

The Ash Burner

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UQP

'So rests the sky against the earth'
– Dag Hammarskjöld

A dozen paces from the house, and I was onto the dune again. The day hot, but the depth of it locked under the road; the sand powdery as I ran beneath the low branches to the top. Tipped over it. Evenings on the path produced such quiet light. But as I came down, the dune dipped and caved into my own broken steps, towards the waves still afternoon blue, holding to that perfect invitation – the one that, in my mind, I held through slow days of lessons and wooden seats: to dive in and be back. To swim.

I try to recall the perfect confidence with which I did it, how easily it came. Ran in, and felt the grass and seeds and dust wash off. Up close, the water was suddenly dark. My feet disappeared in the shadow of a cloud, the deepening sea floor giving way. The entire world lay in the deep, I was sure of that. A child's philosophy, but more true as well, more certain. I knew that the world was connected along the ocean floor, and that its bass notes, my mother's heart, could only be heard there.

Now, I am no longer as sure. But my body still remembers the water as it reached around my waist and left its slip of thin waves. It feels the tide, and how it was stronger that day. How the threat was

there, as I stepped in, and it pulled in irregular clutches at my legs, across the open beach. How I shouldn't have gone in.

But I did. I dived in. The best moment of any day, met in that overlay of sky and sea, when those two halves of the world are no longer separate but folded over and confused. Then you come up, take your first strokes, and the divide is formed again: sea and sky reconstructed along the silver road of the horizon. At the end of it lay my goal: a cliff, our fort at the southern tip of the beach. Lion's Head, a wounded outcrop of rocks and broken trees shaped as its name, a stately lion with its paws dipped into the sea.

I swam a long way out. Only when I reached the outer edge of what I could manage – the point at which I might not make it – would I begin to work my way to shore, in my mind following a wide curve back in. Sometimes, as a game that I played against my own fears, and perhaps against my hopes for adventure and the world down there, I imagined that I was being chased by something sinister, a monster or a shark. Once, it came true: a fin and sudden, hot fear.

Yet even then, as the grey passed me, the water contained only the feeling of home, for it was such an impossible luxury to swim, and such liberation from the heat of the summer: sweat under the knees, cut grooves in the sticky surface of the desk. In the water, I felt I'd accepted the invitation at last. I was back.

And as I swam, I reached down to find the ghost that every afternoon drew me into the water. I searched for my mother, certain that she remained with us here, if not in the everyday world. I looked for the rocks – a line of them that ran out from the Head. I pushed past to them, and waited for her to come. My legs lifted up towards the surface, as I hovered over the bottom for as long as I could hold my breath. Then, when I touched the seabed I heard again that bass

note that connected and pulsed the world over. The ocean floor of us all. And somewhere along it, the voice of the dead.

The further out I went, the closer we became, and the more insistent the hidden theme. In this way, over time I had extended the swim until that Friday afternoon I must have been nearly a kilometre out; further than I could manage. The excitement of it: not only didn't I have control anymore, but I'd surrendered it to her. So when I saw the rip, the normal signs – a slick channel of water that tailed across the surface – I knew what it meant, but I didn't try to move out of its way. The current followed me, and soon enough my course had bent to it. I was pulled past the lion and towards its pride of breakers on the other side.

I wasn't frightened. Or, rather, I wasn't frightened enough. I knew that the sea had me; it was deciding where I was going next. Already, it was shaping a new life, even while I had the energy and maybe the chance to get out. But once I'd passed the Head I stopped resisting altogether. Let the tide take me somewhere. It seemed so obvious that there was some point to it. Isn't that what it means to be a child: that there can only ever be meaning?

So I stood treading water, and waited for the meaning to make itself known. My mother would come, I was sure she would come. And then together we'd know what was next.

But as I waited, I felt a shift, a change in perception away from the water under me. Something drew my eyes towards a figure on the uneven steps that led to the top of Lion's Head. He was running down from the lookout. And seeing him there, seemingly coming to help me, I realised that the true menace lay not in the waves or in the current, but in a first, light temptation to stop treading water.

Close your eyes, it said. And for a moment I did. I let the waves around me block the sight of the person on the lookout, and I let my head dip under the surface, into the warm salt water. Below, there was no current at all, no movement, all stillness and peace. I had escaped the rip, if I wished it. I could stay there, with her.

What was it, then?

A shot?

Yes, a shot fired from the rocks, Dad's voice – the man who'd run desperately down from the top of the Head to reach me. Along the surface, on the rocks, the sure sight of my father. And a horrible awareness of what he'd find if I let go. He yelled and I heard him more clearly. 'Come back!'

He dived in. I panicked, finally. But already the last strength out of me. I lost my breath, shaking. The water was cold. A hollow, deathly hunger. I began to cry. I called out for help, searched for him in the water. Where had he gone? Where was he? I wanted to stop.

But I couldn't see him.

1

Come back. He held my hand and pressed the words into my palm. 'Listen to me.' I heard his voice as though it were coming up through the pillow rather than from the faint presence next to me. But he spoke so little. What did he want me to hear?

I slipped in and out of a fever. I liked it, this other ocean of warmth and cold that seemed to be carrying me away. But then in stark moments it brought me back, with a heavy chest and a stomach that ached, a longing for something that hadn't been met but rather interrupted. I'd been saved.

'You're nearly there,' Dad said, but in the haze I couldn't decide whether he meant the rocks of Lion's Head or the room we were in, with the shadows that broke over it, too. Unsure, I thought to myself over and over: *He must have made it.*

He must have made it. It was Dad. But I was bleeding, a deep cut in my side made by the rocks as I finally reached them. He pulled me free. Blood collected in a shallow rock pool. That was a memory. And I remembered blood on Dad's wide hands as he lifted me. A hand against the side of my face as he held me.

And then, later, a hand on my temple, while I came out of the fever.

I slept and slept, and when at last I woke properly my eyes followed the changing light on the wooden frame of the window beside my bed. I wondered to myself if that was where God was – not on the ocean floor that connected the world, with all the answers it was meant to contain about my mother, but in the wooden cracks at the edge of the glass. In the splinters.

They kept the bed next to mine empty. It was perfectly quiet, so quiet that sometimes I thought I could hear my muscles twitching, and a thin percussion in my fingers when I lay on my hands. Eventually I made out the muffled sound of other children in a distant room somewhere – and a pounding that came through the floor, their steps on the floorboards, like nights when the surf was heavy and the drumming made it up to the house.

I sensed Dad was always there, although often I felt rather than saw his outline in the room.

And then one morning I woke up hungry.

He asked whether there was anything I wanted to eat. I told him I wanted something salty, and so my first meal when I came out of the worst days was a packet of crisps. Each morning, I still woke up panicking, still thinking I might drown. But gradually the room formed as a more definite reality, one that could replace those last minutes in the sea, and I saw instead the wooden panels, and pale curtains that let in the light.

Corner shadows concealed a single chair and a sliding table. A few of Dad's books were there: he was reading *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene, and the slim volume sat on top of the pile. When he came back into the room, he picked it up and sat with his side to me.

I pretended not to be awake; for a few minutes, the trick worked and we were back in his office and it felt like I was watching him read, waiting for him to light a cigar and sip his tea with scotch. But then he turned to me and put down the book, and through half-closed eyes I watched him struggle with what to say next.

He didn't once ask why I'd gone out so far on my own, but with that kindness to me he also spared himself a task that we should have undertaken then, while it was still fresh. We should have thought of ways of finding Mum together, not on our own as we'd done until now. But neither of us wanted to talk about it, not the accident nor what lay behind it.

For the outcome had been a kind of betrayal – a loss of faith in the solidarity of us – and that had to be said first if we were going to go any further. So instead he smiled at me and returned to his book, and I continued to watch him read.

After a week in this room, the muffled sounds next door found shape as laughter and yelling – and I was to be moved in to join them. *The Quiet American* and the pile beneath it were finished, and my father said he was going back to work.

'Who's been fighting?' I asked him. 'Any good cases lately?'

'Oh, just the usual suspects. Murphy wants his fences fixed again. The supermarket isn't paying its bills. But I've been asked to go to Sydney, Ted. I'm going to help with the drafting of a report. An old friend of mine teaches at the law school. He's asked me to help him.'

'I'll be alright,' I said.

'Listen, they want you in here for another couple of weeks. So I'll be back before you're out. Is there anything you'd like from Sydney?'

It felt like my only chance. ‘Dad, I’m sorry.’

‘I know you are. But is there anything I can get you?’

‘I wish I hadn’t done it.’

‘I know. We’ll be alright.’ He stood up and got ready to leave, collected his portable library into his leather briefcase. He said he’d buy me something for my thirteenth birthday. Something to read while I was getting better.

‘I won’t swim again,’ I promised.

‘I know.’ He pressed my hand.

I watched him leave, and when he didn’t turn around to say goodbye I saw the anger he held in.

I felt it might help to have someone apart from him to talk to – to tell somebody else everything that I’d found out for myself, the things he hadn’t explained to me. Someone to tell that my mother had drowned, and that that was why my father was so angry.

He passed into the corridor, and gradually the light movement of nurses and trolleys replaced his absence. I watched them as they rushed here and there, their familiar busyness like a curtain that swung open and closed across the doorway.

When the nurses spoke to me, there was a pleasing note of sexual teasing in their voices. They quizzed me about whether I had a girlfriend. I knew, in a way, that they were asking about Dad, not me, but I didn’t mind that. They were curious, and I was an easy way to place the question.

‘Of course I don’t have a girlfriend,’ I replied.

‘That’s a shame,’ said one. ‘You know that girls love a patient. You’re almost ideal boyfriend material at the moment.’

‘I doubt that.’ But it was a thought, all the same.

In the new room, it was Anthony who started our first conversation. I'd seen him around town, and I had some idea of who he was. But I wouldn't have thought to speak to someone in the grade above me, in the high school I was about to join. And he was nearly two years older than me, one of the older ones in his year. Even now, I can see him sitting down on the end of my bed, uninvited.

'Are you going to show me?' he asked.

I'd noticed already that there was a fair bit of wound-swapping, so the request seemed natural enough. I lifted my shirt, and for a moment we joined in an inspection of the broad, white bandage that circled my torso. A spot of blood showed where the cut was deepest. The nurses had told me not to run around too much, for the wound kept bleeding lightly. I did as I was told, but they didn't believe me. To Anthony, I said that if you stared at it too long, the blood appeared to be moving towards the edges of the bandage, like a drop of red ink on blotting paper.

Anthony nodded. For a moment, I thought we were done. He stood up to go. He was tall and very lean. His hair was cropped short, and this made his dark eyes seem unnaturally large, as if held wide open. He was handsome. To me, he seemed completely out of place here. A visitor.

He still looked like he would leave, but then sat back on the end of my bed and said, 'Did you know that you nearly died?'

'No.'

'They couldn't treat your infection.'

'How do you know?'

He shook his head. It said, *We all know*. And then, 'Give me a second.' He walked across the room to his bed at the far end, near the windows, and when he came back he handed me a book. 'Have you read this?' It was an anthology of poems by Emily Dickinson.

‘No.’

‘Do you want me to leave it for you?’ he said.

‘No, thank you.’

‘Don’t you read poetry?’

‘Not really. Sometimes Dad reads poems out loud. He likes WH Auden and Philip Larkin.’

‘Well, I can’t keep it. My dad wouldn’t ...’

When Anthony didn’t finish the thought, I asked, ‘How did you get the book, then?’

‘My girlfriend brought it for me. Claire. Do you know her?’

‘I’ve seen her around,’ I answered. ‘I think I’ve seen her with you.’

Again, there was a pause during which Anthony might leave, and if he had, perhaps our friendship would have amounted to no more than this.

But I didn’t want him to go yet. And what else do you ask someone in a hospital but their reason for being there?

‘Can I see?’

So it was Anthony’s turn to lift his shirt. He sat down, turned his back to me, and heard me catch my breath. He quickly pulled his shirt down again and faced me. His face was flushed.

‘Is it that bad?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I mean ...’ The bruise was all the way down his back.

He turned towards the door, watched the nurses coming and going. ‘I’m fine now. I think they only keep me here because they know I don’t mind it.’ He added, ‘Don’t say anything. I haven’t shown anyone before.’

‘But how did it happen?’

‘I’ll tell you later. So, do you want the book?’ he asked again.

‘No.’

He stood up and put it down by my side. ‘Give it to your dad, then.’

Anthony left me alone for the rest of the day. But after that, he was the most regular caller at my bedside. I didn’t understand him very well. At first I didn’t even know why he confused me, but gradually I realised that he had a way of speaking in ideas rather than events, in a way opposite to how my father spoke and what I was used to.

Like Dad, however, Anthony wore his curiosity very openly. He said that, after the Dickinson, he now *needed* to read more American poetry. Not even Dad had ever spoken about ‘needing’ writers. Anthony said he’d ask Claire for Whitman, but also more American women writers: Chopin, Jewett, Willa Cather.

I was curious about Claire, and how she dealt with these strange requests. ‘How do you manage to read so much?’ I asked.

His reply was, ‘How can you lie there just thinking all that time?’

I wasn’t sure. I didn’t think about anything in particular, but it seemed that I needed the time not to. But to my surprise, I soon found myself waiting for him, hoping he’d make it across the room to share one of his thoughts or arguments.

His favourite topic was beauty. He said he *believed in it*.

‘What is it, then?’ I asked him. ‘I don’t think I get the point of beauty. Dad once said that Mum was almost *too* beautiful. Have you ever heard that before?’

No, but he liked the idea: ‘That’s exactly what I think, too. Beauty is when you feel overwhelmed, as though the person has done something to you.’

‘The person?’

‘The girl,’ he replied, and smiled. ‘Or, the world. Suddenly the world does something so lovely that it hurts. You must get that?’

I told him I liked the feeling of water running through my fingers, when I swam and stretched my arms forward. ‘That’s such a good feeling. I guess that’s a beautiful feeling.’

‘That’s the feeling of being comfortable,’ Anthony said. ‘It’s not the same.’

‘Isn’t that just as good?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘It has to hurt.’

Eric, our neighbour from next door, came most days and filled me in on my father’s trip to Sydney. Dad would call him to check on the garden and the house, and to give him messages to pass on to me. Eric said that everything at the law school was on schedule, and Dad would be back well before it was time for me to come home.

This should have cheered me up, but it didn’t quite work. I noticed that I wasn’t in any rush to leave, and also that I was waiting to meet Anthony’s girlfriend, Claire. After a few days in the main ward, her visits still hadn’t coincided with when I was awake.

But I had visits from my class, and from my teacher Miss Weston who, despite having supposedly given up on an interest in my father, made it from the library to bring me books to read, along with my homework and goodwill messages from school. Other neighbours found me reading Dickinson or the books that Anthony thought I should have read by now. One was the Kate Chopin, which apparently Claire had brought when I was asleep. I told Miss Weston I didn’t agree with the ending of *The Awakening*. Wasn’t there another choice besides suicide? You could swim out, if you needed to, but shouldn’t you always try to come in again?

She answered that things had changed since Chopin had written her book. Women had better choices now. She then told me about her own decision to leave Sydney to come and live in Lion's Head. She said she could have had a job in a city school by now, and be closer to home, but that sometimes it was better to leave.

'Do you miss your family?' I asked.

'Oh, I miss them. Yes, of course I do. But I had to come away to really get to know them. Now I'm so pleased I'm here, and I get to know people like you, Ted, and your father.'

'I'm glad you've stayed,' I told her.

'Well, there were other things,' she confided. 'Things didn't work out after uni. Coming to Lion's Head was good for lots of reasons.'

'It's a bit colder in Sydney, isn't it?' I asked.

Miss Weston ignored the question, as if preoccupied with those lots of reasons. Then she said, 'There was only one man in the gender studies major. Isn't that odd? I mean, is it really that hard to be interested in gender if you're a man.'

I wasn't sure.

'Men are too self-absorbed,' she concluded.

I sensed that she wanted to say something about my father, but I couldn't tell exactly what. Eric, too, had views about Dad that he'd been saving up: it didn't do for Dad to spend so much time alone. I wondered how Eric could so unknowingly speak of his own condition. From his point of view, the main thing that Dad needed was to join the bowls club.

Mostly, I sat quietly and listened, and I suppose waited; for I'd found a container for all that I wanted to say, in Anthony. I didn't know why he wanted to talk to me – I felt hopelessly ignorant when I was with him – but I liked his company very much, and accepted the role of the younger boy who needed instruction. And I recall

that I got better at conversing as the days went by: Anthony was teaching me how to think from point to point, deductively, rather than from the details out. He spoke about paintings, music – mainly pop music, but also chamber music, another pleasure he kept hidden from his father, like poetry.

He shouldn't have worried, not here. Anthony's father didn't visit, and so it turned out there wasn't any need to hide the Dickinson. For the first few days, the only visitor I saw was his mother. She wouldn't sit down, and wore the distracted appearance of someone very busy or late, and yet I knew from Anthony that her life was spent watching television and reading thick romances. 'She doesn't like hospitals,' Anthony said.

'Why?'

'I don't think she ever knows what to say.'

No, but then nor did anyone else, not really. For no one knew how to talk about my accident, and I began to realise that meant we wouldn't talk about it at all. Until Claire arrived, it would remain in the sea, where it had occurred, for me and my mother to work out.

2

Those nights in the hospital, after the lights had been out for an hour, I felt as though I was back at the house, or in the water. I heard the waves, and half-dreamt that Dad had collected me early, and that we were back to our routine – the two of us, and how we'd thought about Mum in the years since she'd died.

As soon as he thought I was asleep, he'd set the needle. Sometimes at 'Un bel dì vedremo', other nights at the start of a Rossini, maybe *La Cenerentola*. The first bars counted out the opening movements of our evenings. By the time I was nine or ten, I understood well enough that the music had to be Romantic, for by then he'd taught me that the Romantic movement expressed the sensibility of the lonely, the sentimental; and, without being told, I knew that when he talked about those things he was describing something in himself, and something that he'd seen in me, as well.

But the effect of all that lonely beauty was different for each of us. It put him in the mood to read and write, to sit alone in the study. It made me want to leave. I'd climb out of my bedroom window and make my way down to the beach, to the accompaniment of a score that was almost always Italian. For me, it was swimming music, just as much as it might be music for lost lovers

sitting by windows. It followed me across the road to the first rise of the dune.

There weren't many trees over on our side, and you could see the house clearly. I sat as still as I could in a strip of greenery and bushes, watching my father. I knew his movements off by heart, probably because I watched them guiltily and didn't want to get caught. I could tell when he was going to come to the window by the way he stood up from the desk. I could tell when he wanted a drink, for he rose quickly and turned around. When he wanted to look out onto the street, he got up more slowly and stretched his back first.

And I knew the road the way I knew him, as an extension of the house and the way it related to the sea. I rode down it at least a dozen times every day. A shift of my weight on a tall-framed bike as I hooked left at the Lion's Head bowls club, a flick to straighten again. Eric frowning, telling me from his garden that I'd kill myself one of these days. But rushing home for my first swim, who cared about what might happen one of these days?

And then, in the evenings when Dad's records were on, giving Eric another reason to grumble, I crossed again and went out for another swim, the one that no one knew about, not even Eric. I didn't jump straight in. For a while, I sat and listened to the music. Sometimes, I waited for Dad to come to the window. He gazed out, towards my side of the street. The breeze moved the tall grass at my knees, passing by me as it took the music to our other neighbours, a street of opera-tolerants, and then over the dune and out to sea.

Eventually, I'd undress down to my shorts, fold them under a bench, and sit with my back to the house, facing the water. When a record ended or needed turning, I turned around with it. While

Dad decided what to put on next, I climbed as lightly as I could over the dune and down to the purple water of the bay.

The sea touched the grey sand of night. As quietly as possible I disrupted the stillness of it. There was that heady, first sensation of belonging as I dived under. The music was gone, muted by the bass notes of the ocean, its thudding silence. And with that, the gates to my own thoughts eased open, and I found that the Romantics were wrong.

In the sea, I wasn't the least bit lonely.

For I heard my mother's heart. That is no harder to believe now than when I was twelve and swimming out to hear it. There, along the ocean floor, its rhythm matched my own. I might have thought that it *was* merely my own, the underwater concentration of my own pulse. But there was always final evidence up at the study window, and in the music that followed me down from it. I was never the only one listening.

Anthony was up getting a glass of water. He had trouble sitting still for long, and now walked across to the window. Claire seemed used to all his restlessness, and for a moment kept her eyes on me. I blushed. Then she stood up from Anthony's chair and joined him at the window. Against the light, the arch of her back showed through her white shirt. She put her arm around his waist, below the bruises on his back, and watched the street outside.

She was shorter than him. They were in the same grade, but she was nearly a year younger, fourteen when we met properly that summer. Her thick black hair spun across his shoulder, accentuating how white Anthony was – this was unusual in a beach town, where we ignored the warnings about the sun. She turned to face me, and

I noticed, more so than before, her foreignness: whatever country her parents had brought with them was present in her cheekbones, and how they fell to her lips.

It seemed she knew a bit about me, and had questions already formed. She came over to my bed – to quiz me, apparently as her way of establishing my character. She wanted to know more about the accident, and how I'd ended up on the rough side of the Head.

'I never swim that side,' she said. 'I don't see how you could get caught there.'

I tried to boast. 'It was a rip. I was lucky to get back at all.'

'Or lucky that your dad got to you,' she replied.

'Yes.' I wondered how she'd discovered all this. 'Have you visited Anthony a lot?'

'Most days. You've been somewhere else.' I tried to calculate how I could have missed her visits. She continued, 'I've come at three-thirty ... sometimes you've been asleep. A lot. You snore.' I found her eyes to tell if she was making fun of me. The expression was more open than that. She waited for a reaction.

'Yes, I've heard that before.'

'From your dad?'

'Yes.'

'I saw him. When you were still in your own room, I mean. He sat with you for ages and sometimes left before you woke up.'

'I know.'

And then a thought that it seemed Claire had been holding in reserve: 'He looks lonely.'

'Has Anthony told you about my mum?'

'Yes. He told me that she died when you were young. It must have been an awful time.'

'I don't remember it. I was only three.'

‘For him, I mean.’ And then, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘But you’re right. It’s hardest on him.’

‘No. It’s just how he looks when he’s waiting for you to wake up – like he’s waiting for something else as well.’

‘My mother’s heart.’ I was surprised to hear myself say it to Claire – the first time I’d put my view of him out in the open, saying what he and I had in common –

Our own ways of listening for her.

How could he fall in love, when he so obviously still listened for my mother? He did it through music; I did it in the water.

‘He’s already got someone,’ I explained. ‘My mum’s still here.’

‘Now?’

I met Claire’s gaze and wondered if she saw how she’d hit me in the stomach. ‘Right now,’ I answered at last.

3

Before the accident, I swam every night that I could. And although Dad wouldn't have thanked me for it, I swam as much for his sake as for my own. I had my questions about him. About those long nights he liked to spend surrounded by books and opera. About his reluctance to give me the whole story of our life in Lion's Head, and why we'd moved here from Yorkshire. Questions that assumed there was something to discover in the way he wished for the past, and perhaps regretted it.

Their origin lay in little hints that I pocketed during the routines of each day, such as the way my teachers, during a conversation about nothing in particular, managed to talk about my father. Without ever explaining why, they would speak of him as a kind of puzzle, if not in what they actually said, then in a tone that we all recognised and reserved for the mysteries of small-town existence. It was in the way they called him 'your father' instead of 'your dad', and in the way they spoke more about him than they did others. 'Your father must notice that,' they would say to me, or, 'I expect that's something your father has spoken to you about,' be it history, the law, or some strangeness of human nature.

I wasn't yet sure what the pieces of the puzzle were, or which

piece was missing. He'd started life here as a lawyer. Now he was the magistrate, but still a foreigner, and still a widower. The whole town knew those things, and I supposed that these parts of his identity added up to a suite of questions for those who watched him. To me, it seemed there was more to know because that's how he wanted it to seem, what he quietly implied. In a town that liked to leave all its doors unlocked, he wanted certain doors to remain closed, even with me. It didn't trouble me the way it troubled the town. I'd grown up with it.

It was why I went swimming at night, in any case. Everyone was hoping for a glimpse of my mother, but what was clear to me, if not others, was that the glimpse of her that they saw in the stillness behind his smile lay also under the white light on the water.

For some, the most pressing matter was my father's decision to remain single. It amazed me how doggedly our friends returned to the topic of marriage time and again, as though one day the oddness of his still being single would be cracked, and he'd be made understandable. They said that he and I should have a woman's care, as though it were the 1950s. They insisted that there was no reason for us not to have a woman around. He was still handsome, even the sort of man who became more handsome with age. They thought he must have been in his early forties.

And in his way he was charming, too. I'd seen it. He flattered the ladies of Lion's Head with a very light kind of teasing that wasn't at all normal in town. Once, when Miss Weston walked past our house on her way to school, she brought him a cake. She said it was to thank him for some books he'd donated to the school. But for some Mondays in a row, she repeated the gesture and it began to look like a routine – although she said these treats were just extras from her baking the day before. Eventually I understood it properly.

For a while I thought she might have a chance: her cakes weren't very good, but she was so well read. She talked about the Brontës, who she said, like us, were from the North. She said it brought an identity, a sensibility.

But it came to nothing. Not even the Brontë sisters could do it. A sympathetic expression that Miss Weston shot at me on one of her visits predicted that my father would never let anyone in, not even the young, pretty and well-read ones, who for his sake might have broken a previous rule against baking for men. It wasn't Miss Weston's fault, or the Brontës', or the fault of the other ladies of Lion's Head. The fault lay with love itself, and how it refused to be calmed. At least so I thought. For this reason, my father was never able to encourage the gaze of another. Too fast, he looked away, and returned his eyes to the one we'd search for at night. I saw that he was still in love with my mother, and I loved him all the more for it.

So, with no locals to draw him out of himself, and explain him properly to the rest of the town, our neighbours were left instead with their curiosity. They shared it around, and often I was able to join it to my own. They gave me clues that supported my own thoughts about him.

And once, when two of our neighbours stopped on their evening walk and looked up to the house, failing to see me sitting in the shadows, they unwittingly told me something he hadn't yet mentioned. They stood close to me, and the streetlights caught the sides of their faces.

One said that she'd heard that my mother had died in a swimming accident in Yorkshire.

Yes, that was right, answered the other.

When they were out of sight I walked down to the sea, dizzy with finally understanding why I wanted to swim all the time.

I dived beneath the surface, and listened for her heart again. And I promised I would swim as far out as she needed me to.

By the time Dad got back from Sydney, I'd told the story to Anthony and Claire – in instalments, a story of how I'd ended up in hospital. Anthony asked more and more questions, until I felt like I was one of his books, or one of the titles that Dad brought back from Sydney for my birthday. He said to open them early. I unwrapped *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island* and *Dracula* – early tales of Northerners adrift, and one of a vampire who ended up in our hometown, Whitby.

For Anthony and Claire I'd said in plain words that Dad was a widower, and that I'd never really known my mother, but that I held on as dearly as I could to my barest memories of her. And I confided in them that my father would only ever love her. He'd never be able to put our earlier life in Whitby behind him. But although I was sure everyone knew this about him, I felt awkward when Dad visited next, as though I'd betrayed him again. I'd had a swimming accident, and now I was telling strangers about his heart.

He didn't notice. He approved of the Dickinson on my bedside table, and I felt this almost as an approval of Anthony and the confidences that were springing up between us. 'You're reading poetry at last,' Dad said.

'It's my age,' I replied.

He wondered whether there was a girl to whom he could attribute the interest. 'The nurses are pretty.'

For a moment, I enjoyed his confusion, and a flicker of mischief that was rare between us. 'Yes,' I said. 'They've been asking about you, too.'

He smiled. 'Then I should get out while I can.'

I introduced him to Anthony. I was nervous, as though I were introducing a rival. Neither of them noticed that, either. They talked about the Dickinson, and the other North American poets that Dad liked.

They got along well, which surprised me: my father didn't take to people so quickly. And something else suddenly appeared. I saw it and understood it: a space between Dad and me that Anthony was walking into. While the two of them sat and talked – Anthony on the bed and my father in the chair beside it – I knew from then on that I'd relate best to my father when I was in the company of others. With Anthony, and also Claire.