

AT THE HEART OF THINGS

there is no meaning. Hanging a picture on the wall
I give a little too much force to my thumb skin
breaks under pressure an orb of blood red red to
dark red to dry red to skin to iron to rust to
heat to sweat to yesterdays as we move, we move.
Tuesday. Going into the city with the rest of them sliding
down the greased pole of means become ends. Let me
tell you. I slipped and travelled against the sharp grain
of escalator, one flight of metal before I hit flat floor and
crack, to the back of my head. I cried like a child oh I oh I
said me am in pain.

I was at work by the afternoon. At home by early
evening feeling burning scratches on the backs of my
legs and the bruised curve of my head. My mind curved
bruised.

In bed, the sheets scraped and tugged me sore any
way I tried to lie. I face down, looking for a cool
place, stretched out an arm and all that was solid
dematerialized. I a nothing slipped into water. Water,
as pressure. I felt the water as pressure. I'd always
thought of pressure as a pushing down oh it was
every drop of water for miles working into me. There
was nothing to my fingers, no weight, no force on the
pads of my feet, no cold draught wafting past the hairs
of my skin, no sound, no sight. I couldn't set my watch
to nothing. I waited, couldn't scream, unaware of mouth
or lungs to do so not breathing, not dead, not alive. No
fear. Not yet. Eyes wide open into dark and no sense.
Unsayable.

The Friday, I dropped in on Uncle Padana. It was early
summer: shadows fold neatly around corners, light

warms the backs of the hands until four and cools before six. He answered the phone in a lady voice as I stood outside his consulting room, buzzed me in, He's ready for you now. He was sitting behind his desk, leaning back in his chair looking boyish, expectant, tired. A Ceropegia hung from the bookshelf and fondled the few hairs on his head. As I moved into the room he stood and for me opened his arms.

I told him about the fall, the senseless black of that night. He cupped the bowl of my head in his hands, throbbing sore into his palms.

'What painkillers you on?' he said. He speaks out of the side of his mouth – gritted teeth, broke his jaw, never set right.

'Something weak,' I said.

'Do you feel weak, sick?'

'Nothing.' I cupped my elbow rough pad, a graze dried red, and the other elbow, the same.

'A crack to the head. Confusion, no doubt.' He took away his hands.

'Confusion isn't the feeling,' I said, 'and you were there, and cousin Rhumz was there.'

'Was I kind?' Scratching a nail over the stubble above his lip.

'Kind?'

'Pleasant, agreeable.'

'You weren't there in your physicality, at least, too dark to tell.'

'No light to bounce off my face?'

'No light to see.'

'Black?'

'Deeper than black, than basalt, as deep as death. You were a presence, not yourself.'

'Well, take a light next time—'

'If there's a next time.'

'Yes, then I might know that I was kind to you.'

'You are.'

'I want to know if I am, truly.'

'You're serious?'

'Look around.'

I looked. A yellow corduroy sofa. The long list of clients whose arses had worn it down talking it out for the cure, a stack of them stretching up to the crows. To the left, a wall of books. The wooden floor, with a walking path where varnish was worn to the wood. Piles of paper. Three pairs of glasses. The room was a rectangle. That plant was the only plant. Us three the only living things in the room that I could see. The things I could not see: mice beneath the floorboards, dust mites, woodlice work their way into gaps come out at night. A bowl of oranges, living or dead, I couldn't decide. A window. Outside, a high wall, over which street life ran along as water runs downstream.

'I'm all about your night visits. You tell me, you tell me everything.'

'Okay.' I hugged him.

'Rest your head dear, lie horizontal. I worry.'

'I will.' Out of the room.

'Call your sister?' he said, as the door closed behind me.

We were eleven when our father died. Sunday morning and I reached for my phone, touched her name and let it ring, no answer, but I felt she was at the other end watching it ring. A petty satisfaction I had then I was petty, pleased because she was so petty. Our blood was separated at birth but still runs hot through both of us. There was no big feud, that would be too easy, simply, we both need the upper hand. Our father died he

died. Twenty years of hot friction have passed since then. He cooled the blood. He waved the flag to signal the end of the race. He's dead. We found no way of being without him.

That night, I took the bedside lamp, an arm outstretched from the sheets. Light in my hand to extend my gaze solid shield against darkness. My hand backlit glowing. I pointed the lamp downwards, illuminating my feet, thighs, chest, arms, all there. It was snowing. Watch it fall through the lamp beam. Then I was afraid, and the cuts on my legs did burn then. The light would only penetrate a metre in any direction, and beyond that a void contained me. Last time being there I was a nothing, now, myself and body entirely oh shone light in a circle around while the white stuff fell into darkness beneath me. Arm moving against dense water, resisting. I floating an obstacle in the snow's path. It settled into the hollows of my collarbones and attached to ragged braids of hair, but I couldn't feel it. It weighed nothing.

I wrote everything down after then: the pressure, I'm becoming accustomed; time undeterminable; snowfall, grey-white, like pieces of bleached moss; presence of Padana like hands cupping my head, Rhumz a tickle at the top of my throat and eyelids, as if singing a high note; no sighting of a living thing yet no skin and bone other than mine yet. That fear carried on in me, dread of emptiness all around and no way to go.

Some research at The Gross Library. I looked for oceanography and geology, cruised the pages of *The Silent World*, *The Deep*. I'd travelled deep, so deep, I knew that. My cousin, Rhumz, had been the librarian at The Gross for years, until she had the kids. I'd catch

her in the toilets sometimes, mouth open red glistening, brushing her tongue in the mirror. My habit of going to The Gross stayed after she left. I sat at library desk with head propped on my hand let thoughts run through into evening. Through the window, a streetlight, a fox inside the light's yellow triangle, looking up, tipping back its head, black-tipped ears folding back, dipped ink black, catching yellow falling from the streetlight. Then gone.

At home, I picked up the phone. I said, 'You were with me last night, Rhumz.'

She said, 'Ha, sweetheart. Where was I last night? (Voice quieted as she turned to bring in her husband.) I was cleaning some five-year-old-child gunk out of the U-bend, wasn't I?'

'Yeah,' he said.

'What else will they find for their fun and games? The dangers of children, the perils of living with children. It's us who need protecting, cousin, it's us who are naïve, cousin. How could I have been with you?'

I said the same thing that I'd said to Padana, though Rhumz was a different temperament, a different grain.

'Presence? Well fuck me, I've always wished I could be two places at once. But I never was there, not me. You know one of them left a little nugget of something at my front door, on the mat. They think they're all cats and dogs and little elf people. The kids think they can be anything they want. Leaving little shits over the mat. I'm a cat or a dog they say, and that works for them. Cousin, don't let them fool you, the perils of family life it's too late for me. The party's over after a point. It's all old cigar stubs from then on. How's your sister?'

After Rhumz, I called Sister again. Again, no answer. Had I finally put her off? There were only a few axes of love, hate, attention in this world to sustain me, Padana,

Rhumz, and Sister – Grindy. She was where?

I never got very close to Grindy. Voice at the end of the phone, sometimes. Voice from across the table. Face at the other side of a grave. Wet eyes returning my gaze. I'd always fancied that her back was covered in acne, warts, moles with roots deep into the heart of her.

A fantasy close to me at this point. I, small as a flea scaling her back, looking for a foothold such as a protruding mole, ingrown hair, pimple. I reach the base of her neck, she screws her head around to look at me and I fall, scream with no sound.

I poured a glass of vodka, warm, and paced. As I passed the bookcase, a spike of pain. A small shard of glass lodged in my foot, a fresh wound to join the others. I washed it out with some drink, dabbed it with a tissue and drank more and sat down one minute and the next, I was in the snow. My lamp, shining right at me, suspended about a metre in front, glass in my hand.

The snow was dead matter, faecal matter and inorganic matter. Over weeks it falls from the ocean's surface to the deepest layers. A tug at my foot. Sharp teeth, a tail, something that liked my blood. The first time feeling something here. Oh I felt the teeth sharp in me and I liked the feel. I'll say it again I liked it. The pink eel rasped at my foot, coiling itself and flexing, tugging, eyes black as the surround. I flicked my foot and it held on, my heel fresh meat to chew, so I kicked downwards, harder, and it let go. I followed it with my lamp beam as it undulated, body S-shaped light and shadow. I moved, as if running, fanning my arm out behind me downwards downwards through the snow now only the eel I had for company. And Padana and Rhumz I sensed in the dark.

The eel led me to a pool, I examined it piece by piece.

A blue lagoon encrusted at its edges with smooth, charcoal-black pebbles, a slick mist of ochre hung above it. The eel disappeared into it and never reappeared into my light. Water beneath water? Dead crabs and eels lined its edges. The black pebbles, at a closer look, were mussels, mouths open, ready to swallow me oh terrifying and so beautiful it has to be seen unsayable beyond I know. I put my feet onto its surface and felt it push back. Wisp of blood from my heel drift away. To feel my feet. I didn't have feet before they had something to stand on. A surface. Now my feet were accustomed. Unsteady though it was unsteady the surface could have swallowed me.

A red light. Legs kicked I held the lamp with one hand, plug dipping into the lagoon. I followed the red light, just like the eel moved, undulating my legs as if they were swinging ropes and I drifted forwards so slowly at first it took time. But there was so much time I'm getting used to it. Closer to the red, I pointed the lamp. Teeth transparent pincers, eyes glancing to its sides – foil dishes – as its dagger head cut through dark water. It travelled without fear, red light beneath each eye, for lighting the way? That hinged mouth. It didn't hurry away from me. I followed and forgot for how far or how long we burrowed into dark, me and this fish. A long swim through the deepest layers. Long swim through the snow into the nothing beyond sight lines overhead. And pool after pool, haze beneath my feet. Overhead there were bioluminescent pathways. And mine, my lamp beam, my red-light fish.

I followed the fish into morning. The vodka had spilled onto my lap. Head jerked back over the sofa arm, dried spit on my chin. My foot was red, dried blood, the glass cutting not so deep. But the memories of the glass,

too deep, my heart of lead.

He had been sitting here one night, though I had taken back his key. He'd been sitting here naked one night. Light on he stood, dry skin, scratched and looking sore, limp penis, which he put in my hand. Limp like a soaked cloth. It was I who'd limped him, he'd said. I held on to the penis. In part because it was warm and my hands were cold and shaking. For old times' sake then. The glass was thrown later. In the struggle. The glass was thrown to give me time to run away. To give me time to run and to find the edge. I changed the locks after a few days.

Malacosteus niger. The fish can be found in the midnight zone, with a flashing red cheek for attracting prey. Though its nature not as violent as its teeth. It was an ugly companion, leading me further than I'd have dared to go alone with just the lamp light. *Synphobranchidae*, the eel that ragged my foot for the taste of blood. The lake was filled with brine, a cold seep, salt deposits from sea after sea, leaching out from below the bed. An ochre haze of bacteria floating above it, thick cloud of cells a soup wants to be left alone undisturbed, I know I understand. I knew its surface in the sense of my feet.

Leaving the library that night, I walked down the fox's alleyway, past that lonely streetlight, fried chicken bones. Once out of its beam I waded through that pink city darkness. As I walked along dark alley black shoes dipped into tarmac. Legs swinging black. Feet kick through black. Only I could really know what I'd seen. I would speak with Uncle Padana, as he'd asked, hear his pencil burning at the other end of the line he'd go quiet, cooking up diagnoses, feebly, but in true he was

stumped. I called Sister again a few times, again nothing. Thick air between us.

I should have known that she would show up the next time. Unlike the others she was there in the flesh. Unlike me, she looked dead. Her skin yellow, as always, but pale, above us a ceiling of flashing fish cruised along, her hair in thick bulging soft braids which wafted around her face, obscuring, reappearing, and she was silent. She was dressed the same as me. She always dressed the same as me – that was something I hated about her. Hated her ability to dress. The only difference was that she was wearing shoes, Mary Janes, black front buckle. I moved closer to my sister. Her feet and hands were puckered. My face inches from hers, her eyes were open staring ahead into the lamp, brown irises illuminated. Then she blinked, slow. Mouth opened and closed, mechanical, like a young bird begging for food. The eyes moving but no fixed gaze. Her limbs and head floated, drifting with the currents. I moved to touch her, but I couldn't. My hand a weight, her puckered feet in my eyeline. I was alone. I swivelled my lamp about me, I was close to the bed. Tube worms, red-lipped, floral, spread like grass beneath me there was no room for standing.

I've seen an eel tie itself into knots, poisoned by the brine. I'd shone my light on it. Grindy's eyes had seemed empty as the eel's. She was retreated deep inside, so deep her body was just another floating debris fallen from the surface, eyes opaque as the brine pool. The eel's head had jerked back and forth – the crack of a whip. It was momentarily surrendered to a powerful terror. Body a black stone underwater. But it did survive.

After then, my travels down the tube rails seemed the stranger thing. Travelling into the city with the rest of them, sliding down the . Eye contact eyes snap

away. The city demands a certain kind of contact only. It demands suspicions. Changes the meaning of a glance or a look of love, to yourself you keep your looks only to your own chest. It begins with everybody and nobody. People flashing lights they shoes, make up, rats' tails and so on hinge-necked bulb-headed bug-eyed. We are all alike in this strangeness. But I was accustomed to the dark pressures of the water oh I'm no longer accustomed to this.

Last time. I was at the edge of a trench. At the edge, lamp in hand. Trying to see into it there was no point. Legs kick into black. I shone my lamp into the trench, but the light was swallowed. No point in the lamp light, too deep. I turned, they were all there. Everywhere I shot a beam there was Padana, Rhumz with Husband, the kids, getting on with things: moving rocks, feeding the tube worms, corralling the few fish into neat groups according to size, colour and temperament. And I was grateful, but I had to go.

I circled around them, a farewell lap, handed Uncle Padana my lamp, kicked past the brine pools and the spiked rocks and dead eels, mussels. No point in the lamplight, too deep. No point in eyes too deep. No point in explaining. No way of making sense of

'Ta-ta.'

I tossed my chin over my shoulder and waved as I went over the edge. If I could pass on something, it would be to say that at the heart at the heart at the heart of things there is no sense. Sister. I brushed the tips of my fingers on the ledge of the seabed as they waved me off.