

ONE

I am drifting in the dark on night's blind waters, the vast dark volume of wet and shapeless dreams fathoms beneath me, above me a limitless sky without stars, without moon; drifting within the isotropic realm; then slowly I emerge into a lush green garden, mine or someone else's, or a yellow room expanding; a man is speaking to me while reclining on a velvet divan but I don't believe a word he says. And then some other words; and I wake into damp rumpled cotton sheets, black silk strangling my breasts, the light unfolding — grey and dim. What if I had your voice urging me like virtue? What if — words like sleep unravelling — I had walked the breadth of your voice? If words had served you? The cat stares up at me from her furrow between my thighs, no thought of time or dreams or cunning lies. A final image, brief as flame, catches like wind in a sail — your mouth not those hands with straining

veins so red from hanging winter washing. Your hands, your eyes, your deep solid ineffable gaze meeting mine, what if — What if in winter those white sheets had let go and we had chased them to the frozen garden and there made a place where secrets could unfurl? And now softly crying, the dream divided, night's intention disavowed. I am tossed awake by words. I fall back upon myself.

If you had held me once in laughter. If you had spoken of the world split wide open. If the world — I rise, not wishing to wake Robin.

If mother were place not payment.

If daughter were promise.

I put on my bathrobe, go to the kitchen window and look out into this blue morning, a heavy snow beginning to fall. What is a dream? An enormous conspiring genealogy, some incest, yes, and murder. Rampant, frenzied, blind. Standing here in this moment, how the sun's first rays converge with these dreams, these rivers of words, my ancestors. How they connect to my lying next to Robin in this morning's half-light while words like pelted tomatoes smashed against the walls of my veins. A dream has its own weight, and in this simple balance I measure the night and the day.

It is said that if one were strong enough she could take the finest most powerful traits of a lost one and integrate them into herself. That if one were wise enough she could eat her dead. Trickster work. To disregard the lines

and break the female body down into world without end.

Last night I jerked a suitcase across the floor of our bedroom from closet to bed, tossed in a hapless array of cotton and wool, then stood over Robin. I start this terrible day with the hope that some of my high-handed hollowness might collapse, or that I might find a door. I confess that I have blamed Robin, a useless occupation. I haven't always understood that truth wants its tempo and so today I will attempt patience. As I am forgotten in the extremity of her memory, perhaps it is possible that today I might be, from time to time, myself.

Tonight she will not come home.



The Nora Flood who is you grows up in Port Credit, about a mile inland from the lake, next door to the elementary school, and each morning you pace your washing and breakfasting and dressing to the beat of the radio program your father, Jefferson, plays. You step out the front door three minutes before nine; that way you are spared mingling in the schoolyard. It mattered then. It still matters, really. You struggle even yet, on your walks through public space, your Nikon camera in hand: *Look closer. Press deeper.* Now that everything's gone digital, you can see more clearly those schoolyard years, with their moral imperatives of ones and zeroes, of winners

and losers; you have not forgotten just how you learned to be a being out of time.



She must push herself where oral expression is concerned, the teachers report as the terms drag by. My mother Myra has not been inclined to push, and on a rare occasion lies with me instead in the backyard beneath the magnolia tree where we catch its bruised pink petals in our open mouths. Myra stays home, stays out of sight mostly, working in her rose garden while I grow up alone in a dark crib and a playpen and a backyard sandbox, until my fourth birthday, when Myra gets restless and goes to work as a public health nurse. I can read Canada's Food Guide where it hangs inside a kitchen cupboard — three fruits and at least eight glasses of water a day. Myra drinks her eight glasses straight from the running tap, lips pulled back over impeccable teeth as she gulps the water down, her hair held out of the way in one clenched fist. Jefferson cannot stop her, but for me and my sisters the rule is, Use a glass. You must distinguish yourself from the animals.

Myra works in the public schools, parting heads of hair to look for lice. There's a newspaper clipping in one of her scrapbooks, Myra holding an untidy schoolboy's hand while an old doctor administers a vaccine. She's

telling me she took me along in the car where I napped in the back seat while she slipped away to join up with the healing powers. What? I don't remember this. When I ask her, What else? her bath overflows and she's got to end the call. It's only six in the morning in Kitsilano; where is she hurrying to? And what is this business about healing powers?

Robin briefly nods at me over the rim of her coffee cup, an inestimable glance. She looks like death's daughter. Thoughts as indiscriminate as last night's suitcase jerk unspoken across my mind. These weekly phone calls to Myra in Vancouver were Robin's idea, calling impulsively this morning of all mornings was mine. Robin has said, Just love her for an hour here and there. The telephone receiver has the weight of a brick I want to throw.



Robin stands in the middle of the kitchen, rocking from one foot to the other. The robe she wears is torn at the armpit. I can see her breast beneath the terry cloth, can see her soft nipple hardening. Her short black hair rides high and stormy away from her forehead, her eyelids are sticky with mucus. She taps her spoon distractedly against the side of her cup.

She asks, What are your plans for tonight, Nora? She seems to need to approach the stretch of time between

this question and my answer in the way of an aerial acrobat to the rope. I'm watching her, a stiffness gathering at the base of my skull. A voice in my head begins its whispering, *Please come flying*, but I don't understand it at first, it's just a bowdlerized distant singing. A severed and sudden wish for night descends upon me.

I'll call you later, I tell her, but I know I won't.

Please come flying, please come flying, these words rise up now into my mind, lettered fragments, and with these fragments the obsessive counting of minutes until I see Robin again.

Tonight she will not come home.



At twenty-two you move from Toronto to Montreal, you live in a tiny one-and-a-half above a Portuguese bakery. Graffiti on the side of the building reads: *Dehors méchant*. Your upstairs neighbour translates.

It means de snot in your face.

How feminine the city of Montreal, you think. You are alone, without friends. You wait, and the emptiness you gather into your solar plexus is a decoy of magnificent proportions. You fill it with wine and the mechanics of taking a photograph and some anxious thoughts about time, you wait for the shape of your future to appear on the wide stretch of horizon you can see from the lookout

atop Mont Royal. You wait, and while you wait you read the book *Nightwood* far into every night, shaping that Nora Flood's mouth around words you whisper to yourself in the dark, trying to reinvent your life so that you might begin to read the world.



The problems of two people seem as wide as the world to me now.

Send Robin away, whole choruses rise up in exhortation.

Trust no one.

Last night: I lie awake in bed listening to her fumble with her key in the lock, I trace her movements along the darkened hall and into the small room where she sometimes succumbs to its divan. She draws back the heavy coats in the closet, the screech of hanger against metal rod waking the dead. She wrestles awhile with the wet and heavy wool and leather she wears. She is whispering something as she stumbles. My heart begins its night wandering: *Please come flying, please come flying.*

I remember now. This is Elizabeth Bishop, this is her invitation to Marianne Moore. Please come flying on this fine morning over the Brooklyn bridge. This is New York, and Djuna Barnes there too, in her little corner of Greenwich Village on Patchin Place, dragging small blood and her father's laughter. I am in an hour out of

history, out of memory, out of imagination. Something about my conversation with Myra this morning has put this fragment of a poem again in mind. And something about the suitcase, torn open last night in haste while an almost empty bottle of red wine is kicked over, its contents draining away beneath the bed.

Strange how Myra prohibits so many notions. About flying and bridges, I mean; and other things.

I am wearing the secrets Myra gave me, and her terrible frown.



She says, What are you doing tonight? and I tell her I will call her later. But I won't call. And she will stay away. In the years we have lived together, her departures have become a steady increasing rhythm. Once I used to accompany her, into the smoky rooms where she moves from bottle to bottle, from table to table. But as time passes, I let her go alone: After a few hours, she neither remembers me nor wants me. Last night I packed a bag and stood over her, voracious, ready to eat her alive. What will it be, Robin? You choose.

She will never choose. But I take her bait every time.



You meet Robin at a New Year's Eve dance. She sits with Rae, a woman offended by love. Rae and Robin chain-smoke and share a bottle of cheap Spanish wine. Rae waves you over.

We need to learn about respect and inclusion, Robin says. All this romance. It's like we've become enamoured with death.

You might make every woman a death, Rae says, the way you refuse their hearts. I understand you. You're so critical of your lovers.

I'm critical of everything! Listen, the papers say that the time of the lesbian arguing with the world is over. Too few of us continue to perceive the world's manners as absurd. I'm one of the dangerous few, because I don't accept things.

No. You're not dangerous because you don't accept things. You're dangerous because you're blind. Take away some women's conformity and you take away their remedy.

You know this line, but it seems Robin is innocent of it.

That's fucked. Me? Blind? It's not me who's blind. Might as well pluck out my eyes as ask me not to see how everyone is selling out one by one. I can't stand the community's simple answer: We're here! We're queer! Put us on the front page of the *Gazette*!

Jesus, Rae says. You're hysterical.

A year or two in this oversimplified social strategy and your brain goes numb, Robin says, pointing to the

couples dancing in the swirling light. Passivity sets in. Do you think one woman on that dance floor cares about sexual liberation? I hate our times, she says, drawing hard on each syllable.

Resistance exists, you think.

Rae crushes out her cigarette suddenly, scoffing, Smoking stinks. Robin thrusts her hands deep into the pockets of her trousers.

Rae says, Robin, this is Nora Flood. Nora, Robin. Hello.

Robin looks at you and the lines around her eyes soften and slip. Then the clock strikes twelve.

Robin takes your hand and leads you to the centre of the dance floor. I do not want to be here, she says, then offers nothing more. She pulls you toward her, your bodies touching. You falter slightly, awkward and out of step: She waits for you. Her flesh is cool in your hand like a magnolia bud ripped from its branch in a pitching wind, the perfume her skin exhales the damp ground beneath that tree. Montreal becomes spring for an instant, for that moment in deepest December, for that moment in a smoky room within an abstract embrace. You think you should not look at her, for if you do you will become mere belly. Your appetite peaks.

You count the beats in a phrase, wanting the song to end. You can see Rae waving the bottle, beckoning you to come back.

Rae is one of my oldest friends, you offer to Robin as you move away from the dance floor. Rae's heavy glare terrifies you.

Not for long, is what Robin says.



It would be so easy. So easy to lie down in the shadows of the clock striking twelve. We're here! for this one hour only, the hour you first meet. The one and only hour self-contained in its own light.

Will you ever pick up a girl and take her home, promise her nothing, massage her feet, tell her she is beautiful and never see her naked again? Robin wants everything. She lacks nothing. She is unmanageable. She believes in her thoughts. She feels no shyness about her voice.

She needs you.

It is now ten in the morning, and she has finally gone to work. The two of you will not speak today. Don't ask her when next you see her, Do you love me? From now on, only ask questions the answers to which you are prepared to hear.

Is anyone there?

