

Oystercatchers

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Extract

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I dream of water, even now.

I still see its light, and shadows. The wide, dappled wake of a duck, as it swims. Or I dream, sometimes, of a high tide, and an evening sea – of the huge, grey rolling backs of my old Atlantic water, with all its seals and harbours. I see full moons. And stars. Once, I dreamt of a silvery tail above the waves, and I stood on the shoreline, squinted. A whale, perhaps, or a mermaid – I also dream of these things.

Then there is the darker water – wells, riverbeds. I sleep, and I wade out into my flat, married sea again, with my trousers rolled up, and my hair untied. I count the fishing boats. Or I turn, and watch the coastal lights come on. I know that in the marshes the wading birds are sleeping now – one-legged, with their heads tucked under their wings – and I know there's salt on them. I smell this, or I think I can. It is a hard dream to wake from, and I have carried these birds with me before, in the daytime, in my head.

All my life I've done this. Even before you existed, I paddled or crab-fished in my sleep. Now, I tend to walk on sand, or sit, but, sometimes, too, I dive in. I still dream of underwater things, of shells and graves and seaweed, and I dream, too, of hands that brush my arms, grasp my passing hair and try to save me. Sometimes I reach for them, and I'm pulled awake. But mostly, I turn away. I don't want to leave my silence, or its greenish light. So I stay. I swim with my eyes open, amongst my quiet anchors and my old, lost shipwrecks. I touch them, as I pass. I think, *I remember you* . . . I sleep amongst their mossy chains, and fishes.

I

Storm Watch

Four years, now. Four – and how many months?

I don't know. Not anymore. I have the years in me, still, but the smaller, paler shapes of time have been lost – the weeks, and days, and the quiet hours within them. They've left me, or maybe my wish to count them has. Once, I did count – the minutes, and your heart sounds; the seconds on my watch. I watched the seasons come – how the trees changed, and the shoots pushed up out of the earth, and the frosts, and I'd see your frail ghost walk out across the ploughed fields. I'd think to myself, *last year . . .* and imagine it: you, as you were – eating, or in grass. And this, love, is how I measured our lives, at first: by returns, by the slow, silent turning of the world. I counted four pumpkins, four warm Mays. Pine trees, and bank holidays; one leap year. I counted ten thousand tides, Amy. I was the girl with the abacus. I did this counting at night.

I was hopeful.

Hopeful, like a bride is, and relieved, at first, for this wasn't a death. I thought it would be. We all did. *She is not dead*, and so, *all will be well* – I told myself this. I sat down, slowed my breath, and imagined futures with you – healthy again, fruit-skinned, with all your scars healed over. Every soft, gentle thing I found was carried to you, laid down on your bed, because I thought you'd miss a world with such things in it – lavender, or eggshells, or the dry, transparent skin of an adder, left on a rock. I'd say, *It's snowing*. Or, *The strawberries are early*. Til sent a postcard, and I read it to you. She wrote of deserts, and huge, cloudless desert skies – and so, for a while, this room was not green-walled, and we were not

Oystercatchers

in an inland town, with your stale smell, and your thin, green heart.

Also, I said: *This, love, is walking*. As I pressed my fist into the balls of your feet, and curled your toes over, cat-like.

And now? Am I still hopeful? For your life, as it was? Perhaps. But hope grows old, as all things do. It loses its shine; it shrinks away. I am older, and I no longer count, or peel oranges in your room to scent it, and I do not bring shells, hold them to your ear. I don't talk of your wise, nut-coloured doctor who stitched you up, saved you, and knows your dark insides. He is lonely, I think. I've seen his eyes.

It's all gone – the eggshells, and the songs. Can you blame me? I am only a poor visitor, now, who watches the tree outside, but does not describe it to you. And I am tired, too – find a stone, feel its weight: I am that heavy. I am that heavy-hearted, and I do not lay a false, lovely world down on your bed, anymore, for where was the point? How did it help? Your eyes are still closed, and there may be rabbits in the hospital grounds, and a starry night sky, but the real truths of this world are far darker than that: the falling of towers, diseases. Wars. Bags of nails splitting open on trains. There was a flood in Prague, and the zoo creatures died, or freed themselves – apes on rooftops, a hippo yawning in the town square. In Britain, we burnt our cattle. The house in Stackpole has gone.

Do you even hear this? Whatever this is? We are told you can. You sleep – but it isn't the sleep I know. There is little stirring, and no stretching out. Your sleep is half-true and soul-deep, and it is cold perhaps – as in a chamber, or a dank room, or it is a wide empty landscape in which you are alone. Or you're under ice, knocking.

Or you are buried. And this is how I've come to think of you the most, in these four years: boxed, soundless. Deep, deep in the earth.

*

Storm Watch

Amy, these are my words. I want you to know that. They are not from books, or magazines. They are spoken by me – me, whose language was hardly ever in words, like the rest of the world's, but in numbers, symbols, marks on the skin. Bear with me. I know I'll lose myself in this, say things twice, or not at all. I will whisper these words in your wounded ear, or call them out, across the room. But, also, they are in my head. This is my mind's voice, too, which has never been quiet, and these are my thoughts – fast, mackerel-bright. They flash through my brain as I walk, or read. As I kneel on the lawn, planting bulbs. As I close the windows of this room when rain is coming.

I am nearly twenty-eight. Not old – not even slightly; but would you know me, now? I think I look the same, but I know what lies inside me is not as it was. *Nothing changes* – our mother said this, once, which was wrong of her. I've changed a thousand times over; I've shifted my sands more than you have, in so many ways. Once, I walked on the shingle at Cley next the Sea, lonely, and fierce, and crammed full of lies; I carried a brooch with me. Now? I lie in our garden sometimes, watch the clouds moving, and think of my other lives – all the other girls I have been. Thin, vengeful things. Hollow, too, and I have left them behind me, just as I have left the sugar beet fields, and the cloisters, and the stone girl with her feet lost in leaves. Or maybe *left* is wrong – maybe I have not left them; but they are locked in me – held down with rocks, pressing their bones against their membrane walls, and sometimes, they stir, as you do. That is, I think, a more truthful way of it. But either way, I threw the brooch into the marshes, as I moved through them for the last time. Heard its neat, music sound as it fell. Walked back to the Blakeney house thinking, *A magpie will find it*. Fall in love with its shine.

So now, I sit. I visit. Pick my fingernails. Watch your heart flinch on a screen.

And this, too: I am the good wife. I'm a dark-haired woman with flesh on her bones and love in my mouth, and stories to tell.

Oystercatchers

My days are spent in a white, west-facing house on an English coast that you have never seen, with Ray, and an attic, and a leafy vegetable patch. I walk barefoot through our rooms, stand by its windows. Or I walk on a campus with my coat buttoned up, books to my chest, spectacles on. I know medical terms, chemicals. I've sat in a dark lecture room. And for a long time after your fall, I'd sit in an airless room with a woman who didn't know me at all, but who, also, did. It was her job to know me, to understand. I cried, confessed. I said your name to her, and other names, and she smiled, noted them down.

As for my evenings?

Sometimes they're with my husband. Chess, or books, or just with each other. Me, alone, in a deep, salted bath.

But also, sometimes I spend them here, with you.

*

I come to you as the light fades. I drive north, then west. I cross the toll bridge into Wales, follow the last of the sun, and find you lying on your back, as cool as a queen – blue-veined, porous. Shit-smelling. I spend a few hours with you. When it is late, I go home.

Do you remember Cromer pier? How I hit you across the cheekbone with the side of my hand, and you stumbled backwards, but you did not cry? You stared. And then you came closer to me and took my thumb, as if I was the injured one. Ten years old, and already wise. I knew it – I think we all did. You added poorly; you could not spell; you thought the moon was a night-time sun – and yet, yes, you were wise. As knowing as a priest. And it warmed you, I think, this wisdom – for I stole the blankets off your bed, one winter, hid them away. I secretly opened your window that night, and yet you did not complain. You slept in your clothes, your knees tucked up. Sang to yourself at breakfast.

See? These are the darker truths. I am no saint, I promise you that. I will turn stones over to prove it. For if I talk of wars, of boundaries, and secrets, and if I talk of the bombers who walk,

Storm Watch

calmly, into a square, or onto trains, shouldn't I talk of us? Of our war? For it was a war, of sorts. You came. You, the invader, with bubble-gum breath, and I was the hard, stubborn girl who narrowed her eyes, plotted, hungered for armies of her own. I have been called a witch, before now. Imagine that – me, with sparks in my fingertips, spells and a blistered tongue. All those curses. I cursed you, sometimes. As a baby, you were as pink as a worm. I missed the old world. The old way of things. Amy, I hardened myself.

Did this hardening bring you here? To this hospital bed?

That's the question. I've had it in me for over four years. Of course – for look at my life, and the things I've done. If I had moved, talked, breathed differently, would this bed be empty, now, or slept in by some other girl? Would you be climbing trees, somewhere? Feeding the horses strange things, as you used to – like toast, or unripe plums? I've tried to answer all this. I've worked back, through every part of it, and looked for the moment, the knot in the thread, which brought us here, to this point, this room. There is no such knot. Or rather, there are hundreds of them – slammed doors, lies, my unfaithfulness as a wife, Ray's wife – all on their way to this. To now. This bed in this room.

Guilt. It's in me, all the same, for I have heard of the brain's power – *Imagine*, Til said, *and it can happen that way*. She told me this when I was your age, and facing exams; later, too – when Ray was still a name I dared not say. I never believed her, then. *Stupid*, I thought; I turned away. Yet she told me I should picture myself as a wife, in a house by the coast, shielding my eyes as I looked out across my childhood water, to the ferries and the dipped back of Lundy Island, where the air shakes with puffin wings, and whether or not there is truth in her way of thinking, or such a thing as Fate, I find myself doing all of this now. I wear a wedding ring. From our bedroom, I see the Atlantic. I am in this sea daily, or so it seems. I tread water, and I look back to our house from the fishing buoy, see myself in the window. I am scared, love, that I thought too hard, too clearly, of injuring you.

Oystercatchers

But I never imagined a fall – nothing so brutal. Believe me: I never did. It was an illness that I hoped for, or nightmares, or maybe a deep, yellowing bruise. Once I imagined an adder's bite – for these would be small punishments, small ways of revenge. But not this – not a fall from such a height, with the gulls screaming for you, and the sharp, hard drag of your hands across the rocks, and the crack of your knee, and your brief, huge moment in mid-air, and I never imagined part of your scalp would be lifted up by the rocks, as it was. Nor that, later, the doctor would pluck a mussel out of your skull – glinting, as blue as an eye.

*

Moira, we dream what we dream . . .

This, also, from Til. She wore her rose quartz when she said this; it hung forwards, swayed. And perhaps she's right, it's true – for we can fool our waking hours, and our daytime self, but not the sleeping self at night. I know this. I was tall, solitary; I could raise an eyebrow, as a warrior might. But then, later, I'd dream of old, Atlantic things that undid me, in the dark.

And you? I've often wondered if there are dreams in this strange, dark sleep of yours, and if so, what dreams they might be. Stackpole? If you do dream of it, know this: it does not exist. Or not for us, anymore. The low-slung house in its lane of blackthorn trees and blown sand has gone. Been sold – to a man who knows nothing of tides, or oil spills, and wants the land, not the house on it, so perhaps there are no bricks left at all. Our parents left Stackpole behind them. Packed their boxes and moved inland, to be closer to you. And so the field of horses and the wading birds and the army guns are no longer part of their lives, or yours. Or mine – although I still think of them. I always did. Once, on Freshwater East, I found a dead seagull. I smelt sadness on it, and I still dream of it, two decades on – its open beak, and missing eyes. How its soft, snowy chest feathers parted when the wind came.

Or do you dream of yourself? As you were? The cheerful toddling

Storm Watch

thing who fell asleep in the wheelbarrow, who left milk out for the hedgehog that lived in the compost heap? Our mother says that, once, you spat cockles into the palm of her hand and wiped them on a stranger's sleeve – and this is the girl she prays for. I have seen her do it. She lays down her embroidery, closes her eyes. *Lord, if. . .* Our father comes, too, at the weekends. And I am here in the evenings – full of confessions, and shadows. Smelling of paint.

Shadows, Amy. Many, as if I walk in a cave. I've seen things you never will, and I have done things, too. I've seen a dead frog, dancing. Smelt a whole country on airmail envelopes. I've crossed the tidal creeks at daybreak, seen the low, strange flight of the wading birds, heard them, felt a grief inside me that had no name, no way of expressing it. There are such feelings: deep, and wide. I sit here with them. A man crossed a room just to say to me, *Your husband is lucky. I envy him. Remember I told you that.*

My name, too – written in snow. Lying there, on the hockey fields. How I was punished for it, later: names, and a bed full of grass. I believed those letters, trodden out in snow, were a mistake; I thought, *There are two Moiras. Or a name has been spelt wrong.*

But it was for me, and it wasn't a joke.

'You thought that?' Ray asked me. 'A joke?'

*

I think of you, all the time.

I do not count the minutes, anymore, and I do not imagine the seasons yet to come that might, perhaps, have you in them. But, still, I carry you. I feel winds, and bite into fruit on your behalf. Push my hand into a dog's fur. I blow dandelion clocks, as you did, and when I find my husband asleep on his front, with his arms beneath him, it isn't you I think of, at first – I think of him; I say his name, and he stirs. But it all leads to you, in the end.

So we wait, Ray and I. We feel the earth turn. We wake in the

Oystercatchers

mornings and think, *Today?* No – not today. Not tomorrow, even, for my hope has gone, or it almost has, and I am so tired of waiting, now. So tired, and bored, that I think I, too, could sink into this sleep of yours. Or unplug you, tilt your bed over. Or take my thumb and forefinger and seal up your nose, whilst cupping your jaw in my hand. *There* – isn't that another glimpse of the cruelty in me? That it's come to this? That I have such unkind thoughts? That – and other thoughts besides. I've sat in this chair for thousands of evenings, and felt my life drip away at a faster rate than yours, and I've felt the world darken, and the clouds race. I grow older. And at home, in our quiet house, Ray talks to me of jungles, and city heat, elephants and valley floors; he lists volcanoes, as if they are people he's walked with. And I listen to this, imagine it all. *I will swim in a sound. Stand on the equator.* I long for this. I always have – to walk out into the world with Ray. But we do not go. How can we? Our mother asks me to stay – and she asks this of you, too, when she thinks she's alone. *Stay . . .* She still believes you will survive, somehow. But Amy, I think you will die.

I tell this to no one. Not even Ray. For who would believe it, or want to?

Miracles happen, they say. And also, *You are her sister.*

*

I sit here, now. Moon-skinned, with my glasses on. There are lilies beside you, dropping their thick pollen onto the tiled floor. I can smell them. I can hear your slow, neat heart.

It is December.

Do you listen? Does this find you, at all?

Atlantic. A word of secrets.

As with most things, this story begins with the sea.

II

The Field of Horses

Huge, grey water. Restless water, with white tips to the grey waves. There were ferries, and blow-holes. Sea-pies, with their orange beaks, standing in their coves. Seals blinked, and the grasses shook, and in the evenings the lighthouse on Caldey Island rolled its slow, pale eye.

A coast of foam, and light. And there was a house on this coast that I can still see – weathered, salty. Its blackthorn bushes, and green front door. Furze from the coastal path ran into its garden, and a line of herring gulls hunched on the roof – grey, one-legged. Remember? They clamped their heads beneath their wings, streaked the tiles white. Two fields away there were horses: in stormy weather they'd arch their tails, and flee.

An apple tree, too. A swing.

And I see our parents, there – before they were our parents. George, twirling spanners; Miriam with her curled hair, and her round, hard belly, rolling a chiming ball.

*

They came to Stackpole because of the sea. They longed for it, as I suppose we all long, sometimes, for a thing we can't name, but feel, inside us. He always said, *The sea . . .* wistfully, as if it was only a dream he'd had once, as a boy. He'd say, *Smell it?* Tentacles and splintered wood; rope, and glitter, and lobsterpots, and he loved these things, having lived by them in his younger days. And so after their wedding day, before I was born, before I was even two pink cells, they came to Pembrokeshire, hand in hand, to walk across its cliff-tops. To haul in this sea air. To say

Oystercatchers

the word *married* to each other. On low-tide beaches, and in the dark.

For Sale, it said. Outside a house with gulls on the roof.
So they bought the house, cleaned it. Lived there.

Or at least, this is the story they gave to me, as I grew up: all romance, sea-spray. And I've come back round to imagining it again – to allowing myself to see our parents, newlywed, hearing the caves drip, standing on St Govan's Head for the first time. Finding the chapel, hidden in rocks. Our mother being caught out by the wind, her skirt blowing up on Barafundle.

Stackpole. A sturdy name. A sturdy village, too – sleeping on the south-west coast of Wales. Neat and squat. Its church sat in a hollow, its tearoom steamed, and it had its own, quiet harbour where the buoys bobbed on the tide, and boats rocked themselves. The inn had flowerbeds and chimney smoke, water for dogs, and a rack outside for walkers' boots. Sparrows, in its hedges. And cows chewed thoughtfully on the dairy farm; our mother heard them lowing, in the mornings, when she hung the washing out.

She loved it. *Miriam*. She'd lived in a city, till now; but now, she too loved the sea. Maybe not as much as my father loved it – hungrily, instinctively. But she came to love its breath, and its birds. Also, she had her own sea inside her. Walking on evening beaches with a tiny life moored to her, I imagine she thought, *Where's better, than this?* Where else had old castles and harbours? Empty coves? These skies? George didn't know, either. Briny, bearded George – he swam in all weathers, picked mussels from rocks, and when they walked together at low tide, the balls of their feet pushed flashes of light into the wet sand.

'One day,' he said, 'I'll own my own boat.' Until then, he twirled spanners like batons, smelt of oil. Bits of cars sat in their garden, under tents of tarpaulin, and their eldest daughter, once she was born, would come to know them – how, in rainstorms,

The Field of Horses

these tents would flap and billow, and she'd creep downstairs to watch them at night, throwing blue shadows on the white kitchen wall. She believed they longed to free themselves. To lift up, like dragons, open their wings and slip away into the dark.

*

In their first March there, my mother went to Tenby. She often did. But this was different, because I was inside her, and she sucked liquorice as she walked on the seafront, past the pastel-coloured houses. Slipped a coin into a telescope and peered through it, out to sea. And a woman stopped her near the coast-guard's house – a woman with stars inked onto her arms, and a mark on her lip. A gypsy, or something like one. She put her hand on my mother's belly and said, *A girl. Dark-eyed.* Blinked, then, and said, *Strange . . .*

Miriam dismissed this. Smiled, stepped backwards, and drove home with songs on the radio, and her windscreen wipers on. She believed in God, not magic. She went to church every Sunday, and said her prayers, and arranged the flowers by the font, sometimes, and she didn't believe in predictions like that, from a woman with an alcohol smell. *How does she know?* She shook her head.

But those words stayed with her. I know that at night, my mother was sleepless. She heard the spring gales, worried the edge of the blanket with her thumb and thought, *A girl.* And also, *Strange?* What was? She did not know what this meant.

Later that night, I was born. On that dark-blue, starless night my mother woke up with a fear inside her – tight, like a fist. She crept out of bed. Stood in the bathroom where blackthorn knocked on the windowpane, held onto the sink, and I slipped out, eel-like, onto the bathroom floor. Ten weeks premature. My parents curled round me, waited. I was mute, small, and in the half-light they clutched hands, made promises – offered up

Oystercatchers

everything if it meant that their early, dark-eyed daughter could stay with them, and survive. *Our money. Our own health.*

Nothing, for fourteen minutes. And then, at last, I wailed.

Was that the strange part? That early birth? My father would tell the story, in the years to come. On birthdays, or late at night, he'd retrieve it, polish it up: the blood on the lino, my stare, and how my wet, frail crying made him sink back against the bathtub, say, *Thank God*, over and over. 'We wrapped you in a pillowcase,' he said, 'and you gripped our fingers – like this . . .'

I've often wondered if the herring gulls rose from the roof at the sound of me, their legs dangling, or if the tide had been high – and I've thought of asking my mother these things. But she rarely spoke of my birth, or of the woman with stars on her arms. Only once did she talk of these things: on the telephone, one winter, when I was hateful, and sad, she confessed to me that she'd been afraid that night, and so the happiest moment of her life had not been her wedding, or finding George, or learning of her pregnancy – but lying on the cold bathroom floor one early March night with her nightdress round her waist, and a thin moon outside, and a small, slippery, healthy daughter testing herself. Calling out through the night-time house and altering the shape of it.

*

Baby, for a day or so. *Little One*. Because they'd always imagined a boy inside Miriam – a strong, patient, good-hearted boy, not a girl. So they had no girl-names, and she was just *Baby*, at first. Small, and white-skinned.

Little One. Baby Girl.

Moira, in the end.

Moira, from Mary – and she existed, then, as much as the sea did, and the clouds, and the headland, and her eyes were so black that all these things were reflected in them – grass, and sky. Miriam said she could see herself, too, sometimes. As she breastfed, or bathed me.