the floor and squashing them as flat as they could with their feet so more would fit in the bags.

“What do you think of this?” Erin was looking at one of the bigger sheets of corrugated plastic which was starting to come loose from the side of a building. Kay pulled at it, making it shiver and warp. “Yeah. Yeah I think this is good. Let’s finish the bags first.”

Erin’s was already heavy with cans, so she lowered herself through the hatch to the lower deck. The cloth dividers in the doorways around the central platform looked like they could be useful. She examined one. A heavy sheet, with a vague, faded green and yellow pattern. Flowers maybe? It was nailed to the metal at the top of the frame. She gave it an experimental tug, not expecting much to happen, and was unsurprised when it didn’t shift. There was nothing for it. Taking up her knife, she hacked apart the top of the cloth as close as she could to the nails, trying to waste as little of it as possible. It came down with a tearing sound and a cloud of dust, setting her coughing. Todd would be pleased with this for sure. Perhaps she’d even be able to convince him to make her a new shirt from some of it. Perhaps he’d thank her. The thought made her warm. She so desperately craved kindness, approval from him. Vanishingly rare. Bundling it up, she stashed it in her pack, moving on to the other doors.

After making her way around the whole central platform her bag was straining at the seams, and she’d had to tie the final divider, a flaking tarpaulin, around her neck to carry it out. The bag’s weight and the unevenness of the decks made her unsteady on her feet as she moved through the cabins to the jetty outside. Kay had dropped her pack, similarly full, down by the base of the external ladder she saw, and there was a clattering coming from up top which suggested she was already working on the plastic sheeting. Looping her arms through the straps, she carried Kay’s pack on the front of her body, staggering slightly under the combined weight as she ferried both to the punt. Eli was sitting slumped in the middle of the craft, worrying her for a moment, but looked up as she put the bags down.

“What’s happening?”

“Just, stay here, alright?”

“The traders? Have you met them?”

How to tell him? “Eli,” she paused, glancing over her shoulder at the hills, the growing clouds. “I’ll explain soon.”

She pulled herself back up onto the jetty. The old man made as if to follow her, stumbling, making the craft rock dangerously.

“No. Stay here, Eli, please.” She couldn’t afford more time, had to trust that he’d stay onboard, not fall into the water and take his knowledge, his reading with him. She touched her hand to her shirt at her chest, feeling the reassuring crinkle of plastic and paper beneath.

Erin scrambled up the ladder to the top deck. With the added height the horizon extended, and over the beds of yellow and grey reeds she could see the clouds advancing now in earnest. A wind was rising too, the corrugated plastic on the huts beginning to flex and rattle.

“Kay, we need to move.”

“Just got to finish this last one.” The older woman was doing battle with one of the rigid plastic sheets, trying to convince a bolt to unwind.

“No. Now.” Sharp for a change. In the caves Kay had seniority, but out here she was the one who read the water. “That storm’s moving faster than I thought. We need to be in the shallows before it hits the coast.” Not waiting for a response, she hoisted one of the sheets Kay had managed to free onto her back, and clambered down onto the main deck, not waiting to see if the other woman was following. Speed was vital now. Erin shifted the plastic, balancing it on her head with one hand to brace it as she used the other to steady herself while she climbed down on to the punt. The wind grabbed and twisted it in her grasp, curling up beneath the sheet and trying to wrest it from her, but she refused to let go.

“Eli, pass me that rope.” Not enough hands to hold the pile of salvage against the wind and reach for the ties too. Would they have to ditch the resources? No. Don’t think like that. Still time. She’d secured it now, ropes bound tight across the pile. Laying the tarpaulin over top, she secured one end of a rope to the deck, then tossed the coil over the pile to Eli. “I need you to tie that down for me. Make it tight.” He was moving slowly. Too slowly. By the time she’d done the three other corners he’d only just finished one. She moved round the pile, checking that all the ropes were secure. The tarp was well lashed over top the pile; its blue hunched back twitched and shivered in the wind like some strange animal, like the surface of water.

“The traders. Are they helping us?”

“There isn’t anyone, Eli.” Every instinct in her screaming that there wasn’t time for

conversation.

“But I’ve traded with them before.”

Why didn’t he get it? There was no time, no time to make him understand. The wind was gathering strength, putting a chop in the water, driving the storm front on and on toward them. Kay had finally gotten back to the punt, two more sheets of plastic in her arms. Why had she wasted time on those? Together, they managed to force them beneath the already taut ropes so it would be held secure with the rest of the salvage, working around Eli as he sat motionless on the deck. Where had he gone to? What recess of his mind? Perhaps Kay was right; this wasn’t the same man who had pulled her out of the water. This Eli was changed, somehow, transmuted, a reduction of spirit yet still possessed of the same flesh.

Back up on the deck, she untied the rope and tossed it roughly onto the punt. Was the storm front approaching faster, or was it just a trick of distance now that the clouds were nearer? No time to coil the line properly either way. Already it was driving water in front of it, the punt drifting out from the jetty the moment it was unmoored. She leapt the widening space, landing heavily, making the craft rock. Grabbing the pole she pushed off hard, propelling them in to the open water. How far to the shallows? How fast was the front of the storm moving? She didn’t know these waters, had no sense for their moods. Clear of the scuttled boats now, she dropped her stance low and wide, shifting her weight down for stability so she could propel them faster, balance better.

The reeds were going to be a problem. Had the maps at home showed anything about the currents out here? She tried to remember. Nothing came. No use anyway; there was no guarantee that things remained the same, season in, season out.

She needed another pair of eyes. “Kay.” The older woman looked up from where she was coaxing Eli to sit against the pile of salvage. “Is it safe to leave him alone?”

Kay nodded.

“Okay. There should be another pole under the straps on your side of the salvage.”

“Got it.”

“Alright,” using her weight and the pole she pulled the craft round so they were aiming at the gap into the reeds. “I need you to sit at the front with it, and fend off anything we might be about to run into.”

The older woman shuffled awkwardly to the front, where she crouched, wobbling, the pole balanced awkwardly across her knees. Once again, Erin was forcefully reminded that she had little experience out here. She tried not to think about that. “Sit and hook your legs under the straps,” she called out. Advice for a child. The tide was coming in now. Bad news. A storm swell was one thing to manage, but loaded on top of an incoming tide. Well. That was the sort of thing that woke her,

sweating, in the dark hours of the night. They were in among the reeds now, grey stems bending and hissing in the wind. The sedge was buffering them, absorbing some of the force of the approaching weather, but Erin could still tell that the waves were rising. It was becoming harder to move in a direct line, and she was now having to fight against the current, bargaining with where it wanted her to go. Her arms were burning. Yesterday's blister had opened up, stinging with every motion. The hills were falling away to port, eaten up more and more by distance and the wall of storm-heads no matter how hard she fought against the inexorable push of the swell. It kept pushing them further and further out from the hills. In her stomach, a second storm, thrashing; in her throat, seaweed, wrapping around her chest, making her feel like she couldn't draw breath. Whole body an ache now. Dig deep. Feel the resistance of the mud. Draw through. Again. Every movement an age. Repeat. And repeat. And repeat.

But the hills were still falling away, the great dark bank of the storm, pregnant with malice, a hand of roiling cloud reaching out to clutch and snare them. On the deck, Eli slumped and groaned. The water still wasn't getting shallower. She couldn't see the hills any more, their hunched yellow backs her one point of reference for direction now gone. Were they being pushed up the coast? Parallel to the dry, rather than toward it? Rain blurred the surface of the marsh. Against the salvage the wet tarp snapped and slapped. She was glad of the heavier load; it sat them lower in the water, made it harder to steer, but it also meant they took the smaller waves easier.

A shatter of light to starboard. Then, chasing it, an answering crack. The rain was hail now. Sharp, hard. Stinging her hands. Seeking out bare flesh. Clattering on the tarp, the deck, the water about them hissing with it. Kay had abandoned the pole at the front, trying to shelter herself and Eli with some of the plastic. Water, grey, refuse-flecked, was being lashed across the deck now, curling around her ankles, plucking and pulling and sucking at her feet.

There was no more cloudless sky.

The storm had them.

Waves like stone tossed them. The roar and the howl of it. Air and water near indistinguishable. The pole snagged on something, and was twisted and hurled away from her by the waves. Nothing to do but cling to the punt. A speck in the chaos. Boards creaking, flexing beneath her.

A hand of water took them. Raised them up. And then, the drop. Worse than any in her life before. The bottom fallen out of the world. Her stomach rising to meet her throat. A great splintering. Boards shearing skyward, wood attempting to grow once more. The shock of impact flattening her.

Water, all around.

The weight of sodden clothing.

Her head spinning, eyes blurring. Had to get out of the water. With every wave the shattered body of the punt shuddered. Wriggle toes. Good, legs still worked. Taking a deep breath, she rolled herself off the side of the punt, into the water. It was up to her waist here, buffeting her strongly, but she could stand, just about, clinging with both hands to the side of the stricken raft. Some old concrete structure, hidden just beneath the water, had impaled the punt when the wave had dropped out beneath them. It had split almost in half, jagged concrete sticking up through the middle. One side of the tarp had broken free, dragging in the water. Through the billows of rain she could just make out the dark feet of the mountains. The plains that way then.

“Rin.” Kay’s voice, weak, yelling out above the wind from the other side of the punt.  
“Erin! Where are you?”

“Here! Don’t go anywhere. I’m coming.” She followed the sound of Kay’s voice, pulling herself round the side. Eli was floppy, boneless, seaweed before it dried. The wound above his eye had reopened, and blood was smearing itself down the side of his face. Kay had an arm beneath him, the other clinging to the wreck, trying valiantly to keep his head above the water. With every wave he slipped further from her grip. Erin moved as fast as she could, looping her free arm around him and hauling him up so his body was supported by the trembling wreck. She put her fingers to his neck. A pulse flickered weakly.

“What do we do?” Kay’s grey hair was soaked and matted, plastered to her face; she imagined that hers must be much the same. The older woman was shaking, from cold or from fear Erin couldn’t tell.

Another wave bullied her up against the punt. “I don’t know.”

“But you’re supposed to know!” Fear, most definitely. Her voice brittle with it. A strange, look to her eyes, wide and blank.

“But I don’t!” She snapped. “I don’t. Look,” she was shouting above to be heard, the wind snatching her words from the air and throwing them away, “I don’t know how far we are from dry. I don’t know how much water this storm has pushed ahead of it.” Too much, too much she didn’t know.

“You’ve got to do something. We’ll die.”

One of the long ropes which criss-crossed the punt deck had come undone, its end trailing in the water near her. “If I walk out a way I might be able to see the shore.” With her free hand she drew the rope out until it pulled taut. She gave it a tug, testing the knot securing it to the craft. No movement. “I’ll keep hold of the rope so I can find my way back.” She tied the loose end on to her belt, trying not to let her voice betray the deep fear she felt. “Don’t let this end come undone.” Taking a deep breath, she let go of the punt.

The waves buffeted her from side to side, the undertow threatening to pull her feet out from beneath her. One hand on the rope at her belt, the other held up in front of her to shield her face from the lashing rain, she made her way toward the far bank of reeds, beyond which she'd caught a glimpse of mountains. Cold to her very bones. Things she didn't want to know about tangling around her legs. With every wave, water splashed up at her neck. She was so tired. Her limbs like stone anchors. Reeds all about her, sickly yellow, hissing, whispering. Was she still going the right way? Impossible to know. All was sedge and bulrush, lashing rain and dark, malevolent sky. The coil of rope in her hand was getting smaller as the lengths played out. But the water was getting shallower. Her imagination? No, truth. Miraculous truth. Instead of being around her waist, it now mostly came up to her thighs. She was down to the final loop of the coil. Smears of foam across the water now, sticking to her knees. The reeds thinning. The rope pulled tight. Rain and hail together lashing her face. A growing bank of spume. And through it all, beyond it, a line of a different, darker grey. Land. It had to be.

She followed the line back to the stricken raft, coiling it as she went. One side had slumped further into the water. Kay and Eli were standing, clinging to the edge of it, water splashing up to their necks now with every surge. The tide was still coming in.

"Come on!" Shouting to be heard above the wind. Wiping sodden hair from her face, she hooked Eli's arm over her shoulder, Kay taking the other. He leaned heavily on her, driving her feet into the silt. Then, they began to walk, movements sluggish as the water dragged on them. The journey toward the dry seemed like an age, stumbling and catching their ankles in every hidden hole as the storm did its best to soak and drown them, pull them back, chew them up. Erin started to doubt herself. Had she actually seen land? Or had the darker line just been another patch of reeds, the rest all wish and desire? But, finally, mercy and wonder, the water began to drop. With a renewed surge of energy, she pulled the others toward the shore, solidifying out of the rain as they drew closer. No more water now. Just a thick scum of grey foam, wind-piled, almost a meter deep. Gritty on her face. The smell of salt and rot. In her mouth, her nose. Finally, finally bare gravel beneath her hands. The shore. Crawling now, dragging herself by protesting arms, Erin pulled herself out of the spume. They had no supplies. Everything, their blankets, water, had been on the punt. The food too, probably turned to nothing more than so much mulch by now. She spat, trying to exorcise the taste of the foam. They were on a sweeping expanse of black gravel, the ends of it shrouded in sweeping billows of rain in all direction. Fragments of spume scudded up the shore, skating over the stones and tumbling through the air. The storm was still driving inland, great breakers hurling themselves against the stoney expanse as though trying to reach them and pull

them back into the swell. They couldn't stop here. They would probably die anyway, no way to dry themselves, no shelter from the pelting rain, no way back when it blew itself out, but they couldn't wait for the waves to take them. Too tired to stand. Her legs weak as rotten wood. She crawled up the beach, stones bruising her knees, hoping that Kay and Eli would be able to follow. The gravel rose up steeply as she moved away from the water, mounded by the relentless action of year upon year of waves, rising to a ridge which ran the length of the beach. She pulled herself over the top, sliding down the other side of the ridge as the scree subsided. The roll and boom of the waves muted now. Erin huddled in a dip half way down, the cold stones leeching warm from her bones. As though from a great distance, outside of herself, she registered the sound of the stone dune shifting. The others following after her, she supposed. Everything was detached from her, all emotion, all thought, viewed as if from the other side of a bubble, through the surface of water. There was a clatter of rock as Kay helped Eli over the brink of the dune, the pair half walking, half slipping down to her. Together the three of them huddled together in the lee of the ridge, damp bodies pressed together, desperate for any scrap of shared warmth. Ahead of them, the scree pile sloped down to meet a vast expanse of bare earth and balding scrub-land, crossed by sweeping tracts of black and ash. The trails of fires, roaming the plains. Erin sat and shivered, watching the rain sweep in, the world dissolving away into greyness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn, and the slow unfolding of the world. Away over the mountains the heart of the storm sat heavy, obscuring the naked peaks having moved over them during the long, sleepless night. To the north a fire was twisting its way along the foothills, the result of a lightning strike perhaps. Beside her, Kay's face was pale and blotchy, her lips a worrying ashen colour. Erin took her hands, cold and damp like seaweed or dead fish, and rubbed them between her own, trying to work some warmth back into the older woman's extremities. Kay was shivering, she realised, and she shifted closer, trying to share whatever meagre warmth she had with her.

"You okay?"

The other woman said something, but too quiet for her to catch. Erin moved her head closer, straining to hear.

"Alive."

"Yeah. We are."

"You?"

"Sore."

Kay leaned closer, pulling her to her, and carding her fingers through her hair in a way she hadn't done since Erin was small. Erin looked past her, to Eli slumped against Kay's other side. His skin was wan, cheeks pallid and eyes closed. A hot jolt of fear shot through her. Dead? No. His chest was moving, a subtle rise and fall. His beard was completely matted now, stiff with dried saltwater and knots around his mouth, the same as grampa's had been after his accident, the weeks before he'd finally died. Her hand went to her shirt again, checking compulsively for the rustle of plastic. Still there. Good. On clumsy legs, she moved around Kay to his side, trying not to disturb the dune too much. Gently, she tried to work some of the worst knots free so he could move his mouth properly. The old man inhaled sharply as she tugged too hard on one of them, his eyes flashing open.

"You're alright," she placed a hand on his shoulder. His clothes were cold and damp. Eli said nothing, eyes drifting closed again. A small, dark hole seemed to open up within her chest, drawing her into herself. Sitting back on her heels, she surveyed the landscape properly, taking stock. They were on the edge of the plains, the hills and the city blending with the glare of water to the south east. Hands and knees sinking into the stones, she crawled up onto the top to get a better view. How many day's travel to the edge of the city? It was hard to gauge distance over land; she'd never had to do that before, only ever thinking in water time. They'd be slower on foot, that much she knew. But by how much? Say a day and a half to get this far on a fair tide on the water. If they walked through all the daylight, perhaps four days by foot to get back? Not all that long, but an impossible length of time in their current state. She didn't even know if the others could walk properly. She wasn't sure she could.

Back down in their hollow, Erin laid out the supplies they had, uncomfortably aware of the pressure of the other two's eyes on her, the expectation and trust, blind and misplaced trust, that she would know how to get them safely back. She decided not to challenge that assumption. It was her fault, all her fault, that they were in this situation. She'd insisted on coming this far out. She had allowed Kay to come with her. Her stomach twisted at the thought of how it would hurt Tee if his mother never came back. Twisted more again looking at Eli. She had been too eager, too desperate. Too quick too action, too slow to thought. She laid the last item out on the dark gravel between her and the others. Two canteens of water, mostly full. A short knife each. The clothes on their backs. And no food. Not good. If anything the water was more of a worry; that, and the lack of warmth and shelter. Her clothes were still sopping from the storm and the long wade to the shore.

"Can you both stand?" She watched as they both pulled themselves up, then made them walk ten paces forward and back along the top of the dune. Eli had a limp which hadn't been there the day before, another worry for her to deal with, while Kay was moving slowly but seemed steady enough. "Alright. We need to move."

“The punt? My village?” Eli asked.

She shook her head, the world spinning with the movement. “No. It got broken, remember? Even if the wreck didn’t get carried off in the storm I don’t know I could find it again.”

With that, she started out along the top of the dune, the plains and the mountains beyond them to her right now. Through the bruise of distance the city shimmered in and out of being, a mirage, a graze on the horizon, tantalising, and never seeming to draw any closer. At around mid morning they came to a place where the long rows of black dunes were broken by a broad, flat expanse of larger, rounded stones and dry channels flowing down to the estuary, and in the other direction up across the plains. A dried up river, and a big one at that. It took a while to traverse, the little group having to climb down and up the sides of some of the empty channels, so deep were the cuts left by the vanished water. Eli needed to be pulled up some of them, she and Kay pushing and pulling together to haul him up the sides of the deepest cuts. Her back and arms were agony, already seized up from the day before.

On the other side of the dead river the dunes diminished in height, soon disappearing entirely, leaving only a thin line of gravel and debris to demarcate the boundary where the estuary ended and the vast dry flatlands began. They picked their way along the tideline through the wrack, Erin’s eyes drawn instinctively to the flotsam and wave-tossed debris at her feet, Eli mumbling to himself behind her. Fragments of plastic in startling blues, reds, everywhere, colouring the mud. Empty shells. A long twist of rotting metal. Fish bones, bleached and translucent, crackled underfoot. A length of wood caught her eye, and she bent to inspect it.

“Rin,” Kay called out from further down the beach. She’d slipped ahead, and was waving something in the air. Erin hurried over. “What is it?”

The older woman held out a clump of crinkled reddish seaweed. “Edible. I think. Food. We can eat it.”

Erin’s stomach cramped. She’d been trying to put her hunger out of her mind, but all at once she was aware she was ravenous. Kay cut a strand off the bunch with her knife and passed it to her. She sank her teeth into it hungrily, not even bothering to try clean sand off it. It was chewy, with somewhat of a resistance to it though it wasn’t thick. Terribly salty. Sand grit crunched in her back teeth. Her stomach begged for more. Had to make sure that all of them got enough though. She turned to call Eli.

No reply. The beach behind her empty.

“Where’s Eli?” She twisted around, scanning the length of the beach. No sight or sign. He’d been right behind her before Kay called. Hadn’t he? Suddenly she wasn’t so sure. Her hand went

again to her chest, the hidden page. “Eli?” She called again. “We’ve got to find him.”

Kay had a strange look on her face, her mouth pinched as though she wanted to say something but didn’t, following along behind her anyway as she stumbled back up the beach. This was where she’d been when Kay called for her. Nothing. She needed a better vantage point. Moving as fast as her aching legs would allow, she made for the last dune, half walking half crawling up it to stand at the top. Turning slowly, she scanned the beach again, then the plains. Surely he couldn’t have gone far. He’d been moving the slowest out of all of them. Fear was taking root in her chest and throat now. Squinting against the distance she looked again. Kay had followed her up the dune, beside her now.

“Rin,” the older woman started, but she interrupted her.

“Do you see anything? We’ve got to find him.”

There was a long pause. “Do we?” Kay asked.

“What do you mean?”

“If there’s only two of us our water and this food will last longer.”

Erin didn’t even bother to answer, turning back to the expanse. She couldn’t lose him. One hand went unconsciously to the plastic bag tucked against her chest. He had to be in sight. She shaded her eyes. The air smelled of rain, and hot, wet earth. Nothing. Nothing. She was losing him. Her chest tight, struggling to breathe.

Wait.

There. Moving away from her across the scarred landscape, along the edge of the dried up river. A dark figure, features indistinguishable at this distance. It had to be him. With no thought for herself or Kay, Erin practically threw herself down the side of the dune in a clatter and slide of stones, clutching the plastic bag to her chest. Had to get to him. Had to keep him safe. Underfoot, the ground was dry and cracked, great fractures running through the bare earth. How could it be so dry when there had been so much rain? Perhaps it had mostly fallen on the sea, the mountains. She didn’t understand anything here, on the dry. There was so much strangeness, too much new to her. It wasn’t as flat as it had looked from a distance, a gradual roll and dip which shortened the horizon, making her stumble. She wasn’t used to moving over land at any speed, her feet catching on the earth, on nothing, repeatedly. Behind her, she could hear Kay stumbling and cursing as she followed her, apparently having a similar issue. She’d lost sight of Eli, the crumpled land blocking her view. Her anxiety was rising with every step she took away from the water. She crested another rise, and suddenly there below her were the stones of the dead river, its grey and dusty corpse splayed across the landscape. Further up from her, and across on the far bank, was an ugly black scar from old burning. And there, on the edge of it, was Eli. She was running now, not caring if she fell, down the

slope toward him, dust blooming in her wake. Thick white ash furred the ground, whispering as she moved. The old man was up to his knees in it, crawling, arms outstretched, toward the burn mark. She grabbed his shoulders. His beard was coated with fragments of ash, thin and papery.

“Eli, stop. We’re not going this way.”

He tried to twist away from her, pushing her hands away and continuing to move toward the razed earth. “Let go of me. I have get there.”

“Why? Please, please stop this.” Begging, her hands on his arms, face to face, blocking his way.

“Don’t you see it? It’s right there.”

“What do you mean?” Nothing he was saying was making any sense. The tight knot in her chest was fossilising into something heavy and dark, dragging the rest of her in toward it.

“My village, home, I’m going home.” His voice strange and wobbly, and his eyes wild; too wide and staring through her.

“Home? Home is in the city. There’s nothing out here.”

“It’s right up there. The cooking fires, I can smell them.”

“There’s no one, Eli. You’re just smelling ash.”

“Have to go to them. She’s calling me in for dinner. Mama!” He was yelling now, “Mama, I’m here!”

“Eli, there’s nothing there.” She was crying now, tears and ash a slurry on her face. But he was still pulling away, twisting his arm from her grip with surprising strength. Kay put a hand on her shoulder. “His mind’s gone, ‘Rin. We’ve got to leave him.”

“No. He promised me,” her nose clogged and snotty. She reached into the bag and thrust the torn page at him. “What does it say? Tell me what it says. You promised you’d teach me to read it.” The old man didn’t even look at it, still staring off, beyond her, at something neither she nor Kay would ever be able to see. Was he even processing the fact that she was talking to him? Or was he somewhere else entirely, a foreign land, beyond the reach of sound and meaning? She grabbed his face roughly, pulling it round and forcing him to look at her. His eyes slid across her blindly, not seeming to catch or focus at all.

“Why won’t you look at me?” She was shouting now, she realised, in a detached sort of way, spit and snot spraying across Eli’s unresponsive face. “You promised. You promised me.”

“Erin.”

“No. We’re not leaving him. He’s my friend.”

“Erin, stop.”

“He’s my friend.”

Kay's hands, pulling her back from the old man now sitting blankly in the ash, drawing her away. "He's gone. His mind I mean. His body's there but it's empty inside."

"He was fine before, though. He might get better. Look, he can still move. He can walk with us, we just have to watch him."

"He won't come with us, 'Rin."

"Eli, you know me, don't you?" She had crawled around in front of him, blocking his view of the razed earth.

No response. Not even the flicker of an eye. He'd stopped trying to move forward now, simply sitting and staring into nothingness.

"Get up. Please. Come on. Come with me." She touched his face, gently this time, trying to bring him back to her. His skin was hot beneath her fingers, and clammy too, a fever burning in him. He didn't so much as blink. Inside of her, something vital which had fractured when she first thought he had been taken by the storm finally broke, unleashing a sob. She fell back, old ash billowing up around her. Tears on her face, in her mouth, salt and ash grit. The world a blur of grey. The page in one hand, the other clutching at his oilskin. He was making a strange, high keening noise, one arm out in front of him, grabbing at nothing. An odd, choking noise. Herself, she realised. Sobbing.

Kay put a hand on her shoulder. "Let's go, 'Rin."

"He'll die." A final, weak protest. They were going to die too, she knew it, and he would die either way, regardless of whether he remained.

Wordlessly, Kay held out her knife. Erin recoiled. "No. I can't do that."

"It'd be a mercy. I can do it, if you'd prefer."

"No."

"Alright then. Suit yourself." Kay stepped toward him and Erin flinched, but she only unhooked the canteen from Eli's belt, the old man not putting up any resistance. The older woman tied it to her own belt, and turned back toward her.

"On your feet."

Erin hadn't heard her say that since she was small. Her legs stood her up instinctually, carrying her along after Kay, the muscles seemingly working by themselves as she drifted above herself, the world a blur of ash and heat. Carrying her away, away away away, the sound of Eli falling into the distance, into a place without her. They were cresting a rise now, she realised, falling back into herself. She couldn't hear him any more, and at the top she twisted round. It took a moment to find him, so small now against the vast and barren landscape. He was still sitting in the ash, a dark, anonymous blot on the bare earth.

Kay came up beside her. "You should've killed him."

"I can't do that. Not to a friend."

"It would've been kinder."

"Not for me." She knew that was selfish, but it was true. It would've been like grampa dying again, but by her hand this time. She'd never be able to read the paper now. Never hear his stories again. Never share a drink, a meal, an afternoon with him, but at least she hadn't been the cause. Had she? What would've happened if she hadn't tried to run from the storm? She realised she was clenching her fists.

"Let's keep moving."

The broken ground gave way to scabby tussock, short and pale, darker at the base and hissing around her calves like waves on the shore. Was it edible? She didn't know. Nothing in this forsaken land was known to her. All new, all strange, all blasted and destroyed as much as the city. They trudged on, Kay some way ahead of her. Nothing moved on the horizon except for the same trail of smoke from the morning. Eventually night overtook them and they stopped where it caught them, no better or worse place to halt on the barren expanse. They huddled together under the weight of the darkness, the ground sharp with frost gnawing them, eating away at what little warmth they had left. Her feet felt like blocks of stone, unused to walking for so long over solid ground. She massaged them through her wet shoes. Taking them off would invite more cold in. Kay passed her the emptiest of the two canteens, and she sipped it tentatively, trying not to take too much. Once both were drained they had three days. Three days without water, then the body would fail. Unsettling, to not be surrounded by it. She was unmoored in this place, untethered, cut adrift from the familiar. Everything was too quiet without the constant noise of the flood. She handed the canteen back to Kay, but the older woman refused it. "Finish it off. There were only a few drops to begin with."

"How much do we have left?"

"The other's half empty."

Erin added that up in her head. Not even a litre. Barely enough for another day, two if they really stretched it. She tried to bring herself to care, to be concerned, worried by this, but found that she couldn't. Whatever had broken in her back there, when they left the old man, had taken something of her spirit with it.

Grey dawn; a whimper of light creeping into the ashen world. Had she slept at all? Hard to tell. The waking and sleeping worlds both carried the same flat sense of unreality for her now, as

though seen through plastic, from beneath water. Clear yet somehow out of reach. She was drifting through it all, a ghost, a dreamer. If she could get herself to wake she was sure she would find herself back in the caves, would step out of her alcove to see Tee making something, find someone stoking the fire, hear the others talking, smell the warm, dark scent of the womb of the earth, holding them close. Eli would be out in the city somewhere, would teach her to read over a bowl of stew. She pinched herself. And then again. The fold of skin between her nails white, then red. If she died perhaps she'd wake, find that it had never happened. Her knife was still in her belt. The thought was compelling; in that moment she knew it to be absolute truth. Then Kay stirred beside her, giving her pause. Was this Kay part of her dreaming? Or was the other woman dreaming too, the two of them sharing in the same nightmare? If she woke, freed herself, Kay might not understand.

“What time is it?” Kay’s voice was hoarse now.

“Morning still.” Her own voice like gravel as well. Kay’s face was looking drawn, her eyes sunken and dull, and Erin could tell from the way her own tongue was sticking to the roof of her mouth, the sting of her lips cracking, that she must look much the same. She cast around. The world was draped in thick grey cloud, sitting low over the plains and blocking the mountains and hills from view. Turning herself around so that the sun, a faint, bright spot in the pale grey, was at her back, Erin tried to orient herself. If the sun was rising behind her that meant she must be facing west. Her head was beginning to ache, invisible hands pressing in on her temples, making it hard to think. West. Focus on that. So. The sun behind her. Rising. In all seasons it rose from the sea, so the mountains must be in front of her. She turned herself slowly, head feeling loose, unsteady on her shoulders. The hills must be to her port side then, her left. Still the traitorous voice, urging her to wake herself. She mistrusted the thought now, but not entirely.

They set off again, in the direction she thought was probably south, near the beach but not on it, the sound of waves vague away to their left. Thin wisps of sea-fog twisted around them, across the land in front and behind, obscuring distance even more. Was another storm on its way? The waves didn’t sound like there was any anger in them. She tried to think, remember the signs grampa had taught her for different types of weather. Nothing. Her mind a hollow shell. She was losing herself, a bit at a time, sand flowing through fingers, a shoreline eroding away. On and on they went. Now stumbling through ash; now breaking through the hard crust on semi-baked mud. The day turning about them as though they were its axis. The mountains and hills still invisible. They were walking through the track of another fire now, the great black burnscar torn across the landscape the only sign that they had moved at all from where they set out. The ground all ash and

blackened matter, and beneath it the deep red of burnt clay. Something caught her foot, sending her tumbling down into it. Ash billowed up about her. The complaint of an injured knee. Her hand went immediately to the canteen at her belt, but the lid had stayed shut and there was no moisture on its surface. What had tripped her? She looked around. A long, narrow hump of something dark, lying across the ground. And not just one of them, she realised. All around her more and more of the dark lumps, everywhere she looked, with drifts of ash piled against and over them, obscuring their form. Her heart was in her throat, a storm growing in her stomach. Deep, bone-grip dread. Bodies bodies bodies. Every shape resolving itself into a corpse, twisted and charred. Her stomach lurched. A massacre, a boneyard. In her mind's eye people fleeing in the face of a raging fire before succumbing. Screams. Flesh bubbling up. The smell of burning skin and hair and flesh and the screams and screams and –

She smacked her palm into her head, trying to make it stop. Reality was here. Now. Pay attention. Look around. See, in the near distance, some things sticking up out of the ground. Black poles of some sort, of different heights, jagged and broken at the top. She stooped to properly examine one of the forms, tentatively brushing away the ash. Too solid for a corpse. Her fingers dragged against a rough surface. Not stone. A texture she'd felt before. Wood. Tree bark. The shapes weren't bodies at all, but trees, burnt and fallen trees, a whole stand of them, transformed in death into something warped, unknowable. What would it have been like, to see them alive? What was the word for it? She'd heard someone use it once. A collection of trees. Again, her head empty, a hollow shell. A family of trees. A settlement of them.

In her peripheral vision, startling colour. Her head whipped around. A line of bright yellow was dancing along on the top of the slope away to her right. Fire? She breathed deeply. No. No smell of smoke beyond the memory of it in the ash surrounding her. No flicker. No crackle. She moved toward it, her tired body slow, bruised knee complaining as she crested the rise.

Flowers. Red and yellow, purple and orange, a carpet, a flood of colour burning up the landscape below her. Real? She didn't trust her eyes. She bent to touch one. Soft, and a stickiness to it. The centre was brighter than the outer – what were they called? Petals? Strange thing. Fragile, like fleshy paper. A sweetness on the air, but pleasant, not the sickly smell of rot and decay she knew well. Whispering to each other. Flowers. Grampa had kept a dry one among his things; a small, withered thing, browned and papery. They'd burnt that too, along with him and his books, no use left in its frail, dead body. She hadn't realised so many of them would be this bright. That they'd smell like this. She wished she could tell him about it. And then a hand was on her shoulder and for a moment she knew with absolute certainty that if she turned it would be him and she was eight winters old again, her heart singing, but it was only Kay, come up the hill behind her, leaning on her

out of breath to wheeze. She'd forgotten her presence there for a moment, forgotten herself and where they were. They stood there, wordless, for a time, no energy for speech. Then Kay set off down the slope, through the flowers, not seeming to care that she was crushing them beneath her feet. Erin followed, trying not to step on any. The fog and cloud had begun to lift, letting in a little sunlight beneath the grey roof of the world. A window. A gasp. All around her, the flowers seemed to burn.

They'd walked so far that they'd reached the end of another day. All things falling away into darkness. The roof of cloud lifted fully now, and a few faint stars, like shards of broken glass, were visible in the sky. Kay took out the seaweed they'd been saving, and divided it into equal halves. Erin took it, forced it down. It'd been so long since she'd last eaten that she'd stopped feeling hunger at all. The taste of ocean. Her mouth so dry she could barely swallow. They passed the last canteen back and forth between them. The body crying out for water. Resist the urge to drink it all. Lips damp. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and came away with blood. The skin had split from lack of water, the constant exposure. Cold. Deep. Bone gnawing. Without the cloud to hold it in all warmth had fled the earth.

Kay was saying something. Erin tried to focus. Her mind a net full of holes. Something about fire. Yes. Build a fire. Fire for warmth. Bleached wood and dried brush all around them. Soon they had a small pile of dead timber on a clear patch of ground, moving slow with fatigue and so as not to stumble in the dark. Kay brought out a flint and striker, dashing them together over a small collection of twigs. Sparks. But nothing catching. The wood too damp to hold a flame. They needed kindling, tinder, something dry. On and on the hollow percussion of Kay trying to light the wood.

"Erin." Kay's voice was cracked and hoarse. "That page. For kindling."

Hesitantly, Erin pulled the plastic bag out from under her shirt. The paper inside it would be dry, she knew that for a fact. But. It was all she had left of grampa. If it burnt then all tangible proof he ever existed would be gone, and she'd never be able to read that page even if she could learn how. But. One day they'd all be gone. All the works of men would crumble to dust, eventually, and with them all memory, all proof that they had been, that she and others had lived, had touched this earth. Perhaps it would be for the better. Her knife had grown heavier since the last time she drew it, and the plastic stretched before the blade for a moment before it parted. Musty paper scent. Cramped ink. A memory, of warm fire and hot fish, and grampa reading, dragged out of her. She'd forgotten that. Balling the page up, she cupped it in a bundle of the driest fragments of wood so Kay could strike onto it. Sparks. And then a tongue of fire, the paper blossoming into flame. Quickly they stacked some larger pieces of wood around it, and before long a little fire was burning, throwing out hot smoke and making the night around them darker.

So. That was done. Over with and ended. A void where her emotions should have been. She

held her hands out toward the fire, trying to pull some warmth in to her. Kay was coughing more tonight. The smoke perhaps. She didn't think about it, didn't want to. Didn't want to acknowledge that Kay was probably going to die because of her too. The wind like voices in the dark around them. Her knee sore where she'd fallen. Hot. In the inconsistent light she rolled up the leg of her trousers. A bruise radiating out, red and purple. In the centre, a small graze. Voices whispering. Memory of Will's wound, stigmata. Nothing that bad, surely. Kay coughing over and over. Flame shivering in the wind.

Morning, the fire long-dead but her somehow still alive. Her skin was burning, but she felt cold. Something wrong with her chest. Try to stand. Legs no good. With a lurch she fell back onto the ground. On hands and knees she shuffled away from where they'd made camp, but only made it a few meters before something inside of her twisted again, and she vomited. Her head light, filled with something hazy. Everything around her seemed to be shifting, blurred, and now she was on the ground completely with no memory of having fallen, hard earth against her cheek. Taste of bile, blood. And yet still the body's urge to survive. The heart's constant beat, inexorable and naive. She was dead. All meaning and reason for being gone, spirit and soul withered. Her body just didn't know it yet. Only now beginning to catch up. If by some miracle she got off the plains, made it back to the hills, her body might continue for a long time yet, a hollow shell carrying itself on through the years until it finally wore out and joined her in oblivion.

The hills.

Warm shelter.

Twist around, try to find it. Ahead a shimmer, a dance on the surface, the silver of water; promise of salvation. Hands and knees dragging dragging dragging through dirt and stones and ash. Crawling, forcing the body toward it. But there was nothing.

No water.

Only rock. Bare earth.

Hands bloody from stones. Sting of dust in shallow wounds. A lie. A falsehood. Tongue swollen to the point she could barely breathe.

Somehow in the dirt again.

Had she passed out? Time strange, stretched and fluid. In front of her, an insect, small and black, crawling though the dust before vanishing into a crack in the earth which seemed to open up to swallow it entirely.

Never seen one like that before.

The sky dark at the edges now, eating itself, collapsing in.

Time passing.

Flowing constantly away from her.

How much unknown. Enough to drown in.

Voices. But no shadows, footsteps.

Pages drifting through the air.

Like flakes of ash.

Try to grasp. To read.

Vague. The brink of knowledge. She and grampa reading together. Grampa and Eli beside a fire.

Never happened. Nothing true.

Had she ever been.

Body like dust

like ash

like insects

insects

insects

insects

words

ink

ink

ink

ink

all

over her.

All flesh pain.

And in the distance, coming over the top of a rise like a wave cresting, a line of brilliant red and yellow, the flowers pouring over the landscape to meet her, filling up the world with a roar and blaze of light.