

ALEX LESLIE

Catalogue of the Coast

1.

I know that travelling with you will be dangerous when all the wires blow down across the road on the way to Point No Point. Our first weekend away together. The wires, unravelled by the windstorm, hang from the poles. When you slow the car, I feel the pulse of dying electricity moving in the dark forest. You keep driving and I moan, staring through the window, you muttering, "That is not helping." My breath forms a solid column in the core of my body as we approach the first wire lying across the road. We cross. The texture of the road under the car's wheels plays my leg muscles like zithers. The second wire, the third. Each makes me breathe harder. The next will bring down my body, illuminate the forest like a magic lantern, show the bark down to the skin-like grain, the marks made by hungry, searching birds. We've been sleeping together for a month, but this is when I start to trust your body, when we cross the last dead wire. The rest of the drive goes by in silence. We look from the windows and see what has been left behind by the storm. Rubble of huge cracked-open trunks, pulp of moss and ferns and leaves and needles mortared together by air made solid by speed, fresh trenches in the forest floor, wet black lines in the earth as if wires or veins have been torn up from underneath. The cabin, when we reach it, is quiet and cold. Ocean stretches calm from the edges of the windows.

For the next few days we pass road crews clearing the mess away, sawing through trees that fell after we passed through. I try not to stare at the men scaling the electrical poles, standing in baskets like the crow's nests on ships, their orange-gloved hands working the wires. Was the current cut off completely before we drove through or did it continue, jagged and trying, moving like pain through an injured limb? I look down at your hand as it covers mine. Any of my friends would chalk it up to shock, but I feel that the wires allowed us to cross over. It's a secret, a current between our bodies. In the winter daylight, the menace is gone, the wires high and taut in the still air, telegraphing nothing.

2.

In the beginning, all we do is drive. The riddled coast is our hunting ground for concealed beaches, cheap motels and restaurants serving only sandwiches, fried eggs and beer-battered fish. I wait in motel parking lots while you go in to book the room, because these are tiny towns and we are two women. The rooms are all the same. Beds high and narrow as gurneys, calendar art, plumbing that gurgles and sucks like drainpipes during a rainstorm. These are our first rooms—not the small, separate spaces of our apartments, but these stripped-down cells in grey and paisley, live only with the sounds of us and footsteps of strangers on the ceilings and in the halls.

You go on these drives around the province for your reporting assignments—articles about the failing fisheries, protests against logging companies. “The usual,” you say, and briefly I am thrown by how you see all of this as a taxonomy. Then I find this reassuring, your shrewd bird’s-eye view of the world. The hours I spend watching your profile. Every few kilometres, your eye sweeps me sideways.

On the mornings I wake up in your studio apartment, I watch from bed as you fill mugs with your Bodum, pour in full cream from the half pint you keep only for coffee. This is one of the first things I notice—the attention you pay to small, intense things. Cream for your coffee, the ten-dollar half-empty spice bottles crowding the second shelf of your cupboard, the semigloss paint you’ve used in your apartment, a different colour for each wall, directions standing out like disjointed panels of a circus tent.

You don’t like to give direct invitations. My phone rings and I answer it to hear your voice saying, “Oil spill in Howe Sound, wind’s pushing it north,” or, “Whales migrating in the Broken Group Islands.”

Trees flicker by like a film reel in grey and green, and the highway sweeps under the wheels until it is a faint line of colour like no other colour, a faint vein on the underside of the sky’s skin, and we drive farther and farther away.

3.

It rains through the first three days we spend driving the road between Tofino and Ucluelet, drinking coffee thick as paint in cafés warm as nests, walking in and out of shops to finger sea glass necklaces and dry our hair, wondering where all the people went and when we’ll see some whales, as if they will swim onto the sidewalk in front of us out of the dark blue air. On the fourth day, the rain becomes snow and we set off down the highway toward home.

Evening and the thickening snow makes the world a dark glowing white where our headlights touch road and teeming grey where they touch air. The snowy road balanced against the side of the dark mountain, the ultrasound image of a bone inside an arm.

I say we should stop but you're the one driving.

"Why stop?" you say after a few minutes of silence. "It's getting worse and if we stop we'll be in the worse part, right?"

"Snow falls in the same thickness everywhere," I say. "It doesn't matter where we stop."

"This is not the time for Zen koans," you say.

You drive slowly—our wheels flattening crisp snow—and I jump out every few minutes to clear off the wipers. Snow has suddenly made the world featureless, intimidating as a burned face incapable of forming expression.

"Stop, I think we should stop," I repeat until you agree.

You can't pull over because the road's edges aren't distinguishable from the creeks, mountainsides, drop-offs—there are only the suggestions of curves that could be snow-shadows and moonlight. Where are the edges? Where can we find softness, rest? We crawl into the back seat, the snow encasing the car, the thickening cocoon drugging us. We make love, our deep heat mixing with the cold, and I know that you could break my heart open like the wind.

"I got it used anyway," you whisper, your body balanced above mine.

"What?"

"The car."

"Oh."

"What did you think I meant?" you say and laughter makes your body hard to hold, a loose bundle of rope I'm trying to gather and keep in my arms. You always laugh at my misunderstandings like a child, mercilessly, then rub my shoulders to coax me back. "Oh sa-a-ad lady," you say. I've worked out of my apartment since quitting my last job at a documentary festival—an indifferent mix of tech and grant writing that I tell myself is transitional, though it has become lazily long-term—and it's been easy to enter your mad routine of travel. You spend half the week roaming this part of the coast like an indigenous seabird, the other half locked in your studio apartment and following a migration route of coffee shops with your laptop, typing out articles. Time not spent with you has been spent working, mechanical afternoons wasted without you.

A heavy wind starts up and plays the car like a tin drum. When you fall asleep, an hour before I do, your arms straighten and go limp. You roll away from me against the back of the seat. The air from your mouth comes out in cold white clouds and I press my palms against your cheeks to warm your skin.

The face in our window the next morning is a woman's, a road crew worker made cartoonish by the orange vest pulled over her Gore-Tex jacket. Her silver and black badge screams Emergency. Her face reddened more by cold or embarrassment? The clothes and jackets we heaped sleepily on top of our bodies last night hide almost everything. There's nothing

to do but wave, weakly, a hand to the cold glass. Her footsteps crunch in the icy crust along the side of the car and up the road.

In the road crew's truck, we drink coffee from their thermoses and listen to their stories about the snowstorm. Worst in near thirty years. Four big slides between here and Ucluelet. Old road so. Hell of a place for a storm, a peninsula, people getting trapped in like guys in a mine. We were damn lucky we kept driving. A man and his son got caught under a slide ten k's back and the boy didn't pull through.

A sick tilt in my stomach. Dying in a snowslide would be worse than drowning, I think. No possibility even for a small struggle. Suffocation and cold combined for a mute finish. Were we making love when the boy died? Or had we still been driving? I push these questions away.

You are asking the appropriate things—do they have food for us, can we ride out in their truck, can they jump-start our car? The battery drained keeping up heat all night.

One of the men from the road crew offers to help, says, "Always happy to lend a hand to a damsel in distress." I watch you enjoy playing along, getting all your lines exactly right.

"Thank you," you repeat and he nods and nods. "Thank you." He can't get the car started. "Are the pipes frozen? Like in a house?" you say. He laughs and shakes his head, which makes him try harder, longer. I catch your elbow and you shake it off. If he catches on, I know, he'll turn on us with anger equal to his chivalry.

"Don't," I hiss in your ear. You shake me off again, grinning.

The worker who saw us through the car window, bodies tangled under yesterday's clothing, speaks into her hand-held radio in the cut-out shadow of her truck, eyes narrowed against the cold.

The crew calls our motel hours later to say that your car still won't start. They pushed it to the side of the road for it to be towed out.

I lie on the bed, my body aching, cold with the feeling of danger that didn't play itself out. Your body bright against the window. Your body last night in the car, all the snowlight reflecting through the window, the lit ice of your skin. You look down at the parking lot, frowning. Before lying down beside me, you take the Gideon Bible off the bedside table and toss it into the mini fridge.

"What're you thinking about? Lying here glowering," you say, your arms spread out around you. One of your teeth yellow because half the time you're too lazy to brush, the tooth like an unusual stone you keep hidden in your mouth. When you first started staying over at my apartment, I bought a toothbrush for you at London Drugs, knowing you would never bring your own. I already knew the details you couldn't see, the routines obvious to other people that you glided around. It made me want to fill in all the invisible things for you. When I gave you the toothbrush, you thanked me and hugged me, placed it in the cup beside my sink, and never used it once.

"It isn't such a disaster," you're saying. You wedge a hand between my back and the quilt. "They're towing the car back. I have insurance." You stretch your other arm across my stomach.

"It isn't funny," I say, turning toward the wall.

You kick gently at my ankles, the length of your body edging closer, warmer.

"What isn't funny?" you say.

"Doom," I say.

You begin to laugh. After a few seconds, I join in. Guiltily at first, then with loose gasps that lurch harsh and relieved from my stomach. Your laughter comes out in tall, sharp waves like reckless shouts.

"Maybe we should stop doing this so much," I say.

"Doing what?"

"Driving."

"It's what we do best," you say.

What is it I feel near you? The sight of wires slicing the road, the stunned nerves in the backs of my hands as we crossed over. When we take the ferry to Vancouver Island, I go out onto the deck, regardless of the weather. Active Pass slips its dark form around me. Glass houses levitating from the rock are lanterns on night sailings, marking the route for the ferry. The occasional eye-blink of a lighthouse. Air thrown up by the ocean rushes down the deck and makes my stomach its windsock. Ocean noise.

I don't even own a car. Too expensive, I've always thought. When I first told you that, you snapped back, "You can only know this part of the coast if you own a car."

You tighten a hand around my shoulder and I weaken, roll over. The hotel room has grown uncomfortably hot.

"You want to give up that easily?" you say.

4.

A day's frantic travel to get from your apartment in downtown Vancouver to Desolation Sound, the last stop on the highway up the Sunshine Coast. It always stuns me that remote twists of mist and rock are so close to the city's packed-in smoke. You honk your car horn over and over in the new morning dimness and I see your headlights over the edge of my windowsill as I pull on my shoes, stumble for the door. Two short ferry trips. Hours of road. Chasing the smooth line of highway into the dark v of trees, giant Douglas firs arrowing the sky's highway neck. The town here, Lund, was originally a trading post between settlers and Aboriginal people, you say as the road turns, slopes sharply into the dark elbow of water, the old hotel dominating. You're here to interview marine biologists about the ocean reserve. Toxicity in the water is on the rise. Whole forests are being poisoned beneath the surface, you tell me. The back seat is covered with your research. Your laptop slides back and forth across the overlapping papers like a smooth flat stone. While you do your interviews I walk in and

out of tiny shops, browse the coastal kitsch. Candles studded with small shells; framed photographs of amber western light weakening in folds of sand, stone, a heron out there on the horizon, one leg like a pylon holding the sky and ocean apart; lumpy mugs stencilled with starfish; sea glass pendants swinging from black silk cords. I buy a piece of this place to carry around on my neck, buy you one that matches. I sit on a bench overlooking the harbour. A half-sunken houseboat out there, its roof sticking up above the surface of Desolation Sound like a cocked hat. The air beginning to darken, the slackening ocean casting silver stripes at the blind regions among the clouds. I watch a small boy hurl hunks of bread at a seagull and wonder how I got here, to this remote end of highway, how I lost the need to will my own life. A tin can rattling, small tin rabbit jumping, tied to your bumper. You find me sitting on the bench after dark, waiting for you. You smell like the people you've been interviewing, faint brine of strangers. Another hotel room. Your body on the sheet like paint thrown against a wall that has dripped accidentally into the shape of a woman.

5.

There's a direct ferry to Saltspring Island from Tsawassen, the terminal near Vancouver, but I misread the BC Ferries schedule in your glove compartment and we end up on the ferry that stops at every gulf island.

"The fucking whistle-stop ferry," you say, your body turned like a hook in one of the seats behind the huge window at the prow. Bag of White Spot from the ferry cafeteria steaming in your lap. The sailing is three and a half hours instead of one and a half. Gabriola. Galiano. Pender. Saturna. At every island, the ferry pushes slowly into the tiny berth, opens its maw, and spills the islanders out, the first row of car hoods like shining teeth.

"Sorry," I repeat, and you stare wordlessly into your reflection in the window. "Are you going to stop taking me with you?"—as soon as the words come out, I feel my face heat up. I see your smile shimmering on the dark glass. "It's not funny," I say.

"What's not funny?" you say.

I open my bag of food. You refused to eat in the ferry cafeteria, said only, "The sound of screaming children ruins even the best real estate," turned and walked away, leaving me to order the food and find you afterward in the best seats at the prow, watching the ocean.

I feel you watching me as I tear off chunks of chicken fingers, chew the battered greasy meat, add french fries and Pepsi from my sweating cup. "Nothing," I say.

"You eat like a little kid," you say.

"Why can't you leave me alone."

"Oh sa-a-ad lady," you coax, rubbing my shoulders. When I give in and lean toward you, you stretch an arm around me and mutter, "It doesn't matter about the direct sailing. This is a great way to get in some people watching."

A toddler hurtles by in a Spider-Man costume. An adult's beckoning yell from the back row, like a heckler in a movie theatre, the sound forceful and pointless. The tiny superhero tries a pirouette, enjoying the red and blue smudge of himself in the window. Outside, seagulls play in the air pocket made by the ferry. Fling upward, plummet.

"I'm never having guppies," you say, watching the toddler fall and fall. A few silent minutes pass before you add, "Amanda wants to have more guppies." The word *more* just a garroted bark. Amanda's your older sister. Straight, married to a lawyer, a businesswoman with two degrees in engineering—something to do with geothermal technology—and three boys. These were the coordinates you offered after we ran into her at a movie. You introduced me as your travelling companion and Amanda smiled at me with watchful curiosity. She wore copper jewellery and carried a Puma shoulder bag. You're the middle child. A younger brother who teaches overseas.

"What does Amanda think of us?" I say.

You shrug. "She said you seemed great."

"Do you get along?"

"Most of the time. We don't talk that often. I'm probably kind of a satellite sibling to her helicopter parent," you say and laugh loudly at your own joke.

"Satellite," I say, the word pressing into me like a new bruise.

"Amanda described me once as picking up my bag and getting lost on the coast," you say. "I liked that."

I feel something inside me tear slowly away from itself. You are nothing I can keep.

A ferry worker comes around and begins pulling the black covers over the windows.

"When I was a kid," you say, "I thought they put those covers up to hide horrible storms happening outside. I thought that all the way through 'til I was a teenager. Then my dad told me it's for navigation, so all the light from inside doesn't go out, fool other boats."

You've mentioned having relatives on the north part of Vancouver Island—called simply "The Island" by natives of this part of the coast.

"You went over to the island a lot when you were a kid?" I say.

"My dad worked over there a lot, so sometimes I'd just go for the ride."

"Where'd he work?"

"Prisons. Planned them. So he travelled around a lot. For the government."

"Really? Did you go inside?"

Over the months we've travelled together—over eight months, I count quietly in my mind—this is the most you've told me about your childhood. I know that your mother died when you were a toddler and that your father has never remarried. Once, when I asked what you were like as a kid, you answered, frowning, "I think I was born as a little old man."

"No, he never took me inside," you say. "I just liked going for the trip. I liked the ferry. I stayed in the car in the parking lot. This one prison, near Nanaimo, was my favourite because I'd sit and pick blackberries through the window and eat them until he came back."

"Did you ever see any of the prisoners?"

"Only once."

"Once?"

"I'll tell you some other time."

The seats have gone quiet, the superhero asleep on the carpet in a corner. You pull a folded map of Saltspring out of your pocket and point to the part of the island where we'll be staying. You trace a nearby faint blue line with your finger. "You see that road? Scared the hell out of me once. The end of it just goes right out onto these shelves of rock. You're not careful you could drive right into the ocean."

6.

Your editor gives you an assignment that requires travelling to the northern part of the province. You'll be travelling for all of May and June.

You tell me this sitting at the scratched-up walnut table pushed up under the large window in your apartment. You found the table on the side of the road in West Vancouver, on a sloped street of cedar and glass houses shone through with the Pacific. You got the table into the back of your car, tilting and pivoting it on one leg after the other, alternating directions until you could flip it and slide it in. What had you done for a table before? I wanted to know—I was picturing you wrestling the heavy table down the road, the neighbours carefully navigating around you in their hushed Porsches. "I don't know," you said. "I never really needed a table before. I never thought about it." It frightened me, in the beginning, how much you didn't notice, didn't know was necessary.

You've always wanted to go on the ferry up the Inside Passage, you say—the route that begins near Port Hardy at the northern end of Vancouver Island, passes among the islands and inlets of the coast, an eighteen-hour sailing north that docks in Prince Rupert. Then the seven-hour ferry across Hecate Strait to the Queen Charlotte Islands.

You're unfolding a map that covers the table. A large compass kilometres in diameter floats out in the middle of the ocean. "This whole part of the coast I don't know at all," you say, smoothing the map gently with your palm. Two side-by-side islands like twisted crabs: Dolphin Island, Spicer Island. Fine lines etch the depths of the ocean. A much larger island, shaped like a fetus: Porcher Island.

Your voice, as you say these names, sways toward tenderness. An obsessive love. I recognize this voice from your articles that I look for every day in the newspaper. I know that sometimes you don't take me with you on trips. You confessed to me last month that you've been offered the job of section editor several times. But you need to keep moving, need

the long pulls of stories, the possibility of a landscape of immediate things.

"You gotta be somewhere?" you say, watching me get up from my chair.

"Yeah, work."

"You work from home," you say.

For a moment I'm surprised that you know this about me. How much do you know about my days? For months I've skipped most messages from my friends. A friend, Jessica, who I've been close to since undergrad, left a message last week saying only, in a distant, clipped voice: "Um, call me sometime." When the message played, I was getting ready to leave to meet you for a late-night coffee; I forgot to call her back.

"I have to go," I say, struggling with the strap of my bag that has suddenly come alive and twists out from under the grip of my fingers again and again. "I don't know what we're doing with this. I don't know what we're doing."

You stand and watch me quietly.

"I was going to ask you to come," you say.

For once you don't make fun of me. This is how you give hugs: you put your arms out on either side and I lean into you like a tree.

Travellers stand in the rain talking about the ferry going up the coast. The ferry will be three days late, the tired women in the office just told all of us. BC Ferries will pay for the necessary nights of accommodation. We're trapped here, in this outpost on the northern end of Vancouver Island, until then.

"It's the way with BC Ferries, since they went corporate," says a man from Comox, his wife in matching cherry red Gore-Tex nodding hard.

A German man whose plan was to catch a second boat to Alaska in Prince Rupert and then fly home to Frankfurt from Whitehorse stands on the dark pavement, looking lost. "What will I do now?" he says.

You shrug. "It's the way things go on this part of the coast, you know?" you say—something you've said to me too many times to count. The German regards you, eyebrows falling over his hard eyes. I see you for a moment through his devastating point of view. A small, compact woman with an ease of speech too easily mistaken for arrogance.

"That is unhelpful," he says. His English is poor and formal. "I am right to have trust in the schedules."

"Why don't you just drive back to Victoria and get on a plane, then?" you say. You have no respect for rigid people, I know, and as we drive away to search for a motel not overrun by truckers or tree planters, you mimic the shrill exchange we've just left. The human exchange of news that you hear as poetry for dummies, an inane recitation among strangers, a children's book chant.

The ferry is late.

The ferry is still very late.

Did you see the black bear on the road?

It was a big black bear?

Yes!

How big?

Really big.

Which road was the big black bear on?

On the road.

On which road?

Which road?

On the road to town.

Where was the big black bear on the road?

On the middle of the road.

The big black bear was on the middle of the road on the way to town?

Yes!

The ferry is late.

The ferry is still very late.

It is at times like these that I think I see you most clearly, the way I saw you at first when we met, balanced always above all the others.

We drive through the scrappy north island towns—Chevron, Overwaitea, one government-issue high-gloss totem pole for every RCMP station. The Cold Beer and Wine Store attached to the Family Restaurant attached to the eighteen-wheelers' motel of choice. We don't need to tell each other that the motels where men sit outside their rented room doors in dirty work pants eating burgers out of paper bags, bottles of liquor tipsy on the pockmarked concrete beside their boots would not be safe for us.

Finally, you pull up to a hotel painted in white and forest green, a statue of a black bear standing upright on either side of the office door. "Looks white bread enough," you say. "This must be where the BC Hydro guys stay."

Another hotel room. How many hotel rooms have I shared with you? These plain, anonymous spaces that float free of home and routine. Two months of this, driving together.

You set up your laptop on the table while I cook rice from the large bag in the trunk of your car and chicken thighs we picked up at Overwaitea. When we travelled together before, the trips never more than two or three days long, we got by on cheap restaurant food and gas station sandwiches. This is the first time we've shopped together, selected food, planned meals beforehand. The hard rhythm of your typing and the spitting of the chicken skin crisping in the pan. The low hum of your writing fills the room.

The ferry waits in the dark morning light, sleeps in the water in the rocky cove like a huge white whale. We stand on the deck and watch the island leave us, drift free and move northward.

The coast slides past the windows, dawn to night, dark to next dark, all the way north. Whale backs sink dark ink into polished water. The

setting sun sears the water gold two hours before we meet earth in Prince Rupert, bump off the ramp into darkness.

Then across Hecate Strait. The night ferry. Seven hours across the night's flat open back. We climb the narrow metal stairs from the vehicle deck, unroll our sleeping bags between two rows of seats, then sit leaning against each other to watch the mainland slip away. Islanders returning home from the mainland congregate around the doors. Most Haida, some white. Women pull out decks of cards and start games of gin rummy. A young father coaxes his daughter into her pyjamas, asks her to pick a story to read before sleep. They crawl together to sit in the Coke machine's gentle lantern glow and she opens the book slowly. Passengers settle down for sleep among the seats. The quiet slip-slip of the group of women dealing and throwing down cards, occasional soft groans of dreaming, the low machine thoughts of the ferry making its way out to open water. The tall orange lights of the port sail past like dark stars. Three silvery teenage boys share a laptop screen in the far corner. From their strained faces, I know it's porn they're watching. Their parents peacefully asleep at their toes.

"Ready for sleep?" you whisper.

I hear the teenage boys snickering behind their laptop across the tops of the seats when you slip out of your sleeping bag and unzip mine.

"What if someone wakes up?" I hiss back.

"Are you kidding? This thing is the boat of the living dead," you respond, moving your hands around my hips, and I wonder how many people have made love on this sailing, the quiet of the night water and sounds of sleeping humans spreading around, the calmly advancing ferry a small secure shuttle between worlds.

The Queen Charlotte Islands—"Haida Gwaii," you correct me—rise out of the Pacific in long sloping fingers of green and black. Their landscape untouched by the ice age, you tell me. An ancient geography. You love to point out the signs reading Tsunami Evacuation Route, laughing. "If there's a tsunami and we're in a car, we'd better hope it floats," you say. "That's the only evacuation route. Away from the bottom of the ocean."

"Don't be morbid," I say.

"It's not morbid, it's true. It's the only romantic myth about living on the coast worth believing. If there's an earthquake or a tsunami, we're all gone. Nothing left. Might as well see it that way. Look it in the eye."

"Nobody can live that way," I say, and you don't answer.

The next day, flipping through the guest sign-out book in the small cabin we're renting, you let out a yell, then pull the book off the table, laughing. "Look, look."

I read the entry beside your finger, written to the cabin's owners:

Dear Jackson and Lorna,

Thank you for your wonderful hospitality and warm welcome. We really appreciated your help when the ocean took our car at North Beach.

*Sincerely,
Ellen and Cam O'Brien*

It's a common thing that happens to tourists, we learn the next morning from the woman, Krystal, who sells us our morning coffees and fried egg and bacon sandwiches in the gas station twenty minutes from our cabin. Men in working clothes sit on stools around the counter, their plates crowding up against the cash register and jars of chocolate mint patties and beef jerky. Krystal presides, her body like a wedding cake on toothpicks. Two brown front teeth, a seductive sea lion smile.

"People drive their cars right out onto the sand on North Beach, you know, thinking it's all fun and all. Then they leave their cars for a bit and go for a walk up the beach. Well, it's a real long beach, you know. Long walk, hour and more, out to Rose Spit, and that's where they all want to go, all the tourists, so they can stand out there and feel all at the edge of the world with water all around them. Like it's their romantic moment, like that part in the *Titanic* movie or whatever. And they come back and their car's gone. First they think some teenager's stolen it. But then they see there aren't no wheel marks. And then they start thinking. It's the ocean. It comes up any time and takes what it wants." She breaks down into lung-burst laughter and fills our coffees back up for free.

Two men at the end of the counter count their crippled fingers, exchange news about workers' compensation. "Got money for this one, not for this one, got more for this one."

"I could interview them," you tell me under your breath. "They probably used to work on the fishing boats. When there were still fish." I've become accustomed to the alertness of your journalist eye. You can talk to any stranger, manoeuvre their sentences toward the information you want. When we first met I could tell when you were nervous with me by the shift in your voice toward an interview tone—"Stop interviewing me," I'd say savagely, the only way I could startle you into silence. "This isn't an interview. I am the person you're talking to."

You drive the road to North Beach—the northernmost end of Haida Gwaii—with crazed anticipation. A long dirt road through forest cloaked in moss, all angles erased by dark green light. This part of the island has been ceded to the Haida, you say, but it was probably logged before that. Hard to believe, I think, staring into the world under the rain forest's canopy, curtains and hollows.

North Beach spreads away, flat and bright, vanishing off to the right into distance, curving beyond the eye's reach to Rose Spit, a sand peninsula fading off into the Pacific, pointing the way to Alaska. Turning

around, I see the hill we've just passed, a dark rough thumb of volcanic rock. "This is where the Haida say everything started, you know," you say, walking quickly ahead of me across the sand. "This is where raven found humans in a clam shell. This is it." We walk for twenty minutes along the water and Rose Spit seems no closer, the white sand spreading sun-smoothed around us, distanceless. A family has parked their red truck up near the bank of logs washed in by the ocean. Their barbecue releases a fine column of smoke, backlit by the sun. "Hope they don't get swept away," you say, taking my hand.

At the end of Rose Spit, there is only ocean around us, a tiny scrap of sand we stand on above the water. The island's long mist ghost clings at our backs.

This is where you begin to tell me the story about the astronaut. You were eight years old, eating blackberries in a parking lot, waiting for your father. You're the only one who saw him.

When we walk back along the beach, the family and the red truck are gone. "Guess they got swept away," you say. I stare at the place where they were, the sun-bleached logs, the heaped leg bones of dinosaurs. I force myself to believe that something as heavy as a pick-up could be removed so simply, instantly. Slid off under the ocean's dark blue sweep like a pill under a tongue. Wouldn't humans on the beach hear the tide changing its thoughts, thundering in? Thousands of tons of water turning on a dime. Gravity's leg swinging inward. We walk toward the forest. I hear only the regular beat of the water on the sand, the nearing trees rubbing their large soft bodies against each other, wind-turned seabird wails.

You find the tire prints where they turned the pick-up around. Their turning circle like a lopsided sundial in the sand, all the indentations full of shadow in strong contrast to the beach's smooth bright wash. I kneel and press my fingers into the prints, turn my head toward the ocean's endless span. The air at eye level fills with water and drains into a brightness that gives hard skin to every living thing.

7.

On the crossing back to the mainland, the ferry pitches across Hecate Strait like a tin can in a gutter, and we both give up the warm waters of our insides.

The passenger seat takes on the shape of my body. The curves in the road take on the shape of our conversations. I watch your eyes in the rear-view mirror. You take calls from your editor and from William on your cell. Otherwise it's just us. You drive us across the top of the province, stopping in every small town.

We keep a running list of things we notice and love. The dozens of eagles like sentries on the electrical poles and wires by the towers of crab traps in Prince Rupert. The latkes on the breakfast menu at the motel restaurant in Terrace.

I've sublet my apartment to a friend who's in grad school and was grateful for the space for a couple of months at less than full rent to finish her thesis. When I think of returning to my apartment, empty and full of all the things I'll carry back from this trip, I'm stunned by my anticipation of loss, a cold already widening inside me. I didn't know what it meant to fall in love before I met you. Mornings are something slack and light. Then, again, we throw our two bags of clothes onto your papers always covering the back seat, the messy shuffle of your notes, handwriting like sandpiper footprints, the scratch-hop of your thoughts following each from the other.

I dream that you're driving your car on the ocean floor, taking long lazy turns among the curious whales, jagged bases of reefs, your face lit up inside the car's glass-lantern shell, the purple sides mirrors for fish. I am somewhere in the water, watching you, my pickled eyes watching, jealous and terrified, as you drive through darker and darker layers of water until you're gone entirely.

You guard your notebook like a gate, but leave your papers lying loosely everywhere. I didn't know you kept a notebook before this trip—it was one of the things that could fall into the spaces between hours we spent together. There are strong limits to your sharing, I know. I look for too much in everything you do.

In Prince George, the last city before we set off down the highway toward the lower mainland and Vancouver, the end of our trip, I wait for you to sleep, then take my arms away from your body and find your notebook under your sweaters in your bag.

I've been expecting bad or elliptical poetry; or journal entries full of your usual long cryptic descriptions of people and things; or transcriptions of the conversations you eavesdrop on in coffee shops and restaurants. What I find makes my hands grow warm in the darkness, kneeling on the floor on the thin carpet. Descriptions of all of our trips together; a list of junk food we've bought at gas stations; a list of ferry sailings we've taken and missed, waited for in dark parking lots, people walking their desperate dogs between the rows of cars; a list of the places I've gone with you, and a parallel list of the places you've gone alone. I shut the notebook without finishing and push it back to the bottom of your bag, return to find you still sleeping in the bed.

On the last day of the trip we hit gridlock all the way through the valley on the way into Vancouver. We sit in traffic, inching forward. The wild speed of the trip leaves our bodies. You leave the radio on through all of these hours. We don't talk. When you drop me off at the curb outside my apartment, you get out to help me with my bag, automatically heave yours onto the curb too. I help you throw it back in and watch you drive away.

8.

After the trip north, the way we make love changes. Your hands slip rapid fire around my body. You're searching for something, trying to find something in the deep pockets where you think I keep things hidden. I know the soft interlockings of your muscles and bones, know the chart of your body better than any ultrasound, my palms picking up the throbs and weakening pulses. Some nights you wrap your right leg around my left leg like a bandage and do not speak. "You should never leave me," you say. The words send a charge looping through my chest. An electric eel set loose inside me, touching every edge with its dark hot tongue.

Something about us has become more tangible to others, I can tell—we're now often asked how we met. I let you improvise, watching how you weave in parts of real stories, enjoying your inventions.

We were stranded on the same highway during a snowstorm, your battery had died, and you came to my car for heat. "Heat," you repeat hoarsely, and your audience laughs. We met during a windstorm. Electrical wires had been blown down across the road and neither of us, in our separate cars, had wanted to drive over the possibly live wires, and that was how we met, sketched into a small space by the invisible, powerful current. We met on the night ferry somewhere in the middle of Hecate Strait. We had sex in the light from the Coke machine.

"So romantic," people say, some knowing enough to doubt you.

"Hard to believe but true," you say.

You've parked below on the street in front of my building and honked and honked and woken up the neighbours early in the morning too many times to count. This time you sit quietly in the front seat and light a rare cigarette. You only smoke when you're nervous. I watch you from my kitchen window, half expecting you to change your mind and drive away. I watch you smoke the cigarette down to its end, throw it out the window into a puddle, light another, and get out of your car, flip the car door shut behind you, head toward the front door to come upstairs and help me carry down the boxes full of all my things to drive to your apartment.

9.

When you were eight years old, you sat in a car with your father and he drove to a gravel parking lot outside a prison on Vancouver Island. You passed a sign that said CORRECTIONAL FACILITY and the name of the prison. You asked your father what language the name was in and he shrugged and said, "I think it's from a First Nations word or something." He stopped the car in the bank of dark shade at the far end of the parking lot under a tangled overhang of blackberry bushes and rolled your window halfway down, the three other windows all the way up. "I'll just be

a few minutes," he said. "Want me to leave the radio on?" He knew you always wanted the radio on. You still do. You've told me that it's a force of habit from spending so much time driving—your need to have the sound of another voice in the car. "Before you," you add carefully. You have detailed judgments of the impulsive jokes and grasping segues of all the local DJs, as if they're people you've known long enough to criticize within earshot, cut mid-speech with one of your perfect interruptions.

It was hot in the car. Sunlight flared up along the edges of the shade. Your dad had left the radio on an AM station that played oldies. You knew the lyrics to every song for the first twenty minutes. You watched the clock. Knowing the words that sounded out of empty space made you feel masterful. You still know all the lyrics to those songs, haven't forgotten any of your childhood knowledge.

After a while, bored, you got up on your knees and stuck your head out the window. The wide eye of the windshield wasn't enough. You needed to see for yourself. Turned your neck around all the way, like you'd seen in *The Exorcist*. Looked at the sky.

The song playing was "Going to the Chapel." *And we're gon-na get mar-ar-ar-ied.* You sang the words loudly across the wide gravel lot. *Go-ing to the chap-el of love!*

The blackberry bush showed you columns of dark fruit when you grasped a branch and dragged it downward. Pebbles of flavour, a tight cluster like insect eyes. You relished this gross thought. The blackberries were warm when you picked them. You were surprised by their small, steady heat in the centre of your hand. You opened the door of the glove compartment and began loading the berries.

You stood on the seat and braced your belly on the edge of the window, looted branches deeper and higher. You don't remember the music that played during this part. Had it been half an hour since he'd left? More?

The glove compartment was half full and you already imagined giving the blackberries to the relatives up-island, saying something casual and impressive like "Thought these might come in handy for a dessert." You felt like a provider. Your thin body, hard and straight, before puberty when you put on the weight that made you shy away from strangers until you came out during undergrad. Your wrists scratched up with the delicate razors of thorns.

When the alarm blared from the prison, you thought for a second it was the radio. A short-circuiting of all the signals, a single overbearing voice from the world.

You let go of branches and fell downward.

One cheek rubbed hard against the gravel. Smashed purple fruit leaking from your fist, stained like a vein down your arm. You lay stunned at the bottom of the shade.

You heard your father yell your name.

Where are you where are you? He could not see you.

You turned your face, not knowing half of it was covered in blood, and saw with one eye the man in the orange suit standing deep in the blackberry bushes.

This is the only story you have never told anyone else, you tell me.

The man in orange was mostly hidden by the branches. Colour flared off him and he stepped back into the shadow. You smiled at him.

You thought he was an astronaut. The alarm was to tell everyone that his rocket had crashed.

You said hello to the man in the orange suit. He held up one hand, then held one finger against his lips. You nodded. He was a secret astronaut. You understood that. You wanted him to trust you. He stood there, looking at you, just standing there. You thought he seemed kind of awkward. Maybe just shy. A new planet would be hard.

Your cheek burned. You put your hand on it and it came off stamped red. It hurt less than all that blood made it look.

The alarm coming from the prison screamed and screamed. You noticed that his suit wasn't puffy at all, like an astronaut's should be. It hung limply from the frame of his body. He was thin, from all that time eating canned food and bread in outer space.

The man mouthed to you: *Are you okay?*

You mouthed back: *I'll be fine.*

Your father was yelling your name from somewhere. His voice was different than you had ever heard it. And you heard heavy shoes slamming on gravel. Men's feet running. You stood up and went around the front of the car.

The alarm stopped, the world fell into silence.

You wondered why your father seemed so scared.

He yelled, "What happened? Where were you?"

You said, "I fell out the window."

There were a bunch of men behind him in blue uniforms with gold badges. Three of them held guns. They'd all come out of the prison, you guessed.

No one asks you if you've seen anything. Prisoners always run in the opposite direction, away from the parking lot and the highway. Everyone runs into the forest.

It was years before you thought of that, though—it was years before any of the details began to present themselves to you. You were twelve or thirteen by then. The astronaut was faint and strong, a pulse of orange light in your memory, a message in the radio stream from the rest of the universe. Sometimes you told yourself that you'd invented him, to make yourself forget. Whenever your father went away for a few days to visit a prison, you said goodbye to him coldly, sending him into strangeness. For years after you saw the prisoner in the bushes, you thought of your father's trips as voyages to other planets. Slaves in orange suits walked these worlds.

Your father carried you into the prison to be cleaned up. He hadn't carried you in years and you were surprised by how easily he lifted you

from the ground. In a brightly lit room where a few men lay on beds, a nurse had you sit on a table and she gently cleaned your cheek. In the hallway, you stopped at a small window and looked into a room full of tables where men in orange uniforms worked silently, and then your father pulled you away. In the car, he looked at the motherlode of blackberries, your gleaming dark pile of treasure, closed the glove compartment hard. Said, "Okay to go?" You drove for hours down the highway that stretched along the spine of the island, wordless. After a while, dark juice began to leak out around the bottom edge of the glove compartment door, drip bright spots of warm colour onto your knees.

In that parking lot, you were changed. I know that and I know that's why you told me this story. I prod but you won't say what the story means to you. When I try to ask, you frown and repeat parts of it as your answer. "I don't know . . . The prisoner asked if I was okay," you say, or "I guess . . . I fell out of the window and I didn't think I would see anyone in the bushes," and you stop and look away, sorting events in your mind, or thinking nothing at all, only remembering.

I wonder if you want me to remember this story with you, or tell you what it did to you, if that's why you told me. Would I only make it mine and not yours? There is only a darkness here, something that isn't mine to keep, and I put my body around its walls with you inside it. I'm the only other one who knows, and I'm still learning how to tell this story.

10.

We're drinking orange pekoe and sharing a plate of chicken fingers in the ferry cafeteria when we feel the boat start to go down. On the deck—darkness, BC Ferries staff calm-faced and loud-voiced as soldiers in their navy uniforms, the ocean keening under the bright lights. The ocean, suddenly all there, everywhere, a live thing waiting for us to enter it. Active Pass around us, Vancouver less than an hour away. One of your hands grasps one of my thighs. One of my hands finds one of your shoulders. Night becomes electric. Where is the water?

"Into the boats, folks, into the boats," voices recite in the darkness. The opening line of a psalm caught on repeat. For months I will wake at night beside you in the darkness, hearing voices ordering, "Into the boats, into the boats."

Already the throaty noise of helicopters caught somewhere above the clouds. Past the light shining down where it smashes on the water and is hurled back up. A man between us and one of the boats overflowing with kids in rubber and fleece, primary colours and open eyes and mouths, is asking a ferry worker about his car. The ferry worker says softly that the doors to the lower decks have been sealed and would you please get into the emergency craft with your family, sir. The man climbs over the white edge and falls onto the shoulders of his children.

My body is something separate and wild, a flag I have been handed to wave in the wind. Where are you? Coaxing, wrestling me into one of the boats. One hand for each side of my lower back, your fingers make hard braces for my muscles that run downward like water. As the boat goes down, I look up across the ferry's broad side. Pale spots—skin, faces, then the faces move across a width of darkness into the last boat. The ferry's side angles off, polished slickly by the moon, like a butcher knife stuck crookedly into the sky. The boats motor fast away from the dying mountain of it. The ferry begins to slip under, a great sound like tired-out thunder.

The dogs. We hear them barking, barking. Are the cars on the lower deck already surrounded by water? Your face slips between the searchlights slashing valleys in the water, bounces like a rubber ball, and I put my hands out to hold it still.

The dogs. Yells, silence, the whole ocean moving out there like a black planet, the tiny boat darting and sliding. You take chicken fingers out of your pocket and we bite into the soft greasy meat, hunching under the whiplash wind. You slide to the bottom of the boat and I lean between your chest and legs. I squat there, lean slightly into you. This is the first time I've thought of you as something fragile, as anything but tightly coiled and firm. Your arms a brittle hoop around me—if I move, I could snap your elbows. Your body a small house to crouch inside. I settle down, frozen.

"I love you," you whisper. I press the back of my head against your open mouth, feel the heat of your breath in my hair.

That something so large and unassuming, the commuter calm of a ferry, could fall, your body left sinking into cold water, holding onto other cooling bodies, colours escaping like fading siren sound.

Screams.

"People are still on there?" I hiss, not wanting the children to hear me. But everybody on the ocean can hear the screams.

"No. Horses," a man's voice says from the other side of the boat. He's travelling alone. I notice his black leather pants that shine like the water. "Trailers of horses with the trucks. Heading over to a race on the mainland."

A horse's kicking legs would be uncontrollable underwater. Great slashing things, lashing free all the junk of the world.

Our chests buckle together. Freezing spray comes over the edge of the boat. You lean forward and your heat is all around me.

The screams of the drowning horses speed out across the churning water as the ferry goes under, screams sharp and reeling as the sirens of the rescue boats when they come. □