

## THE SEA-BLUE BACKGROUND

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For a month now Esther had travelled on trains every day, a notebook in her lap, scribbling about what had happened before and after the night she and her husband had sex like it was a deluge—like it was the first time in their fifteen year relationship—and before and after she had mentally said goodbye to her closest friend of fourteen years. She had filled three fat notebooks, doing violence to the page to stop from doing violence to herself, and she was ready to read what she had written now that she could leave the house without crying and now that her child was safe from knives in the night, fine blades and hoarse, tense voices filling the dark as he slept. Killing herself with words might just bring her back to her life, she wrote to herself in the notebooks, but killing with knives could not do that. Words had both soothed and killed her at other times. She could choose such a time now, a moment from the past. It was a time shared with her sister, Ari, when letters had taken long days to pass between them, between their homes on different coasts. Ari had made paper in deep vats of cool water. And with their words the sisters had caressed one another, sometimes gentle, sometimes hard and harsh, and cajoled two drowned men to stay close for a while longer.

To begin, as Ari wrote in one of the letters, she would spend weeks collecting old paper to make her batch of new paper. She gathered great bags of wrappings, tissues, joss paper and napkins.

The evening before a papermaking day she sat down and took a few long, slow hours to tear the collected paper into pieces of about the size and shape of her smallest fingernails. She sat with a bowl of water in her lap and dunked the torn pieces into the water as she worked, trails of dye leaking out

to marble the water. The bowls of water were left overnight to saturate, to start turning back to pulp.

In the morning she whizzed her pulp with a hand-held blender and that was when she could start to see the colours this batch would turn out to be: the mix of the dyes from the paper fragments she had torn and swirled together.

The two men had drowned on a hot afternoon. Ari was close by but it was too far and too impossible to reach them, and Esther was much further away. She learned the story through the gift of her sister's words.

When she made pictures from the words and imagined seeing the two men in the water, Esther saw their open eyes, the whites glittering in the bright hot sunlight. The bodies bobbed in the currents, no longer moving of their own accord. Ari was at the edge of the water and the edge of her sister's vision. Esther wanted to reach out her arms and embrace the scene, squeeze it tight, squeeze the life into it.

And she could almost picture herself drawing the men out of the water, using her will, making her will so strong she could hear the sound of it, a humming sound. It reminded her of calming an animal in a way her father had once taught her. He showed her how to talk softly to her pale grey pet budgerigar, to not make any sudden movement, to concentrate hard, focus on the bird, focus on being gentle and thinking of her love for the bird, beguiling it to trust her. The bird, head cocked, blinking, let her stroke its feathers, fine and softly textured as water, almost not there. Her father put his hand into the cage, and the bird panicked and fluttered about, feathers flying. Then she put her hand in through the tiny door again and the bird settled on the perch, cocking its head once again, watching her fingers smooth its fine patterns of grey and white as she concentrated hard on loving the bird. She heard the concentration like a humming noise in her mind, a humming passing between her and the bird.

Now, grown up, her father gone, she still tried the technique every once in a while. She would be walking through the city, past the state library, along the dark grey concrete, among the statues, and would see a flock of pigeons massing on the ground, and she would walk a path through the middle of

them, *calm, quiet, concentrating*. The hum resonated through her and the birds seemed to barely notice her moving among them. And she tried the technique on the stem-legged waterbirds that picked their way through the dewy grass at work just before nightfall in winter. She moved from the path to the grass, *calm, quiet, concentrating*, walking close, too close, to the waterbirds. They did not startle. They kept up their picking, almost as though they expected that she too would lower a black, pointed beak and pick through her own patch of cold grass.

In her mind-pictures of the two men in the water, she was calm. She concentrated until she hummed. The humming passed over the bank and across the water and it encircled the two men and beguiled their dream-blind, drowned eyes to see again. The humming grew stronger, stronger. Maybe soon it would be strong enough to beguile the men from the water.

In the afternoon, Ari wrote, she would go outside and set up her materials, putting her deep plastic vat in the middle of the grass, overlooking the beach on one side and the estuary on the other, and filling the vat with a cool stream from the hose. She put a card table beside the vat and on that she put a wooden board.

Ari took a pile of freshly laundered and ironed couching cloths—calico cloths each the size of a tea towel—and dipped them in to the vat of water, letting them slowly sink to the bottom. When the fabric was soaked through she took out the cloths and hung them over the back of a chair she had placed beside the card table. Taking the first couching cloth from the top of the dripping pile, she spread it flat over the board on the table. The two pieces of her wooden papermaking mould lay on the grass next to the vat of water. She fetched her bowl of pulp, thick and lumpy like coloured porridge, from the kitchen and took a few handfuls of the pulp and put them into the water. Mixing the pulp, she swished the water about with her hands.

A couple of years after the drownings, Ari had gone to live far north, and was out of Esther's sight for another two years except for the briefest of visits. They each observed that now, especially late at night or just on waking in the morning, it was harder to tell the difference between absences: between who

was dead and who was merely out of sight. Both sisters moved into homes near the sea on their different coasts. Esther's flat had no view of the beach but it had a balcony where she liked to sit at night among her glazed pots of lavender and jasmine, a semi-circle of candles around her and a book in her lap. Ari lived in her flat on the cliff between the beach and the estuary.

The sisters started their letter-writing. They shared a love of words and writing and books and letters and journals and diaries and paper and ink. And they shared their grief during a time when silence had smothered the words of many others around them. The letters arrived in alternate weeks in the letter-boxes of the sisters, each anxiously counting down days of the long, slow post.

To look at now, the letters tied in bundles with ribbon, or scattered across a table, appeared dainty and wispy. But when Esther picked up one, unwrapped it from its envelope, and read, she found the words of the letter still strong and sharp, laced with grief in its telling of dreams, visions, memories, truths.

After a while Ari started to write about her papermaking. Every letter between the sisters still prickled with pointed messages of grief, but now Ari also described in detail the processes of her new hobby. Esther read the words, running her fingers over the nubbly texture of her sister's paper, picturing her high on her cliff overlooking her beach and her estuary, up to her elbows in deep, cool water, and drawing out her fresh new paper.

*(end of excerpt)*