

Forgetting

When she's still waiting at 8:25, she is forced to accept that he won't be arriving. A cloudy sunset seeps through half-cracked Venetian blinds, filling the room with milky gold. Thin beams of light reflect on her from the full-length mirror. She stands in front of it, motionless. Opaque streaks of carelessly applied hairspray have dried on the glass earlier in the day. Now they split her image into slices of flesh with uneven edges. Nothing in the room or inside of her aligns.

This is not uncommon. By the third meeting with a man, she is usually lost to reason. She thinks of a Stendhal quote she has read somewhere: 'To think of the rapidity and the violence with which I was drawn towards him.' She knows she's overtaken like this too, no matter how hard she tries to pace the accelerating frames in her mind. Images of her past and future, then his, blend into *theirs*. She knows she shouldn't think this way, but her thoughts are fast glass slides.

She begins to undress. There is no use for discomfort. She peels off her stockings: shed snakeskins on the carpet. One by one, her legs are stripped of anticipation. She's been so busy getting ready, she hasn't realised until now that it is two hours past the time he had been due to arrive. The thing that she will never understand about men is how they can promise so much, so often, with so little intention.

9pm. The places in the room that had been daubed with gold have faded into cool green shadow, as if slowly healing bruises were surfacing all across her walls. Maybe, she thinks, it's the same capacity that can make men in war able to perpetrate killings – they perceive objects and actions, without seeing the relationship between them.

As a child, she passed through war zones, sometimes more than three in a year. Her father, an ambassador, believed it a great addition to her education. And it is true that, unlike the rest of the knowledge that she rote-learned during high school, and forgot entirely within months of completing her final exams, she will always somehow remember the things she saw then.

When she was ten, he had taken her to visit a village in Balochistan. She remembers seeing, through the car's dark glass, mounds of sand by the roadside, weighted with jagged stone tiles. Beside them, a sign painted on rough wood warned of something in a foreign script. She had pointed at the mounds, thinking them the den of some dangerous animal. Her father did not repeat back to her what the interpreter said then. He usually did.

Later, she recounted what she had seen to her teacher at the local school.

Honour Killing. Such a strange combination of words it seemed to her, that the phrase had to be explained. Elders had buried three women alive; sand taking the place of oxygen in their nostrils, forming soft heavy moulds of the insides of their mouths and lungs. A slow landslide taking place in their bodies, below ground.

After returning to Australia, she was unsettled by the dugout airways of crabs and saltwater yabbies that can be seen along the beach. Dark funnels, spotting the sodden shore. She imagined women's upturned faces beneath the sand, somehow surviving; their whistling mouths hungry for air and light.

She remembered those three steep mounds again, more clearly, when she first started dating and her mother variously mentioned keeping her stockings on and protecting her honour. The wet hands and firm mouths, closed eyes, tensed thighs and

sticky clothes of those nights were nice. They seemed to have little to do with killing. But still, she wasn't sure she could trust men entirely.

She hasn't remembered Balochistan again until tonight, although there have been times when fear has flickered, unformed. The images of a flag-planted island and a speared gazelle had flashed through her mind when she lost her virginity (in the morning, flushing away soft strings of flesh, mushroom pink). Then, again in a Vienna taxi, when she'd been on a trip for university. The silent driver had turned his sharp gaze toward her (his profile: a knife-edge, the tint of his sunglass lenses: blood red). His eyes in the rear view mirror had stared back at her, unwavering, and his mouth was shut tight. Outside, it was getting dark. The wood had streaked into swampy wastelands. Her heart had stopped when his pale hand reached to open the glove box and she heard a soft thud in the guts of the car, the remote closing of internal locks. In the echo of that sound she saw her life tunnel down to that road, a right turn perhaps onto a damp dead end track, the cornflower cloth of her travel dress hitched, grey stockings ripped. Her breath had returned when she saw a sign to Mariahilfenstraße arrowing from the highway and heard the tick of the indicator following obediently. Still, when she thinks of Vienna, she does not think of the Hapsburg Palace, the gilt dome of the Ascension, apple strudel, or warm coffee houses: she thinks about the moments she saw the end of her life reflected in the driver's red tinted glasses.

But usually fear has just danced behind an opaque screen in her memory, graceless shadow puppetry. It's the other men, the ones she has been with, that have made her

forget. At first when they stared at her she was scared, but then, gradually, their hands and their mouths stole her caution.

On a TV show this morning she heard about a pill that is being researched in order to perform the ‘inducible and selective erasure of memories.’ In trials, the drug has almost completely removed recollections of a traumatic event in animal subjects, leaving only imprints of happiness. The report also warned that it could have damaging psychological consequences, preventing those who take it from learning from their mistakes. She thinks in that case, perhaps she’d prefer to lose the happy memories. Often it’s remembering episodes of hope that causes her the most distress.

She met him at the party of a friend. When she looked at his face, she thought of a satellite map of rugged terrain, or an EEG graph of brainwaves. He was standing in a corner of the courtyard playing with fire, passing one finger back and forth through the blue blaze of a silver cigarette lighter. She didn’t think she had ever met anyone like him. That was always what she found herself thinking. Then, they all turned out to be the same: emotional flat-lines.

On their first date, he took her to a bar that shared her name and bought her a cocktail. Over ice, it still felt like swallowing knives and flames. He waited for her by the bathroom door at the back of the bar and kissed her hard, there on the stairs, against the wall, his feet planted wide, his arms spread, fingers gripping the bricks on either side of her head. She had thought of the fine furred legs of the spiders in Morocco, large as a man’s hand, which crept into her family’s lodge one year after the rains. Splayed on the ceiling above her bed, a shifting galaxy of dark six-pointed stars. His kiss had tasted of

Tanqueray. Her skirt was caught up at the small of her back. No one in the bar noticed them. She would have liked to get away.

That night she dreamt of muzzled tigers prowling in multi-level hotel suites, surprising her on plush red-carpeted staircases, their whole heads encased in khaki helmets so that all she could see was the condensation from their hot mouths where their eyes should have been. She held her breath beneath chandeliers, on balustrades, overhanging the pebbled paths of landscaped gardens. Once she watched from outside of her body as the figure curled around her, beneath cream sheets, grew stripes and fangs and other sharp things, until, where he clasped her shoulders, she bled.

The second time he took her out, it was to an avant-garde theatre show in which no one spoke. The performer's hands, wet-painted red, left marks on each other whenever they collided. Afterward, he drove her to the outskirts of a park and rolled her on top of him in the dark car. The zipper on his jeans clipped the skin of her thigh, leaving a trail of swollen punctures like small tooth marks.

Tonight would've been the third night. A dinner date had been suggested but it's 11pm and he still hasn't arrived. She's begun to like him, more than she wanted to. She finds that she lets out a rough exhalation whenever she thinks of him, her desire rising up thick and dark as ink.

It's beginning to seem that her punishment for this strength of feeling is always the men disappearing.

In the dim room, the carousel of lights from passing cars rotates her eyes from side to side. An emergency helicopter spurs overhead, buzzing frantic as an overturned beetle. She brushes out the curls from her hair and wipes away the mascara, eye shadow and eye liner applied only three hours earlier. She empties her carefully packed handbag of wallet, lip-gloss, condoms and mints. She knows the feeling well, the way it begins. How in the morning, she will wake with a smile, before remembering that now she will have to hate him. How all the buildings and street signs will be renamed in her mind. Like an Amer-Indian map the edge of that park will be known now, and forever, as The-Last-Place-He-Kissed-Me. ‘The whole city, marked-up with ghosts of us,’ she thinks.

She won't cry again, like the last time, but her chest feels tight. For weeks after the last man vanished, she had had to go about everything with her head slightly tilted back to keep the tears contained. If she levelled her gaze, they had laced powdery tracks from her lids to the corners of her lips.

Now the room is a fist clenching around her. It is a still summer outside, a windless, airless night. She would like something to break. Glass, the clouds, a wave. To let the light and air in again. She has grown a little feverish waiting for him. Anticipation turned heavy, limbs unresisting gravity, head sinking. She wants to be near sand dunes and salt lakes. Canyons. A monsoon. To have all new memories.

She places her pressed chemise back in the closet. It shimmers on its hook, swaying there beside her other dresses. All of them, hanging softly like the bodies of women.

12 midnight. Outside the traffic has faded to a low irregular hum. She flicks off the porch light. In the darkness, she begins to pack a suitcase.

At the tip of touch

If there are multiple light sources there are multiple shadows, with overlapping parts darker. For a person or object touching the surface, like a person standing on the ground, or a pole in the ground, these converge at the tip of touch.

- *How a Shadow is Formed*

In the afternoon, as in the evening, there are different kinds of shadow to encounter.

Tonight, at early twilight, they shift faster across grass and earth toward where she lies, testing her skin's boundary with their darkness.

She's thinking of how she has read somewhere that one has not known love until one has slammed the door, climbed halfway down the stairs and cannot keep going. But she did, despite loving you, complete the sharp angle of your staircase. You had stood on the top step, with your hand covering your mouth, as the sound of your voice calling out her name had echoed. She hadn't turned once. The glass door to the afternoon street had gaped wide to envelope her shrinking silhouette, then swung closed.

Above the grasses now, in growing darkness, a cloud looks to her as if it has been harpooned by the highest building on the city skyline. Long silken skeins spread from it, ripped and fluid. Like the city or the beach, parkland excites her. It is the possibility of being observed, of knowing that each one of her gestures is not entirely solitary. Lying in the park, she likes to imagine that figures, wilful and knowing, ghost each tree. As the shadows gather, she is more breathless because she is unsure whether or not she is

watched. Nearby, is that the rustling of birds digging for damp beneath fallen leaves, or muffled footsteps? On the evening air is the drifting scent of mulch and gardenia. She shivers as a spray of drops from a late sprinkler trickles between her breasts. Again she hears a small shuddering sound. The wings of a bird? Or the smothered exhale of a man who has lathered himself to pleasure over her body, unobserved?

The staircase away from you, three years ago, that other evening, was the beginning of so many descents in her being. She likes to think that it was because of you that she slipped. In truth, you had little to do with it. As Hélène Cixous writes, madness is a protection. It stands guard against the horrors of reality. She merely exchanged one for the other when she entered an absolute love for you. It was not even you specifically. By the time you were born, she had already been in love. With strangers, with landscapes, with the vastness of the sky. Though she was just a child, that is the only word for it: that clenched pain in the chest and stomach, at once physical and ethereal. Muscular, dazzling, the ache of love that she had come to know so early.

She had completed the staircase to the echo of your voice and stepped into the street. The cafes were closing. Sagging crème flutes and vanilla slices were slid into freezer bags to await the dawn. By the time she'd walked from your apartment to the beach it had begun to rain. This might have been a singular meteorological event but she felt it was somehow symbolic of everything in her life, to which she was arriving always at the wrong moment. She began to cry in earnest when she recalled your particular gestures. The tight grip of your hand on her hair as you'd held her to the bed. The faint burn of the skin at the nape of her neck. Most people were leaving the beach but she stayed, unafraid

of the sudden violent whiteness of the waves, savouring the brief heat of the sun through broken cloud. She could not discern in which direction the dark clouds were shifting, but it did not disturb her. In fact, the suspicion that each splash of sunshine may've been the last before the true onset of the storm made each swell of warmth more rewarding.

She was twenty-seven when you met in some gardens, by the beach, where a seawall sprawled its bluestone edges out toward the ocean. From a distance, she'd thought you a little older than her, so it was a surprise later to discover that you were several years younger. Walking toward her, you had not anticipated that the inclination to touch her, a stranger, would so strongly overtake you. For her, the idea of resisting was also elusive. It was something about the evening that affected both of you.

The air was so close, so unrefreshing, that as you moved toward her down the dusty path, your body itself gave her relief with a faint breeze. Perhaps it was this. And the sweat above her lip, the skin so wet, she felt too heavy to resist. What you said now she can't recall. It was no doubt a pleasantry, something easily forgotten, such as good evening. But it seems to her, that from the time at which you stared eye to eye, her memories transformed into a register of only physicality and sensation. Language had left her.

But the body has its own words, giving definition to cerebral terms without our permission, often without warning. It was quite rapid, the speed at which her attraction to you became despair. In three days perhaps the cycle was already complete. The rotation of passion and sorrow that has come to define her was set in motion. It was the mystery of your coming to her, and then your inexplicable leaving. It was the weekends of

absence, the never quite knowing. Your inscrutability bound her to you. You commented on this once, noting how firmly she gripped you when you were trying to say goodbye, to return to your house beside the beach whose silhouette she had studied many times in darkness. The house into which she had never been allowed. Of course it had occurred to her that there may have been someone else, that there may have been many. In fact many others was a preferable thought to the threat of *one* other woman's body possessing your attention. But we believe only what is compatible with our sanity – for as long as we can at least – and the thought of that, for her, was not. Not when she watched your face take on that certain appearance in profile, when you would laugh at one of your own jokes. Proud. Young. Just a little indignant. The curve of your chin, rough stubble, crinkle of skin below the lip, the lip. No, not when you drove, drove her home with one hand on her thigh, squeezing her knee hard and kissing her at slow late-night traffic lights. Not when you were inside of her and reaching down with eight fingers pulled her wide, until slippery wet you would slide, her calves on your shoulders, broad and hard, and you rocked her, rocked her side to side.

The moment of revelation came unexpectedly. Although not wanting to admit it, she had suspected that each of you were impaled at the sharp ends of a furtive triangle, but what she found was that you were each balanced at one corner of a fragile square. Afterward, she imagined this invisible relation that you had each found yourselves in as a boxing ring, roped and dangerous. To take a partner and enter into its centre always held the possibility of emerging with enduring scars.

It happened in a room like any other. In your house. In the afternoon. She'd come unexpectedly to find you, wanting once to see you unprepared and completely, to see where you woke and slept without her, to absorb the details of everything about you. She had pushed the buzzer on the intercom at the security entrance and felt, without answer, the deep hum and clunk as the door was disarmed for her. Later it was this feeling, of the door unlocking, that vibration shaking her fingers on its handle, that she would remember most vividly of this afternoon, despite, or perhaps because of, what followed.

The air was thick and hot. Sharp strands of hair were sticking to her cheeks. She felt as if she walked through the heavy waters of a warm lake as she ascended your staircase. In her hands was something she had cooked for you, a cake that had risen too high and fallen slightly in the middle, toffee thick and dripping the crushed sinew of burnt raspberries. The sulphur smell of burning, like the scent of the sea and damp earth thrilled her. In summer, she still craves, guiltily, for the far-off drift of bush blazes.

Your wife was not expecting her. She was expecting the *au pair*. She smelled the burnt sugar and fruits, heard the footsteps on the stairs, too light for that girl. They grew closer, until she stood in the golden light of the doorway. Unnervingly still, uncomfortably beautiful; an intricate insect petrified in amber.

She saw your wife, and beside her the crouched figure of the child, who in confusion raised to her that soft rounded face, a puffed mask of your beloved features rearranged. It was that which made her cry out more than anything. You came in from the kitchen, hearing a scream, and saw her running from the room, so fast that for a moment you thought her hair was on fire. It was the shift of colours in the flickering light, the smell of

burning. You ran past your wife and your child who sat still, mute as statues – statues shattered in transit, cracks at the edges of their faces. When you reached the top of the staircase you called out her name. She did not turn back. Again, you called her name.

Every week, for eight months now, she has watched you. It was an article in the local paper that first allowed her to relocate you two years later. She'd almost forgotten. It was not that the hollow had healed inside of her, but something more dull and constant had closed over it. A putty formed from the greyness of every day. It was the smallest item detailing the winners of an amateur tennis title that would not have stood out had it not been for the picture of you. The cheap ink had bled and smudged. The dark pebbles of your eyes had spread below your forehead and so she thought at first that you wore a mask. Still, she knew the story of your lips, the temper of your mouth, too well for the bow of it not to be recognised. The action shot had captured a sullen, intent expression, so familiar to her, on your unaware face that soft tears came. It was such a strange thing – to see in the distance of print, the body that had once lain beside hers.

That night she opened the photo album on her computer and found other pictures there. The still-life of her pale leg. She had photographed the bruises you left on her body, as evidence of your existence for when you were no longer present. A mud brown hand circling her calf. Fingers splayed to grip, their day-old prints still bleeding the earthed purple of bulbs. The flash of light lent three dimensions to her skin, your traces deep as claw tracks in wet sand. In your absence, more acutely than ever then, she wanted to adjust the contrast, balance and saturation, boost colour, increase sharpness, spotlight

and darken edges - anything that might bring back the mark of you. It's unbearable to her now that each day she wakes to find the isles of her limbs unmarked and milky.

The tennis courts, she discovered, were not far from where she lived, a spot-lit square of desert red at the heart of an overgrown park. In Spring, the sky above the courts is ablaze with a thicket of insects attracted to the lights. That clear white blaze is a cold substitute for the radiance of the moon but still they cannot resist, every evening, returning to be burned. It took her only two weeks to find that you, without fail, trained on Thursdays. Sometimes your partner changed but you were always there. The thickness of the tree trunks, their closeness to each other, all conspired to conceal her from you. The contrast between the brightness of the court and the dimness of the park provided the final element of blinding.

This evening she has wandered from the lit path that leads to the tennis courts. She waited there all of the late afternoon for you. As the sunlight retreated through new leaves, she remembered how, on the day you had first met beside the beach, she had looked up at the lemonade light through those other spade-shaped platelets of green. The veins of them had seemed too bold, anatomical even, showing too much of the crude mechanisms of their living needs. She wishes that she had less of a good memory, what a curse it is that some people would consider a blessing. Everyday the memories ravage her. Although it is true that time can erase, the fading of what she holds so close only makes things worse for her, a panic of forgetting. Often she speaks to you in her mind, repeating, everything that she would say to you if you turned one day from the spotlights and saw her waiting there. Every day she wakes alone to her excellent memory,

sometimes so real that she can feel the warmth of you over her. Your breath on her eyelids, your wet lips on hers, her fingers in the damp at the back of your head where your hair meets the nape of your neck and the smooth whorl of your ear beckons to be kissed.

Tonight the pale pebbles of the path blend with the red dirt of the courts. In the dusk it is a dusty pink ribbon in the distance, far beyond the sharp heads of the grass that level with her eyes, beneath the tree where she lies now. Tonight you did not arrive. Your partner had waited alone for sometime, tossing his tennis ball against the wall, thwacking the racket in frustration. It seemed then that he received a phone call. Shortly after, he was gone and she was left alone in falling darkness.

In her stomach burrows a tangle of worming fears. This is usually the most peaceful hour of the week, the only hour in which her mind is saved from imagining your alternative whereabouts, envisioning freeze-frames of all the ways in which your betrayal of her might still be continuing: your body, an apology, coiled around your wife's sleeping form, your two hands, bowed as a quiver, reaching to cup a new lover's breasts, in blue light, in distant rooms. For this one hour watching you, she is warmed. It is almost as if you are beside her, your arm perhaps slipping from her shoulders to the valley of her back, when she watches the familiar silhouette of your spot-lit form. So soothing, even reassuring, is the crack of racket mesh in your hand, the soft thud of a falling ball.

The shadows have reached her now, erasing all gradients of shape where before, weakening light through wind-thrown branches had streaked her legs with the outline of their dancing hands. She could almost imagine that the soft hum of the leaves was inside

her, that the rustling was again in her blood as when you had held her. Now everything is drenched in darkness, her eyes too, sighing to a half-close. Tonight the darkness only makes her feel alone. As if every movement of her body is solitary. She hears what she had earlier imagined to be the sighs of an admirer, only as the flutter of nesting birds, the scampering of bush rats in the undergrowth of ferns. Even all those living sounds seem distant, outside of her, in a warm frenzied world tonight from which she is excluded.

The shadows are complete now, losing the shapes which at first the obstacles of trees and posts had lent them, all shades of darkness blending, blending. She walks in indigo spaces, between the rows of trees that grow closer as she moves further away from the road. It is those slow minutes between the fall of shadows and when the buzzing aura of sparse lamplights will flicker on beside each path. She has lost awareness of the direction of the road, of borders, of the edges of things; tonight she would like to refuse endings. Behind her she imagines the trees shifting, following on gnarled feet. This, you know, she does not imagine though: the faintest movement behind the trunk of a tree as she approaches, and then the damp span of a hand on her shoulder, something soft and firm closed about her throat.