

THE QUARRY

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Falling

The chimney is leaking again. Clara stands in front of the slow combustion stove, watching the tiny drips roll down the outside of the flue. This must have been happening for a day and a half now, each drip hitting the stove top and sending a spray of moist ash, like fine dark diamonds, against the wall. How could she be so blind? It was the flash of one of these sprays that had finally caught her attention. Now that she's piled the base high with tea-towels (flannels, half the contents of the linen closet) she stands slightly out of breath, wondering what to do.

Just what was *happening* up there on the roof? If only she could see for herself. She'd only had the thing fixed last month ('fixed', she now saw, had been something of an overstatement) by a little man. Little men: She calls them this still, picked up from Essie all those years ago. It had both scandalised and amused her before getting under her skin and into her vernacular. She feels the familiar thrill at her use of the

term now (once these things take, one can never seem to shake them) and hears that liquid-clear voice as though Essie were in the next room.

We'll have to get a little man in, she'd announce, whenever there was a problem.

Clara never did confirm if irony was intended on Essie's part, or if it was simply an unconscious hangover from her upbringing (patrician, so very different to Clara's own) and in fact (she knew this now), that had been part of the thrill. Somehow Essie's breezy tone, her slight wave of the hand would always settle the matter. Clara's throat tightens a little. Essie: Always so practical, in motion, weekends punctuated with household chores, the thrum of endless loads of laundry, tidying piles of the week's papers, books, scarves; the substance of life that Clara insisted on leaving around. (*Too busy dreaming!* Her mother would have said, Essie too, although their meaning couldn't have been more different.)

As Essie bustled from room to room, *always so much to do!* trailed over her shoulder like silk.

Clara thinks of that tone often these days, rattling around as she does in the cottage. It sings in the still, solitary air. Sometimes she thinks she can actually glimpse the vibrations, against a vase, a curtain. Some days it's these vibrations alone that get her into motion, moving through her schedule as she knows she's supposed to do.

She surveys the lounge room now. The old carpet needs replacing. This section near the fireplace in particular, is brittle against her toes. The orange paint they'd chosen for the walls soon after they'd moved in (*the painting almost killed them!*) is still holding up, however. It blazes down the hallway to the front room where the wallpaper remains defiantly modern. It's remarkable how these aesthetic choices have come back into vogue. They'd lived a good life together here, the two of them.

Splayed open on the old tea chest that serves as a coffee table in front of her, is the poetry collection she'd been browsing as the glittering spray of ash caught her eye. She'd been struck by a line and had begun to copy it into her notebook before the interruption: 'Our bodies are breakable...'^o

Indeed, she thinks now, considering the fragment, amazed once more by the silver multiplicity of meaning.

Clara can't remember when it had arrived, her fear of heights (she'd been a gymnast as a child, flying on the uneven bars, balancing still and sure on the beam). One day she'd woken up and there it was, about a month or so after they'd bought this place, a paralysing fear, not of heights so much as of falling. Of meeting some shock, or, she supposed more precisely (with familiar resignation), of becoming unbalanced. These days she can't even stand on top of a ladder to pop her head through the manhole. There is simply no possibility that she'll be able to get up on the roof to see what's happening with the blasted chimney. There could be high winds at this time of year, sudden, possessive gusts. Who knows what might happen? Losing her footing could cast her clear off the pitched roof of the cottage. She could stumble, slide, take a nose-dive. She might plummet, plunge, hit-the-dirt. Lose her grip altogether.

The roof had been entirely Essie's domain. This was surprising of course (in true Essie style), as she was actually afraid of so many things one would associate with roofs (spiders, snakes *poised to strike from the downpipe!*) yet, Essie would climb on up there as sure as breathing. Clean the gutters, brave the baking steel in summer, sleeves rolled up like some kind of 1950's mechanic. Clara had more than once expected her to re-appear from a foray on the roof with a packet of Marlboro tucked under her shirtsleeve, her own little James Dean.

Clara turns back to the mass of tea-towels (a futile defence, now almost entirely soaked through) at the base of the flue. It's a public holiday. There simply won't be a little man available at such short notice. *Think Clara, think.*

The first time Clara saw Essie she was playing the banjo-mandolin in a third generation bluegrass band (although Clara knew none of these labels at the time) in a run-down inner-city dive. The only female in the outfit, she played hillbilly music to ruffle her family's feathers. The violin-like tuning of the instrument made it an easy transition for a classically trained aristocratic punk, and Essie never did like to muck about. Clara had stumbled into the gig after a less than memorable evening with a colleague, something of a date. He was a nice enough fellow, shy, hair slightly thinning already at 30, but the most remarkable thing about him (the only thing she can really recall) was the way he managed to have a small ink mark on the breast of each and every shirt, although Clara never once saw him with a pen in his pocket. A fellow mathematics teacher, Clara had been out with him a few times, but could never shake the vague feeling of frustration at this mysterious cliché of a stain (as though its

mere presence had the power to bring them all down, their whole maths teaching breed). This small stain, along with his frustratingly limited views on mathematics (Clara was much more interested in the *poetry* of numbers), had made things... difficult. They'd met for a drink in a crowded city bar full of suits pressed shoulder to shoulder, jostling amongst the enduring one-upmanship of men. They'd soon argued over something inconsequential (or so it seemed now) and agreed to call it a night. Clara had been grateful to get out of there, but it was still quite early. She decided to walk the 40 minutes or so to the other side of the city, to gather her thoughts in the cool night air, before taking the train home to the familiarity and comfort of the suburbs.

At some stage she walked past a small old pub, with wild music clattering out onto the street. She can't quite recall what made her stop and step inside. In fact, Clara barely remembers anything about that evening other than what happened next. Logic tells her the venue was full, pulsing with art students and punks, appropriately enraged and alcohol fuelled. But to Clara these steaming, pressing bodies remain ghosts. As Clara crossed the threshold that evening she was aware only of a singular image: A boyish girl on a cramped corner stage, with hooded dark eyes, all straight lines, braces and boots. A white cotton shirt and tan linen pants gave nothing away of the woman underneath, but her hands, her small, capable hands sent a shock through Clara with each and every strum. She was transfixed by those hands. The world dropped away. All was distilled to this image, those hands and the sound of the banjo-mandolin.

The woman was entirely focussed on her task, intense, serious. Her concentration was somehow at odds with the loose, frenetic vibe of the music but at the same time completely appropriate. Very occasionally she broke focus, looked up and laughed or said something to the other musicians, and at those times she seemed joyous, entirely free. She seemed the perfect mystery, exciting and dangerous and Clara knew that she must find out what lay beneath.

In contrast to that first evening, Clara remembers with visceral precision the early days of their life together. An anxiety unlike anything she'd felt before. She remembers the violence of her heart flailing against her breastplate and how she felt she might expire at any moment. To cease to be without having the chance to see Essie one more time seemed an end horrible beyond imagining. It compelled her

breathless-self off trains and buses, through crowded city streets to the promise offered by the front door of Essie's inner-city flat. All the hope and possibility that was held by the click of that door: It was a meeting of minds, of spirit, the likes of which she'd never known. (And there she was, supposedly a grown woman!) She felt fragile, exposed as an infant. The possibility that she might lose hold of that glittering, singular knowing was simply too much to bear.

They'd spent long days in Essie's flat, playing records, talking in marathons of intensity, tumbling ideas and the fierce embrace of understanding. Occasionally, every 30 hours or so (she still blushes to remember) they'd emerge from their bubble to get supplies, to take the air on the main street (petrol fumes and spices) and to test the hub of the world against newly formed skins.

As Clara moves from the lounge through to the small kitchen she sees the old photograph of Essie – yellowed now – attached to the fridge. A magnet advertising a removals company pins it there and it vibrates slightly as the compressor struggles to negotiate the too few items contained within. How could she possibly still have this magnet? In the early years they'd moved frequently, almost every six months (*it was traumatic!* Clara can still hear Essie's hyperbole on the matter), but once they'd found the cottage, once they'd found this place, they knew they'd found home.

Over the years, Clara has rarely looked at this photograph. She fingers its soft frayed edge now. Essie's hands are wrapped around a paper cup containing hot chocolate, a roll-your-own cigarette perched between her right fingers just near the rim. She's leaning against a black wrought iron railing, behind which you can see the stone work of *Notre Dame de Paris*. Essie peers at the camera from under the peak of her grey cap, her dark eyes as always, both a challenge and an invitation.

Clara remembers they'd purchased the hot chocolates that day simply to keep warm. The year they went to Paris had been one of the coldest European winters on record. Across the street is the red awning of the cafe where they'd purchased the beverages, and at the edge of the picture, just entering the frame, is an old man on a bicycle. The sky is clear except for a single smear of cloud. It's this smear, and what it represents for Clara, that makes the image so hard to look at. In this tiny frame, this imprint of light on fraying paper, the world is going about its business. Cafes sell hot chocolate on the street and old men cycle toward their destinations. Her Essie, bold

and defiant, leans against a railing by a cathedral, lost in the pleasures of a warm drink and a cigarette. But all Clara remembers of this trip (after Essie's family had cut her off, they'd scrimped and saved so hard for the holiday it seemed as though they'd *dreamed* it into existence), was how the assault of that fierce cold air was a reprieve from the vice like grip of her own frozen spirit. There they were in the City of Light and all Clara could feel was a newly pressing darkness. She felt out of time, out of alignment. Unable to enjoy the pleasures in abundance around her and unable – most shamefully – to meet Essie's romantic ideal of their holiday.

Each day Clara put on layers of clothing: Tights, jeans, cardigan, jacket - one scarf for her neck and another to hold her hat over her ears - and traipsed out to some monument or other, made awkward attempts to dine in a multitude of quaint cafes. But she was numb and she was tired. Tired of looking (and of being looked at) amongst all this perfection, the weight of a northern history an unwelcome rod against her Antipodean spine. She longed for a glimpse of the real, took to scouring the footpath for a protrusion of weed, a glimpse of life. The icy air, slicing as it did at her cheeks and searing her lungs, was sensation at least, she thought. Some indication that she was alive.

After the trip, these darkneses came and went. Unannounced, they rolled in and out like the mist, marked out their years together in the cottage. Clara became fascinated by the thresholds of madness, carrying within herself as she did a constant fear of following in her father's footsteps: That one day the mist would roll in for good. At first Essie had fussed over her, convinced that Clara's darkness was to do with her writing, but later they came to see how much more pervasive her depressions became without it. At least Clara's writing (her 'scribblings', as she called them) provided a vessel into which she might pour that un-distilled part of herself that she couldn't share with Essie. She couldn't bear to lean on Essie too much; Essie had enough on her plate with her work at the local youth centre (she'd reconciled with her family by then, but could never bring herself to follow in their footsteps). Clara still marvels at how Essie stood by her during those years, allowed for her, offered acceptance, if not always understanding.

In the days and months following Essie's aneurism (so cruelly shy of her fiftieth birthday), Clara's scribblings were all she had. As she slowly learned to renegotiate

the space that had been theirs – lounge, hall, study – she scribbled herself into existence. To her astonishment her first novel, *Etchings*, won a local literary prize and her subsequent work has taken her to festivals and conferences. She has spoken on panels, and occasionally given lectures at the local University. Yet absurdly, here she stands, a woman unable to get up on a roof.

It's cool outside today, but nothing like that European winter. The rain has stopped now and the mist is rolling in, bringing with it that clean, mossy smell. Clara moves from the fridge and opens the back door, lets the moist air wash over her skin.

Alive, she thinks, these cloaks of low cloud, rolling through unannounced. They're both mysterious and familiar (like a long lost lover reflecting back your own gesture) and intrinsically, astonishingly, alive. Passing though, the mists obscure everything, and somehow in that same act remake each and every tree, blade of grass, the very fabric of time.

Clara knows the ladder sits just under her feet, in the storage area below the house. For the briefest moment she recalls rolled up sleeves and a sound like silk.

It's not impossible, she thinks. When this mist passes through, the air will be clear and cool, and there's hardly any breeze. It's simply a case of unfolding the thing and propping it against the front of the house. Five, six, seven steps and I'll be up. It's really quite simple Clara. *In fact, it's sure as breathing.*

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Works cited

° Malouf, David. "Flights, 3". *Typewriter Music*. St Lucia: UQP, 2007. p17