



You were a girl, thin and young, with veins that showed blue through your pale, pale skin, and your hair was reddish-gold and really you were still a kid when we saw you last.

You were a girl and you were only fifteen, and you looked younger. Long legs, grey eyes.

You were a girl, a sister and a daughter, and we knew you. At least, we thought we did.

There was a house. In the city—town, we called it, but it was a city and still is, the city of Melbourne. There was a house with two storeys and a tall shaggy tree in front and wisteria looping behind. A house on a hill.

There was a house on a hill in the city and it was full, of us. We were a family. A mother, a father, two daughters.

There was a house on a hill in the city and it was full of us, our family, but then it began to empty. We fell out. We made a mess.

We draped ourselves in blame and disappointment and lurched around, bumping into each other. Some of us wailed and shouted; some of us barely made a sound. None of us was listening, or paying attention. And in the middle of it all you, very quietly, were gone.

And there was an island. Not too far from the city and the house on the hill—about two hours in the car. Since before you were a baby we went there for our holidays, and one of us goes there still.

Ah, the island of your childhood. The beach is small, even at low tide. The rock pools are small and round and shallow. The dunes are mostly low, but they rise as they approach the point and the formations of red rock—soft, waxy-feeling, carved in places with laborious initials, love hearts, swearwords—that the beach is named for.

In the high dunes there are silvery runner grasses, semi-buried, their sandy roots hidden, sturdy and enduring. There are squat mounds of a kind of succulent, its stems stubby and juicy, its pink summer flowers threadbare and brave.

Between the beach and the houses, in the wide band of ti-tree, shadowy and dense and tunnelled through with soft paths, there are beige and grey branch-ceilinged rooms filled with dapples and bark and scatters of very small, dry, minty leaves. There are fat tongues of interwoven creepers, and papery thickets that smell of ants. There are tiny glades—carpets of unblemished sand, a log seat, magic circle of sky, squeaky-stemmed shoots, bright green, bearing tiny blue flowers, a sudden, miniature, mossy hill. Islands within the island, whole and private worlds.

Here on the beach is where you were brought as a baby, were held and kissed and set down, the bodies of the adults like rocks at the corners of your eyes, their voices thinning away,

the waves and the air and the sand all shimmying their infinite particles and you breathing, reaching.

Here, up at the house, in the garden, is where you stood, a naked toddler in a tin tub, water escaping your fists, rolling silver down your pearly skin, your grandmother kneeling by you in the smell of lemons and earth.

Here on the concrete porch in the white sun is where you lay, nine, ten, eleven years old, and read books and ate stone fruit, the juice dripping into the cracks.

Here, back down and through the gate and over the fire track, are the morning glory vines, their spreading leaves a rich and European green, their violet blooms ready to darken and wilt almost as soon as they are picked. Here is where you crouched with a drooping flower behind your ear and watched through twisted grey branches your mother walk away along the beach.

Here—on the beach, in the dunes, in the scrub, in the garden, in a dry, hot, inland paddock that you galloped across on a pony with a helmet fallen over your eyes—here is your island. Nobody else can know it.

But there wasn't only you.

—Here on the beach on a grey day is where I walked heavily in dirt-coloured sand, by clouded unlovely waves, a thirty-six-year-old woman in the last year of my marriage.

—Here is where I, the good son, the good husband, mowed the lawns and pruned the roses and got sweaty and sunburned and hot with fury because nobody ever noticed my efforts, my steadiness, my loyalty.

—Here is where I crossed the lawn in my old bare brown feet, my secateurs held loosely at my thigh, the skin of my arms wrinkled and slack. Here by the gate is where I breathed the cottony sweetness of the blossoms on my lemon tree. And here on the path is where I cried, alone.

—Here in the dim scrub is where I hid beside you with my own morning glory flower, and watched our mother, and awakened to something I did not want. And here is where I stood without you in the soupy water of a dam, my feet slimy and my chest full of sadness. Here is where, older now—an adult, a young woman—I walked one cold May afternoon, miserable and drunk, and started a conversation with a stranger. And here is where, even older, with children of my own, I stood in a windy night on the back porch of a house on the other side—the ocean side—of the island, and thought of you.

Here, on the beach, in the dunes, in the scrub, in the garden, on wet black Settlement Road at first light, under rows of cypresses, and in spider webs and in waves and in the flights of birds, and in the silent inching open of the moon behind clouds and through clouds and alongside stars and in nights more blue than black, and in the sometimes low moon round and yellow over the innermost paddocks and the dams and chicory kilns and quietly grazing sheep and cows, and in waddling echidnas and shy nibbling wallabies—here is the island, over and over again.

Here is your island, and here are ours—your mother’s and your father’s and your grandmother’s and your sister’s.

ISLANDS

Islands, towns, beaches, houses. Bedrooms, kitchens, parks at night. Mothers, fathers, mirrors, dinners. Christmases, bodies, paintings, horses.

The world swarms, and this is just our world, the world of our family, the world of our own making. It exists in us, and in the places where we reach across to each other. The world swarms in every direction. The world swarms, and somewhere you are in it.