

None of the Above

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In her house on the mountainside, Gretel is almost in the sky. This morning she has been up long enough to watch it turn from black to ochre to shredded pink-grey to its present mottled blue, gradually washing out of itself the bright mark of a three-quarter moon.

She has sung nursery rhymes. She has read the same book over and over again, turning its thick cardboard pages and reciting its refrain—‘that’s not my monster.’ She has looked down at her baby girl’s sucking mouth and lightly furred head with its patch of cradle cap, and silently declared ‘that’s not my child.’ She has put the dozing child into her cot, and though tired beyond measure, Gretel has not the heart to go back to bed herself. She has learned that there are times when no sleep at all hurts less than the little that is never enough. Instead she looks in the bathroom mirror at her dirt-coloured eyes and lifeless skin, and thinks ‘that’s not my face.’ She folds gro-suits and blends pumpkin, and thinks ‘that’s not my life.’

Above her kitchen sink is a window with a view down over the city. It’s a small city at any time and from any angle, but from this window it appears small enough for her to cup in her hands. She watches Matchbox cars inching in squares around the city’s heart and imagines flinging up the sash window and reaching out to scoop up all the houses and offices and warehouses and apartments, and then crumbling them like stock cubes into the water of the river.

‘Boredom,’ her mother would diagnose, if Gretel were to tell her mother about making city soup in the basin of the Derwent. ‘You’ve always tended to wild thinking when you’re bored.’

The nurse at the child health clinic might have had another diagnosis, except that Gretel had cheated on the test. Or was that true? *Had* she cheated, exactly? Or was it just that she’d been able to beat the questions at their own game?

The child health clinic was a small fibro cube in a quiet and out-of-the-way street and the nurse was an extravagantly freckled woman of capable dimensions. She sat with her chair lowered and her Birkenstocks securely earthed on the carpet tiles.

‘And how are *you*, mother?’ the nurse asked, after the baby had been stripped and weighed and measured, her tiny hip joints inspected, and her clothes reapplied.

Gretel knew that the nurse’s aura of calm was probably supposed to transmit to her, as it clearly did to her baby, who was sagging contentedly into the nurse’s broad lap. But instead it kindled a panicky desire to grab the nurse by her arms and implore her to look around her. To see. All you had to do was flake open a newspaper, or flick on the news, to know that calm was not justified. All you had to do was look up at the sky and you’d see the cracks forming. But of course, Gretel did not grab the nurse. Compliantly, she sat in the clinic’s armchair and gripped the cup of very hot tea that the nurse had topped up with a stingy amount of low-fat milk.

‘In the last seven days,’ the nurse read out from the sheet on her clipboard, ‘I have looked forward with enjoyment to things, a) as much as I ever did, b) rather less than I used to, c) definitely less than I used to, d) hardly at all.’

‘Actually,’ Gretel said with a little laugh. ‘It’s none of the above. I’ve looked forward to some things more than ever.’

She was thinking of her morning showers. At about 7.30am, she would go into the bathroom and shut the door behind her. She had come to love the door, which was panelled, and painted white, and she had also come to love the blessed metallic clink sounded by the sliding bolt when she shot it home. With the door locked, the room became a box—a white cube disconnected from the rest of the house.

Gretel would shuck her clothes and turn on the water and stand beneath it, gradually turning up the heat until her back and shoulders were scarlet. In the windowless room, she could imagine that outside it was not 7.30am, but 10.30pm, and that when she emerged, she would put on clean pyjamas and slide into the cotton sheets of a turned-back bed, in which she would sleep through the night. In the whiteness of the bathroom, she could even rewind herself out of the nightmare of motherhood. She could push the baby back

inside of herself: dematerialise her from flesh and blood to the sweet and ghostly status of being expected. In the shower, Gretel could still believe that her life was something that she was sketching in pencil, and that she had not, in fact, blotted her copy paper by making a mark as indelible as a child.

Beyond the searing sheath of water, beyond the shower curtain, beyond the bathroom cube, Matt would be looking after the baby. He had not yet complained about the length of the showers, but sometimes when Gretel emerged from the bathroom, he would be already in his coat and standing by the front door, doing nothing more than waiting to hand over the child. In these moments, if in almost no others, Gretel did not feel guilt. That was the wonderful thing about showers—they were such everyday, reasonable things to want. When her shower came to an end, she would stand on the bath mat—the hot water cylinder exhausted—knowing that the best part of her day was now over.

‘Well, that’s wonderful,’ said the nurse, looking pleased and proud.

It is almost 7am and the sky beyond the kitchen window has turned properly blue with the rising of the sun. Down in the city, the buildings and cars have switched off their lights and a ferry is wearing a groove into the surface of the river with its comings and goings.

Gretel empties the sink of its soapy water and long, floating islands of pumpkin puree and wonders why she has lately been remembering strange things. Didn’t they say nature abhorred a vacuum? Well, perhaps this was how her mind proposed to deal with hers, by sucking old and unregarded memories out of their chambers and blowing them up to fill the void, magnifying even the smallest details. Perhaps this was how minds survived hibernation: by laying down stores of image, thought and sensation for later use. Perhaps this was what memories were for: to provide nourishment for those times when the mind has nothing left to eat but itself.

It is thirteen years since her final year of school and Gretel has never before in all that time had cause to remember her mid-year practice exam in geography. Now, though, she recalls that it was held in the assembly hall, in order to give a feel for the Real Thing. Her school was historic enough to have some classic old buildings, and wealthy enough to have quite a lot of new and sleekly architectural ones, but the assembly hall was an ugly sister whose

construction dated somewhere in between. Its walls were made of flat grey bricks with the occasional textured one sticking out like an invitation to climb up to the row of windows that ran along under the ceiling, letting in a stripe of heatless sunshine.

On the day of the exam, the hall was set out with rows of square, grey Laminex desks, each with a fresh exam paper laid face-down on its surface, but as soon as the doors opened, students spilled all over it, girls tipping fluorescent highlighters and barley sugars out of their pencil cases, boys skewing the desks as they bundled their oversized knees and shoes underneath them. Gretel chose a desk about eight rows from the front and Jesse sat down next to her and reached out one leg so she could twine her ankle around his but Mr Andrews—who usually just rolled his eyes—sternly gestured them apart. Mr Andrews was standing at the front of the room under a big clock that wasn't usually there and which was also part of getting a feel for the Real Thing.

Gretel was good at exams, but her mother had warned her not to be too cocky because it might turn out that she, like her father, was good at nothing except exams.

'And you can see for yourself how far that got him in the Real World,' her mother had said.

To seventeen-year-old Gretel, the Real World was invisible, but solid, like everything you can't see on the dark side of a window at night.

Mr Andrews said: 'Your time begins... now.'

Q1. The length of the Tasmanian coastline is:

- a) 4882 kilometres
- b) 5400 kilometres
- c) 3300 kilometres



Gretel hovered her pencil above the page and looked up at the assembly hall windows that held nothing but sky. A sky that she knew. Even if she had been in a coma for a really long time and woke up not knowing her name or

what year it was, she would still know from that particular shade of pale blue that it was winter outside. She looked at the sky until she noticed, in the top corner of the furthest window, the smudged thumbprint of a daytime moon.

How far was it to the moon? she wondered. And if you unravelled the coastline of Tasmania, could it be made to stretch the whole distance? Well, that would depend. On where you drew the line. On whether you measured at high tide. Or low. It would depend on how far you went upstream into the rivers and whether or not you took your measurements all the way to the places where rivers became creeks, and split apart into many creeks that wended their ways up into the mountains. And on whether or not you measured offshore islands, and whether or not you included all of them, even the ones whose outlines disappeared with the tides. It would depend, too, on how precisely you measured. Gretel pictured herself rolling out a ball of string on a pebbled beach, curving meticulous spans around every last pebble at the water's edge. She smiled at the thought. Then, beneath c), she wrote d). And in the white space beside it, gave her answer.

When the exam was over, she and Jesse got into her tinny little Corolla and joined the Friday afternoon traffic heading for the coast. At a service station on the edge of town they ate hot chips and changed out of their school uniforms, and a little after that they took down Gretel's P-plates in readiness to cruise into the drive-through of a country pub where they bought cheap wine. Finally, they turned off the highway and took the long, winding dirt road that led to a campsite where they set up their tent by torchlight and got stoned.

Little penguins were crooning in the dunes as Gretel and Jesse stumbled along a narrow path that led through the scrub and onto the beach. There they started to kiss, and then to strip off their clothes. They didn't care that the sand was cold because sex was still new enough and mid-year exams were over and they were reckless inside a swirl of dope and winter wind and blurring stars.

Like Gretel, Jesse had parents on the permissive side of things. In Gretel's case, it was because her parents almost never spoke to each other that it was easy to slip into the grey area between them. But Jesse's parents were slack in a far more considered way. They'd moved to Tasmania with a view to

surviving the Cold War by growing backyard vegetables and building an underground bunker in the grounds of their hobby farm, and they believed that seventeen-year-olds—who might at any moment have to pull an adult's weight in a post-apocalyptic world—should start practising independence and responsibility. Gretel didn't know it then, but at the end of the year, his parents would take the family back to Sydney since the nuclear holocaust had turned out not to be so imminent after all.

Gretel lay on the sand with Jesse still on top of her, his head resting on her collarbone, her fingertips blending into the soft, curling stubble of his dark hair. Above, the clear night sky was immensely black against the white spill of the Milky Way, and Gretel worked out that if she crossed her eyes just a little, she could prise the moon and stars from their firmament and make them look as if they were coming loose and just about to shower down all over the two of them.

Jesse propped himself up on one elbow.

'What'd you pick for Question 1?' he asked.

'Such a romantic question,' she said.

'No, really. What'd you pick?'

'What'd *you* pick?' she asked.

'I went for a). Split the difference. Four thousand and something kilometres'd be about right, wouldn't it?'

'Maybe,' she said. 'But I chose d).'

'There was no d),' he said.

'There was on my paper,' she said.

'You didn't.'

Jesse looked at her, incredulously.

'You can't do this shit forever, you know,' he said.

'It was only a practice exam,' she said, laughing, but his face was so serious that it was like getting a glimpse through that darkened window of what he would look like all grown up in the Real World.

'So what *did* you write?' he asked. 'For d)?'

A moment ago, she might have told him. Now, she didn't feel like it.

'Nothing special,' she said. 'Just shit.'

Behind Jesse's shoulder, Gretel stretched one hand up towards the sky and the small amount of light that there was on that night seemed to cling to

it, making a luminous outline for her fingers and thumb. Though joined, still, to Jesse, she felt her separateness. She knew precisely where she began and ended. She could feel the very edges of herself. Of her hands, fingers, feet, toes. She had very long hair then—fine and pale—and she felt the full measure of every strand, and that of every eyelash, and eyebrow hair, and of all the hairs on her arms and her legs. She could feel the overhang of her fingernails, the rippling ins and outs of every pore of her skin.

She felt her outline as a crystalline filament, glowing. And as she concentrated upon it, she sensed its unravelling. She became a single strand drifting upwards, threading stars onto herself as if they were tiny beads. She scribbled herself in finest silver all over the black of the sky. *Virtually infinite*, she wrote, in huge cursive letters. And even when she was finished, there was still easily enough of her left to lasso the moon.

The baby cries. But Matt is up, and Gretel can hear him burbling to his daughter as he gets her out of her cot. He comes into the kitchen and kisses Gretel good morning and the baby reaches out for her mother, so Matt bundles her into Gretel's arms. Gretel's body takes up the weight as if it is something to be expected. And though it causes her to sink back down into all the heaviness of her days, at the same time she feels the force of her love for her child, dragging like a ploughshare over the surface of her heart, opening it up, rolling it over, exposing all its tenderness.

'Good morning, sweetpea,' she coos.

'How long've you been up?' Matt asks as he goes about the business of setting the coffee percolator going.

'Since about three.'

'What have you been thinking about?'

Perhaps she is only imagining it, but she senses something faintly diagnostic about the question. She knows that he has been worried, and perhaps it is because she doesn't want to worry him any further that she thinks it best to say nothing of unravelling coasts or unhinged stars or the lost infinity of her youth.

'Nothing much,' she says. *Just shit.*

The kitchen smells of coffee now and he is standing close beside her as he puts out a finger and touches her high in the centre of her forehead.

Drawing his finger down, he traces her profile, through the middle of her eyebrows, down the length of her nose, along its underside, over her lips and chin. The finger travels down her throat to her breast and across to the baby's belly and up over her little chest and the fatty curve of her cheek. It keeps going, tracking over the baby's soft skin all the way to the place where the sunlight coming in through the window is coating each and every flyaway strand of her impossibly fine hair.