

## The Cliff

### Amethyst

I have never seen the cliff from below, and the moment I do I will have died. My whole life I have lived up here, never seen anything else than this one side of the cliff and my imagination. But since I have a fertile mind in which even the most barren landscapes grow, I might have, in fact, seen everything. Besides, there is beauty in knowing only one thing, and being forced to know it so well you understand how little you know it and can begin to see it anew. The cliff certainly has its own beauty. If it wasn't here but elsewhere, I would still recognize it in its hard nakedness like the body of an old lover. It sits in my soles and palms. I like to crawl along it, all the way to its end, my end, and drag my knees over its jagged skin until they start humming. Then I sit, motionless but fluid, cut open, turned inside out. There is something sad in the comfort of knowing I'm still red inside when there's no one to share my redness with. I watch the red run over my shins, sinking into the stone, attracted to it like its opposite pole, sinking so matter-of-factly it leaves me bewildered how there can be no word for the colour of blood on rock. Inspecting my wounds, I find small particles of debris in it, like worms in rotting corpses, except that I'm neither corpse nor rotting but humming, bleeding into stone.

The stone is different each time. It can metamorphose from resembling quartz, Himalayan salt or obsidian glass to chalk, granite, basalt, lime-, clay-, soapstone or any other variation in the nomenclature of solid mineral matters. It can even grow itself into a petrified tree by crystallizing into leaf-veined phyllite. This is what I call our autumn. Here, since the atmosphere is always the same, the stone is what makes the seasons. It also makes night and day. When it changes into a golden-yellow, iridescent citrine, sun rises whereas night falls in a deep blue-bladed lapis lazuli. Spring comes with the blossoming of bright green olivine and summer with the shimmering spectral play of rainbow fossilizing opal. On rare occasions, the stone gives itself the outlandish beauty of a snow queen when it takes on the form of something resembling amorphous, non-crystalline ice, smooth, opaque and pallid, making the cliff look like a ghostly dunescape at the bottom of a frozen underwater world. This then is what I call our winter.

There's also a fifth season, the season of no season, the season of unselfing, when the stone puts on its invisibility cloak of translucent, vitreous celestine under which the entire cliff instantly vanishes, letting the darkness through like a polished window sunbeams, blending fully with the surrounding void in its perfected camouflage, becoming itself the nothing. Yet, regardless of the stone's vagaries, it always, under my hands, remains the very body I know. Not so much because I

remember it, but because in some arcane way it speaks to me ever anew, like something too right to the touch not to have known it before. It seems much more than a memory touch has a recognition.

Every day I walk to the tip of the tongue-shaped cliff to see if today is the day to jump. If I walk like myself, it is exactly 93 steps from beginning to end. I'm waiting for step 94. 94 has its own time and I know it because the first 93 had theirs too. When it storms, I take my baby, the child I love violently and the only child I'll ever have, to the tip because I know about her passion for wild things. Then we play fly a kite. She can't walk yet, so I carry her to the very edge and hold her above the waters withdrawn from our sight as the cliff reaches up so high all that reveals itself to us is a fog in onyx wafting below. The sound, however, is clearly that of the sea, waves striking stone, stone resonating against them, an orchestra of percussionists playing the rock implacably, so implacably it leaves me bewildered how there can be no word for the sound of wave on rock. When I hold my baby above the invisible sea, her in nothing but diapers and the air, her hair, thigh-long, rises and gyrates in the winds, a Botticellian child-Venus amidst a tornado. Often the winds whirl so fiercely I can feel her paperlight little body yank my hands as if I was holding the spool to the world as it unwinds up into the hungry sucking of the sky. I say *Fly, baby, fly! Goodbye, baby, bye!* as part of our ritual and she responds by stretching her arms out to the sides, her hair soaring from her scalp like a jet of flame, her short chubby legs kicking the nothing as if pushing herself off the springboard air to reach even higher. At the peak of my arms she stops kicking, now crossing her feet, pointing downwards, toes flexed, slight arch like that in dancers' feet, completely still, her arms kept sideways, still also, as if she was crucified against the sky. I hear her squeak with sweet joy at our apocalyptic game and it makes me happy to know she's not only getting used to but actually starting to grow in her tiny heart a tenderness for mortality. Right from the beginning one should always practice one's own ending.

Teaching about the concept of end and beginning is an easy thing to do when you find yourself girded by a sharp edge cutting a clear demarcation line right between the two. The cliff's margin is calm and precise, a surgeon's scalpel severing worlds whose blade will cut deep into our abdominal wall should we ever wear this belt too tight. Here, there is no slow transition, no gradual fading, no fluid death. There is only before and behind the rim, and in between a lot of practice. There are other ways we practice. One of our favourites consists in me lying on my back after feeding her, burying my spine deep into the hard ground until my vertebrae cease being bone and become rock itself, letting my head dangle down the edge, her belly on my breasts, her chin resting on my shoulder as I pat her back while we gaze together into the black haze and wait for the burp. I believe this way she learns to associate the sight of void with pleasant satiation and release. It has always been curious to me how the most impossible combinations can be welded together if welded early enough, while the pristine brain is still glowing in the heat of fresh fires before it eventually, like all others, turns cold and grey and rigid. The contingent of combinations is bottomless. I could make her so scared of her own heartbeat she'd feel haunted by the poltergeist in her chest until the very day it ceases to rumble. I can only hope to have put together a combination that opens when kindness touches her.

As all good mothers I always make an effort in the shaping of my baby's mind to combine the earnest with the frolic, wed the somber with jouissance. I instantly feel more adequate in my execution of motherhood whenever I've managed to come up with a new game. Inventing games is a special skill of mine as it might as well be of all the other cliff mothers – supposed, of course, there was such a thing as *the other*. I've called this game the Marble Game, plain and simple, because it is just that. It doesn't require much: merely a bunch of amethyst clusters to be found in abundance on the cliff which keeps secreting them like violet furuncle flowers in a sick garden still sprouting defiant beauty in its disease. The tricky task is to throw – or roll if the clusters haven't grown too many spiky petals and remained rather round – the amethyst marbles right at the sharp scalpel edge. If she has estimated falsely, throwing too far so that the clusters fall right down into the fog, the game is finished. That is all. Yet, however plain and simple the game might be, its consequences are not; it has left a permanent indentation on my baby's brain, so squishy and susceptible still, yielding to experience like an overripe peach to pressure. Those marbles have given her a double awareness: both the notion of the fallen clusters being irrevocably gone and an acute sense for distance, fundamental in a place where distance determines everything. In addition, as a further lesson on distance, I've made it a rule to play both during storms and lulls so she may learn to appraise the effects of nature on itself: how much faster the demarcation line approaches when the winds are pushing towards it, how space is ultimately as relative to the air as is time to the whale.

My baby, just like colour and wave on rock, has no name. I never gave her one. I thought I'd leave it up to her to choose one in case she decides to need one. I, for my part, never chose one because it simply doesn't make sense to have a name on the cliff. It is too small and separated a place here to have one, to be one. You would assume, since it is so small and separated a place, it is also a safe one, but the truth is everything can happen here, my baby and I can be shaken anytime. Time, that is a thing in itself which can be shaken here. Perhaps this is why the snow globe has become her favourite toy. I gave it to her as a welcome gift right after I tore her out of my womb. I also gave her a rattle but not once did she show but she never showed the faintest interest in that one. As soon as her little arms, as snowy as the snow in the globe, were strong enough, she began to shake the globe obsessively and then watch with utmost fascination the havoc she'd created in this bounded universe of hers that fits into a child's ruling palm. The rattle? Untouched. Somehow right after opening her lungs to the world, she preferred bedlam over rhythm, chaos over order. This is what the cliff does to you. It gives you a sense of proportion. Her snow globe is like time, change within stability, save that here not only the snow but also the globe itself are unfixed. My baby and I have nothing to cling to except one another. For now, that is.

## Chalk

We used to have something else to cling to: her father. I loved her father just as violently as I love her. But no violence can stop the inevitable. Neither can love. He did have a name once but he

severed it like a useless limb when he realized it made no difference whatsoever. There's no one else here after all to talk to in each other's absence. There is no other. There is no absence. We are always here, on the cliff, together, and when we speak, we speak to one another. The rest is silence and wind. What would we need a name for? I feel good without a name. It's lighter, one burden less. I already have enough to carry carrying my nameless baby. I stopped breastfeeding her shortly after birth. Preparatory measures. I needed to make her fit as soon as possible to not only be able to live outside but also away from me. She kept touching and kneading my breasts, desperately trying to pump some drops of milk out of them, her miniature mouth seeking my nipples as if this would magically make the emptied well gush again. She couldn't know she was looking in the wrong place: I had replaced skin with glass – now the bottles held my milk. It's been long enough for her to drink from clinking walls that I doubt she remembers any different by now. Maybe never breastfeeding her at all would have been the more maternal thing to do. But I was too selfish for sacrifice. I wanted to feel it on my skin, how it feels to feed another with yourself. Maybe it was cruel to give it to her knowing all too well I'd take it away again. But then many things are brutal in the matter of birth and its aftermath. Cutting the umbilical cord is equally cruel, possibly even more so. Perfidious almost. Wrapping such delicate beings into the illusion not to be singular but one with another, for all those months, only to expel them from their fetal paradise, to cut them into existence, into the sheer shock of unalterable exposition, like sinners to be punished when in their toothlessness they weren't even able to bite apple. A pregnant woman's body is a Garden of Eden without temptation lurking – except the one to be born. No other tree grows under the hemisphere of her big belly than that of life itself. It is as though the very will to live was the sinful fruit, the pluckable greed to want more than eternal safety. Do you know how to find out whether a dead baby was a stillborn? You cut a piece of lung out and throw it into water. If it floats, the baby was alive. If it sinks, the baby arrived in the world without ever breathing it in – fetal death in utero. It sinks with the heaviness of purity. Because innocence weighs too. That's why women drown and witches float. You see, wanting to breathe is just as sinful as heresy. And it is hard, so very hard, to decide what to want within such short amount of time given. On the cliff pregnancy lasts 460 423 500 days. 460 days of paradise until its pillars give in and the fleshy dome collapses. 460 days, which is the time of the cormorant, the puffin and the sea lion added up, the time till each of them has brought their own offspring to the light of day. Yet words like days and hours don't mean much here anyway, they fluctuate like the stone, they bend and flex with the same ease as my baby's hips. One hour here is the length of breath held by the whale during its dive. Time is measured in oxygen and depends entirely on the constitution and mood of the whale. It passes with the speed of the whale's emergence. So when I notice I start menstruating too early and stop bleeding too soon, when my baby's fingernails and hair grow within a short span, when her bottle needs constant refilling, when the winds turn aggressively rapid and the air gets loose and light with acceleration, then I know the whale has not been underwater for long. When, however, the atmosphere grows stiffer, denser, viscous almost, so much it feels I could dip my forefinger in it like into a honeypot and lick off the air, when the winds behave more gently, moving kite-dropping-slowly as though in some kind of somnambulance, when I can see lightning sluggishly crawl down the sky like electrified drunk spiders, when my baby's diapers suddenly

need no changing and she shows no signs of hunger whatsoever, when we both fall into languorous, comatose sleep right there on the spot, flat and inert on our backs, side by side, her head nestled in my armpit, then I know the whale has been diving deep deep down, vertical, straight into the cold rib-crushing, lung-deflating blackness where the sea becomes the very void that enfolds us. But no matter how much the whale contracts or stretches time like a muscle, it's never enough to decide what to want, to make the right choice without at that very moment exponentiating all the other ones that would have been righter. I know it's not fair. But that's how it goes here on the cliff. I try my best to work my way around it, to work our way around it. One of those ways was to teach my baby how to drink on her own. The snow globe has been a helpful tool throughout the training. Meanwhile she has learned to hold the bottle up, shake it a bit, put it to her lips and tilt it, just enough to anxiously gulp down the milk as if in premonition (or still in remembrance – what's the difference after all?) it might otherwise dry up too.

### Achnelith

She's a lot like her father, in her own interpretation of him.

I wish I could say this sentence because it sounds pretty and romantic and like a thing parents would proudly claim about their child but to tell the truth: I have no idea. When I look at her, I don't see anything of him in her but I don't know if that is because she doesn't look like him or because I've already forgotten how he looked. I wouldn't find him in anything anymore. It is as if he never existed. He left no traces except this child. No hair in the brush, no dent on the pillow, no picture in my mindframe. I don't even have a shoe. He wore both of them when he jumped. I begged him to take them off, to leave them here, but he said it would be wrong, they belonged to him, we shouldn't let false sentimentality blur our vision. And I knew he was right. But still, what I would give for one wrong shoe only. Or a scent at least. But the possessive winds dragged that away from us too. Now the atmosphere smells forlorn, loveless and perfunctory, like some musty whisper-walled, marble-tiled hallway in an orphanage swarming teeming with regimented loneliness. Apart from my baby's, who smells like milk and hair with a whiff of algae, like how **as** I imagine sea cows smell, no other odour has abided than that of minerals, chalky dust and friction: a flinty, oily smokiness, the fetid bouquet of arsenic, sulfur and petroleum that emanates whenever I scratch the stone or knock it together. It's the odour of a temple by the sea burnt down to its bony spirit. So now this is all I have of him: this sea cow child who enjoys the tugging of the winds, unaware they took the last remains of her father. It's better this way though. After all, that's what he wanted. As little memory as possible. He merely obeyed the law. He was a sensible man. I too try to be sensible but sometimes it is just so hard, so very hard. You see, the cliff demands not little from us.

I should tell a bit more about our surroundings so you may forgive my need for false sentimentality. It is always easier after all to forgive something understood.

Not attached to anything but our bodies, or rather our bodies being attached to it, the cliff towers horizontally, protruding from the void we simply call *the cavity*, like a tongue stuck out of a black mouth which was never there. Our view consists solely of staring into this gigantically formless, non-existing mouth that could with one roll of its tongue easily gulp us down. The darkness around us is thick yet not ungainly, moving with the exquisite Victorian elegance of heavy velvet in a noblewoman's winter dress. Threads of light are sewn into the fabric in the shape of both discrete twilight that glows coyly as the seam between cliff and void and bold ornaments of illumination stitched all over the velvety dark by the spider flashes of lightning. The cliff may be big enough for three bodies but remains far too small for one soul: 93 steps lengthwise, 55 in width at the end where the tongue descends into the throat, 7 at its apex. Luckily, we have books to expand the limited space and chalk crayons in all colours to draw on the rock whatever we might be missing. This way we've created manifold worlds right at the bottom of ourselves, painted us our own view across the horizon beneath our feet. I've drawn doors when I felt alone, a fireplace when I felt cold, a mirror when I felt hideous. I've drawn the whale and the sea to finally catch a glimpse of them. I've drawn the cormorant and puffin in flight, and the sea lion in play. I've also drawn them with their babies, how I imagine them together. I realized how difficult it is to draw things like connection or trust, to draw love. But I tried, and now when I look at them, I can see it perfectly: vivid and warm and loving on stone. I've also drawn rain, the thing books somehow seem to like telling about. It's always dry here, windy, yes, very windy, on special days humid and foggy, at most, but no such thing ever as water coming down on us. In fact, apart from blood, the only liquid we get into contact here is mother's milk. When I hadn't weaned my baby yet, I would sometimes rhythmically squeeze my breasts, pressing the milk ducts behind my nipples, to then priestly, like baptismal water, sprinkle the warm liquid on my arms, neck and belly. It was heavenly. It made me want to bathe in it, to submerge my entire body in my own sweet, holy fluids. Ever since then I can't conceive of rain as anything but a lactating sky expressing itself, as I can only imagine the sea as a whole ocean filled with colostrum, changing colour, consistency and composition over time. Ranging between a rich, sticky dark-yellow, over a smooth creamy white to a thin bluish-tinted transparent, to pink, orange and red, to brown and rust-hued, yes, even black or bloody if there's something wrong with the sea. Every single one of these variations of seas I've painted onto the rock, using all crayons I own, when necessary blending them to get the exact right shade, to make sure the sea below the cliff is amongst the many on it. My baby has been drawing too. She draws strange things, creatures I've never read about in my books but since she has drawn them, it means they must – at least enough for her to have missed them – exist somewhere. Well, and now they certainly do here.

I wanted to draw her father but I couldn't because I can't remember his face. Everytime I tried, I'd only see a stranger stare back at me. It made me feel even more deserted than before, when the stone had just been as blank as my memory; it was as though his absence became more visible by giving it a face that wasn't his. He's the only thing I haven't been able to draw and thus will have to miss forever. He's gone for good. I know. And so will I, soon. For my baby is too

young to remember my face. I won't even linger as one of the creatures the books never mention. I won't even exist in some at-least-kind-of way.

I wish I was able to weep about this but we have no tears here on the cliff, except for Pele's, goddess of fire, volcano and dance, she who shapes the sacred land, wherever that is, she, the earth-eating woman whose tears run upwards to us as spatter from the sea when airborne particles of frothy lava quick-freeze in a spray to form black tapered droplets of basaltic glass, their tails spun from the trail of liquid in motion. Once in a while, like snakes digesting, the winds disgorge the goddess's hair instead, brittle and blonde and painful, when the molten blobs are stretched into long, entangled glass strands of flaxen, divine to sight, pernicious to lungs and skin. We were warned long before for at no moment did the gods, those paladins of distance, ever liked to be touched. And they probably have a point—it's the space between in which we worship. Whether tear or hair is a question of viscosity (low/tear – high/hair) is a question of velocity (quick/low – slow/ high) is a question of force (strong/quick – weak/slow) is a question of resistance (low/strong – high/weak) which is a question of total randomness. In the end everything always leads back to the whale's caprice. Abstract or concrete, it determines both equally, formation of material as much as formation of time. So apart from volcanic tears sporadically traveling up here along banks of wild air, we have none ourselves on the cliff, no tears whatsoever to call our own, and therefore we suffer infinitely so much more. Perhaps it is part of our punishment. The people in my books often cry. Particularly in the bible. There's a lot of weeping in the bible. Mary wept, Jesus wept, Job wept. Job said deep darkness was on his eyelids. I wonder whether it was the same darkness as ours here, and if it was, why then he could weep when we cannot. Even Frankenstein's monster cried "with sad and solemn enthusiasm". Does this mean we're even less human than monsters, my baby and I? In the stories it says their eyes filled with tears that ran down their cheeks, and so this has been my alchemic manual in my experiments with our hypermonstrous hearts. I figured if Jesus at the wedding of Cana in Galilee miraculously converted water to wine, it might not be entirely absurd to think it possible to turn blood and breast milk into water, especially so within a laboratory such as the cliff where the banal is transmutation and stableness the prodigy. One time my baby fell badly during one of her attempts to walk, abrading the flesh on her shins and palms on the treacherous needle-shaped prisms of tourmaline the rock had grown that day. As she whimpered in her dry pain, I brushed my pinky across the ravine of her gash and meticulously, as if setting a royal ruby into a crown, placed it at the inner corner of her eye so it could roll down the way it is supposed to, how the tales tell it. I set another thick drop into my own eye's corner, and then we sat there, in lacrimal togetherness, crying tears for the first time in our lives. It was heavenly.

### Granite

Sometimes he comes to me in my dreams, those dreams I subside into when the whale is sinking. He comes as nothing but fog with arms and voice, a threefold chimera, and he speaks only little.

And yet his apparition speaks more vividly to me than any of my waking sights. He always visits as a semi-stranger, a hybrid-phantom, my centaur of dreams: half abstract, half love. And though his voice remains unknown to me, a sound as foreign as softness under my feet, his arms I know better than the stone itself. For touch does have a recognition, even the touch of a shadow. When we embrace, his brumous body radiates a shocking cold that makes me shudder in the clash, avalanches crashing down my spine. His arms, however, are so overly familiar that, just like the point of temperature at which extreme heat feels icy and extreme cold burning, all distinctions dissipate and the avalanches grow into a sensation of fever waves, reversed chills, where I find myself sweating from his sizzling cold, until, bit by bit, they begin to thaw through my entire chest like glaciers warmly melting down my rib cage. Then, in these scarce, ever unpredictable moments, all is whole and good. If only they didn't disperse so swiftly. Do I know they don't last? Naturally. Do I keep trying to make them stay? Always. Why is it that the most real things happen to be the least palpable? I try to laugh at the grotesque absurdity of it all. To know that what I long to touch with all my being will always, must always evaporate right in front of me is a knowledge I don't want. It's merely crippling, worth barbaric rejection. It ought to be amputated like a name. No wonder Eurydice vanished when Orpheus despite all warnings did eventually turn around to look at her. He should have known about the nature of desire. And perhaps he did. But it's one thing to know, to believe another. Such foolishness. And yet from the whole deck of choices, I keep drawing, over and over again, the card of The Fool myself. And he? The *he* of my story? The man who helped me make my baby before he, too, became a myth? This *he* never looked back. Not once. Not even a tentative twist of the head. Instead, he kept his gaze firmly fixed to where he wanted to go – and there he went. Just like that. He was the infallible Orpheus, the sage and sensible man whose card would invariably show no other than The Hermit. Possibly this is why in fact not much has changed in the shift from flesh to fog. Already long before his leap I felt exactly the same: as if I was nothing but a mere shadow collector, the fisher setting sail every single day to catch plankton with coarse-meshed nets, the madwoman obsessively seeking to encapsulate the impossible to wear it around her neck in a locket. I have neither net nor locket, let alone a photograph to put in. I can't even see the sea. Instead I have my baby whose legs wrap around my neck, her heels closing over my collarbones when I wear her on my shoulders, and in whom there must be something of him encapsulated, though I don't know what.

But there is no sense in lamenting. After all, that's how it goes here on the cliff. He used to say there cannot be misery in the natural course of things. I'm still learning what he meant by this. At least now reality has caught up with observation: finally, after the unbearable strain, like that of prey in the pull of two scavenger jaws or of tectonic plates drifting away from each other, being tugged both by perception and apprehension, by present and future simultaneously, already experiencing what I was still expecting – finally, finally his absence is congruent to my missing. One shark let go of the carcass. The rift has formed. The earth's crust is no longer contorting in tension. He unhinged it all into harmony when he jumped. And although it may be a disturbing kind of harmony and one that comes with its own earthache, it's a harmony nonetheless in which I find the relief of no longer having to feel insane. Ultimately, after all, I'm the paranoid who turned out to be right.



## Quartz

She's still a riddle to me. I know as much about my own baby as I know about the stone. I wonder if this is because neither of them speaks but I equally wonder if I would understand more if they did. Once, she was lying in my lap, holding up the bottle, drinking my pumped milk as taught, I looked at her through the thin glass and all of a sudden saw her become wave: an undulating field, rippled in opacity, stretched, at certain angles doubled, then again slimming into erasure before reappearing as another curve in her own nature. Any micromovement of her hands or mouth instantly set off new ripples so that it was entirely impossible for me to, even for a second, fixate her within the glass. She kept flowing away from my gaze like quicksilver. I took a piece of quartz and looked again but this time she refracted and split into an endless variety of prism babies, oscillating copies but not quite as if this was a sorcerer's trick to test whether I'd break the spell by choosing the right, my, baby. I wouldn't have known. I didn't pass. suspects behind a mirror, having to choose which one was mine. This is the closest I ever got to grasping her.

## Clay

However much I keep looking, lightning past just won't strike again. Perhaps it's too tired to push back through into present. Can certain forms of lightning go extinct? Like certain species, names or languages, mentalities or predilections? Like certain ways of being? The fact that the lightnings of the past differ so drastically from the ones now has to do with the drastic difference of the whale. Back then the whale was still young: different size, different weight, different way of being. And it was not one, but two. It had a mate. Sometimes, if frequencies were not too low, I would hear them serenade each other. Their songs sounded harmonious despite either of them keeping to its own unique modulation. They dove and surfaced in unison and if they ever got separated for a moment, they simply measured the space between their echoes to find back to one another. And so formation was drastically different too. Time got flexed and stretched much more tenderly, so tenderly I even grew oblivious to the sheer existence of the whales. Their presence was very discreet, a tiny, humble voice from the ocean, as unobtrusive as the quietness of those so confident, so strengthened in themselves they shed all need for noise. There was less restlessness in the whale's spirit, more subtlety, more poise, only minor marks on its fluke. Commuting far less between extremes, it mostly nested in middlewaters. It swam in serenity. That was before the sonar broke in the division of the atmosphere, caused when someone severely hurt the elementary law and in a split second released a dosage of maddening energy that deranged and shuffled all forces, leaving both particle and wave in concussion, and the whale's brain irreversibly damaged. When the sonar broke it emitted an ear-splitting screaming sound, so nightmarishly shrill and harrowing, a demon unleashed, its frequencies ruptured the whale's acoustic canal the moment they hit it and vandalized its mate's colossal blue-blooded heart when they ferociously pulsed through it. The

mate instantly began sinking to the ocean floor, its song a modulation I had never heard before, reminiscent of old laments, sending out a faint last signal in its descent the other, deaf and disoriented by now, did not hear. It couldn't have saved it anyway. The surviving whale never got over this. So it just went mad. It's as though its sanity descended with the body of its mate, in unison, and now, like Quasimodo's and Esmeralda's conjoined skeletons, they lie side by side on the ocean bed. Despite my pondering the events over and over again, this remains the only comforting thought I to date have been able to come up with.

The damage in its full extent, however, I didn't understand until shortly after this incident time shifted radically. It bent out of proportion the very moment the frantic whale began to move beyond its usual zone. When it left its serene ring, time was trembling, flying apart, pieces shattering, swirling, hitting against one another, the whole chronological construct collapsing, going down in one contiguous sequence of chaos and ache as though all clocks in every universe were being reset at the exact same moment. I heard time crumble, wail as it was being dismembered and forcefully stretched, making soul-branding noises of a Banshee on a rack, ligaments, bones and cartilage popping, tendons torn, sinews ripping, joints dislocating, a groan, a growl, a squall, a bellow, another excruciating howl till finally the letting go into one long, continuous cry, time weeping as it watched itself distort and die, then one single simple sigh, tranquil and deep, and then—silence.

After this torturous time crash, the fall of order, I still haven't adjusted to the new unreliableness of everything. I just can't find any pattern, any cohesion in formation anymore. All that's left is volatility and perpetual conversion as the whale keeps pacing back and forth in the cage of its demented mind. And we pace with it. Commotion is always born in painful labour. Nothing moves unwounded. We either pace or we curdle. The only stillness now is stiffness, paralysis within which to the shallow eye presents itself as calm. A dead bird in a crackless egg. A stillborn in a rose-cheeked mother. If you threw the calm into water, it would sink. And so I keep walking and counting my steps as if first and last existed.

The winds were no winds yet but a steady, balmy breeze. The lightnings wouldn't crawl or stagger but smoothly dance down the sky, not sedated, not shot, not drunk but edgily sensual, sharp in their femininity as if Pina Bausch had choreographed electricity. Those were my favourite kinds of lightning. Still are. They didn't creep intoxicated with despair and horror. They entered the sky like a stage: proud, with postures of resilience. Thinking of the Pina lightnings still instantly makes me crave physicality. They tingle my nerves, my hair roots, my tongue. There was a precise freedom in their dance, a disciplined hope, possible only because the climate had not been abused yet, the atmosphere was still primordially pure, so pure we even had rain. It rained the night we made my baby. The cliff was a warm, red clay that night, I remember well for I could feel it on my back as we lay together in soft sheets, combining our cravings with one another, me clinging to him from beneath, him hovering above me, me holding on to his shoulders, him holding on to his rhythm. Some drops of light rain as if blown through an open window of a love story, a sprinkle of fiction drizzling through, fell at once onto my upper lip and lashes, the water running along the line of my lids and into my mouth as I

opened it with a gasp, feeling so energetically charged I must have become polarised, hygroscopic like the clay I lay on, readily taking up all moisture from the surrounding environment, retaining it within me, retaining him within me, retaining everything within me at that moment, including myself, so retaining and retained in me, so at peace with myself and in love with him that at this point I no longer knew if it was raining or I crying but it didn't matter anyway, nothing mattered, because right now he was dripping rain from his hair, having lowered his head, baring his neck, wet and sleek, to my gaze, like an animal in surrender, his vaulted upper spine emerging before me like an invitation, one vertebra my focal point. Sticking out, it looked like the slippery knot in an anchor rope, and I dug my hands deeper into his shoulders like a clasped prayer tightening, thought of the beauty of his neck, thought of the wet knot, our knot, our not being strangers, my not being alone, my for once not being anything not, but I, all I, positive. Thought of the perfect punctuality and sensibility of this moment in which we floated and moved with trust, not just in each other or ourselves but in the materiality of everything around us, in elements inherently indestructible, in core, in the perpetual, in the perennial, in seeds surviving in soil, in seeds persisting, in seeds, in soil, in persisting, and with this thought in mind, my heart questionless for once, having showered its dirty doubts off in this, however transient, yet angelic bath, clean up to belly button and fingernails, I conceived my baby. She came with water on my face. I miss water on my face.

### **Moonstone**

Today the winds lie narcotized again. All still, so still I can hear the stone growing, changing, working underneath me, a dull, at times rustling sound similar to tooth grinding or crumpling up thick paper as if the cliff unsatisfied was discarding its own draft of itself. Here and there, like injured post-cataclysmic survivors, soldiers in shell shock, one-legged sedated spiders stagger in shot zigzags down into the slow sea where they're extinguished, going out heroically without a sob or hiss or scream. So sticky is the air I wonder whether, if I jumped now, I'd stay stuck in the fall. Would I hang in there, suspended like a fly in cobwebs? Or would I just fall slowly? How slowly? Like a deer subsiding in swamp? Like a sedimenting whale carcass or the stirred snow of the globe returning to the ground, settling back in its origins? Would I slide like lava ponderously creeping along the crest or go down more smoothly, more agile, like resin running down a tree? Or would I maybe just drop like thin-dripping wax on a candle? Would I get dragged down like a drowning widow wearing a woollen coat or levitate because at the last minute she picked the wide skirt instead which now balloons around her shoulders? There must be a whole science to falling.

I've been walking to the tip as every day, the first thing I do after waking. As every day I've counted my steps, 91... 92... 93... the end. From here on there is only one more number, and in that single number: infinity. As every day I've observed my bare feet at every step, studied them

as I walked, tendons and muscles moving me closer to the unwalked number. I'm a voyeur to my own body, getting excited by the sight of what it is driven to do. Beyond me dreamless darkness sprawls unperturbed by either form or matter, behind me, far off at the beginning side of the cliff, the baby's slumbering, a pneumatic bundle whose eyes flicker rapidly with all those soft dreams wrung out of the void once drenched with them. Now the dark is as dead as can be, a pale, bereft replica of its past self, having squirted its remaining life into the compression of this small breathing body before it went out like an octopus perishing in a panic. Her and I hold the relics of all that once was alive out there when the cavity was still inked with infinite richness. as densely, vibrantly black as the pupil of a god's eye until it grew matte and empty, slowly dimming out into a glaucomic soul-barren stare, murky as moonstone. There was a time when this god could see and for a brief moment he saw us and we saw with him. The vision left to him now, however, is peripheral at best, blurry beyond recognition, whose blank spots he injects with erroneous memory mutated over time, suturing the broken nerves into alien connections they were never meant to have, transplanting foreign tissue whose mismatch we're constantly feeling with the poignancy of adopted children secretly knowing. To live on the cliff means no other than to live in the distortions of his sight, and often I gasp for air under this suffocating, wrongly quilted patchwork. But however skewed and lightless everything around us may be, when I see this bundle dozing in the distance, see her eyelids quiver, I'd like to hope there are images pulsing underneath, a clarity long forgotten yet not lost. I'd like to hope that ancient cave paintings wait under her eyes to be rediscovered one day by divers with headlamps and scholars with magnifying glasses. I'd like to hope we dream the dreams on, we breathe the ancient breath. I'd like to hope. But I'm not sure if hope is just yet another falsely memorized stitch. He did jump after all. How could I be sure of anything.

## Paper

See the child. She is sitting in a circle of glass. The bottles prepared for this moment stand around the girl like the guarding ghosts of wet nurses. Transparent provision made by a woman who touched glass often enough not to forget about it in her leaving. Now it is only you and the child. Good you stayed. Someone has to. Through the membrane of velvet void and paper you both look at each other in confusion. Around you all is still and dark, the usual. Her mother's departure has not affected the atmosphere, nothing external got pierced in the process. A disturbing kind of immunity, you think. You would have many questions had you had time to ask but not now, no asking anything with a deserted child sitting before you. Some situations are so immense, they draw tight in their own vastness, get frapped like sails of incomprehension that cannot fit any more than pragmatism. So you tell the child she should drink her milk now to grow strong against the winds, against all you have read about in her mother's reports. You speak in a calm voice, trying to hide your insecurity. The girl is staring at you in disbelief. She looks like dust raised by the thump of an ancient tree felled, like the bird-fled space between the

horizontal where the tree lies now and the vertical it once reached. There is aftermath in her eyes. You don't know what else to do so you tell her a story about a sea cow that realizes it needs more air than nature expects from it in order to feel good in the sea. You made the story up, you think, but now that it's finished you're not so sure anymore. The child doesn't tell you how scared she is, how perplexed, how sad. Speech has not left her body yet. She knows how to vibrate thought but her vibrations are still directionless. Her interior leaks arbitrarily, not yet in language. To be clairvoyant and mute is the first and last form of loneliness. Like any young mind she knows loss without telling. Inside herself, she recognizes the distinct shape of loss, recognizes it from her father, senses it with the precision of an owl locating a mouse in the snow. Knowing loss is just a matter of calculating distances, anticipating the moving away, the sinking in, a constant recalibration. Loss is only a thin layer of fallen atmosphere far. If you look sharply, you'll see it quiver under its cover, making tiny ripples in the surface, always alert, never hibernating. The girl has seen the ripples long before. She saw them while drinking, watching her mother watch her through the bottle. She saw her stretch, slim into erasure, then reappear as another curve in nature. You are the new curve. I must help the child, you think, I can't leave her alone here on this cliff with nothing but milk and motherlessness. If only I could make her speak, you think. But you can't because it's impossible to lend voice. You think. But what if you can? What if, after all, it was possible? You suddenly realize one of the most beautiful things is to lend voice, to bring into vibration, to steer for someone who knows all about waves but whose arms are too weak to hold the wheel. You think It may be one sense of being. You may be right. The child has crawled to the circle and hungrily taken one bottle out of the ghostly ring. She's drinking fast, the bottle is nearly finished, a chunk of breast milk sediments on its bottom whenever she tilts the bottle vertical. Where is her mother now, you wonder. How could she leave you alone with an infant? It's too much responsibility for someone who's come here only to touch paper, not glass, not baby hair, not this. How could you take care of a child you just met a few pages ago? What is the alternative? Is there any at all? Meanwhile the girl has emptied the bottle, including the chunks, drunk the remains of her mother. She looks at you expectantly. She probably waits for me to lie with her at the edge, our heads dangling down, waiting for the burp, you think. You can't do it. You're too scared to get near it. Instead, you decide to tell her another story, one about release. This time it's about the whale. You tell her that sometimes it likes to stay deep down a little longer because it enjoys the pressure on its body holding it together like a corset, higher up in shallower waters it's easier to disintegrate, the bones start drifting apart, the flesh loosens. People easily forget how much effort it takes a whale to hold its huge self together. In the abyss it is supported from the outside, free through external forces, not crushed, not deflated. Deep down there is no sharp light, the molecules sit as tight as a sturdy crib. You see, child, there is no ill will in the whale, just a need to be held in this heavy body presence once in a while. Deep lightless places make excellent holders. This is how you end your story, in the hope it may have been a comfort to the girl, an explanation. You don't know what for yet.

