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## OUR BODIES AT HOME

MY SISTER SAYS SHE'S COME BACK because the ocean was wearing her house down the same way water wears rocks down into sand, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

My sister says it was especially bad in the evenings when the tide came in and it became clear that the house hadn't been built far enough inland. There were old French doors that had once been white but had since gone yellow with damage from the sun, and in the evenings the waves came right up to and under those doors, inching in and receding and inching in further and receding again. The doors were flimsy enough that they got pushed forward and pulled back with each wave, and even after my sister managed to latch them shut the water still pushed them forward and pulled them back as though it was trying to pop them off their hinges before the night was through.

And it wasn't just the waves that were the problem; water was finding other ways to let itself in. My sister says there must have been a burst pipe somewhere, because when she did her laundry detergent would bubble up through the holes in the knots of the wooden floorboards and the smell of soap would spread throughout the place. And when it rained, water would leak through the roof, leaving brown oblong shapes on the ceiling, and my sister would lie on her bed and watch those shapes in much the same way that children watch clouds.

My sister's whole house was slowly invaded by water until eventually the doors *did* pop off their hinges, the floorboards came loose, and the walls crumpled down softly and were carried out to sea. All that was left of the building was its frame, and my sister was living in nothing but light through structure.

According to our mother, my sister's come back because all her plans fell through. According to our mother, my sister is the kind of person to blame her poor dancing on the ground not being level. According to our

mother, my sister is the kind of person who is blind to her own faults.

Our mother is the kind of woman who might cross herself incessantly and sleep beneath a crucified Christ made of brass if it weren't for the fact that she doesn't believe in anything that she can't see and touch. So instead of crossing herself, and instead of sleeping with the lazy gaze of Jesus cast down on her, she chews her nails to the quick and sits in front of her vanity mirror each night, moisturizing the skin around her eyes with a cream ordered from a catalogue.

At home, there are little holes in the knots of the wood-panelled walls. If I turn off all the lights in our bedroom but leave the one in the hallway on, it twinkles through like stars—at least it did until my sister came back, because she put a little piece of electrical tape over each one so that our dead grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins couldn't spy on us through the walls any longer.

At home, we're always being watched, and it's always putting us on edge. At home, the house groans in the middle of the night and the doors mysteriously slam shut throughout the day. At home, all of the boys my sister loved in childhood have grown to men and died in car accidents marked by white crosses in roadside ditches. My sister says she intends to pull over one of these days and pay them a visit. At home, our mother's cancer has come and gone again, taking both her breasts with it this time.

Out here, there's no poetry or anything else in the way of warmth or softness. Out here, the feral cats are raped and bled, and sometimes they even eat their own newborns. Out here, when the sows farrow we keep them in a steel pen while their piglets breastfeed, and they don't have room to walk or even turn around. The bars of those steel pens create temporary indentations on the sides of the sows that remind me of the lines left on my sister's torso from the straps and underwire of her bra.

When my sister straightens her hair with the clothes iron, she sometimes burns the skin behind her ears. I've seen the wounds rise up into blisters that feel as smooth as flower petals and look like cuts from a blade. When a man comes around, which is nearly never, my sister holds her body up differently. She walks a walk that is not her own, as though possessed. Every word that comes out of her mouth sounds like either disdain or discontent.

My sister says this place has always been a misery. Even before she left, all she ever talked about was leaving.

There's a man who lives next to us who owns an upright piano that no one ever plays. He sets traps where his fields meet the forest, and when a coyote is caught it either chews its own leg off to escape or he shoots it in the head. There's a girl who lives across the street who's three years older than me and three years younger than my sister, and on more than one occasion I've watched her drown kittens in a barrel full of rain water.

As far as I can tell, these people exist to give this place more depth and nuance, but beyond that they don't serve any purpose. As far as I can tell, there's nothing that exists outside of this place; only things that exist for it. There's a car that drops off the mail at the end of our long driveway, there are salespeople who stop by to sell encyclopedias or vacuums or kitchen knives, and there's a man who occasionally comes to borrow our chainsaw, but as soon as they bring what they are bringing, sell what they are selling, or borrow what they are borrowing, they go back out into the grey nothing that is everything outside of this place.

After our mother falls asleep in front of the television, my sister brings an opened bottle of wine into our room and stretches her body out on her mattress like an exhale. She talks about the restaurants she used to go to when she was away and the names of her favourite drinks. Soon after my sister left, she reinvented herself with the help of her new friends—girls who styled fashion spreads, who didn't have to work for much, who sometimes woke up in unfamiliar beds with bruises on their bodies, and who never learned how to take care of themselves because they were always waiting for someone else to do it for them.

My sister went out into the world as aggressive as a newcomer. My sister went out into the world holding a knife by the blade. My sister went out into the world electric with an anger turned in toward herself. My sister says she thought about this place all the time when she was away. No matter how far she went, she couldn't get away from it. She says she knew deep down that eventually this place would drag her back. She says this place used to come to the front door of her house by the sea, and she used to pretend she wasn't home. She says she would hear it knocking, and she would freeze still as a corpse with the sheets pulled up over her head until it left.

My sister lies awake in bed at night and says that if I ever get the chance to leave, I should do it and never come back—not even when our mother's cancer does or the house falls in. If the rain leaks through the roof, let it leak through your body, leaving brown oblong shapes on your skin. If the ocean

wears the house down, let it wear you down the same way water wears rocks down into sand. If it carries the house away, let it take you with it.

One day my sister will go into the field and be buried with the corn, and one day our mother's body will waste away and I will spread her ashes across the creek. One day I will be the only one left, and no one will come around here again. There won't be any mothers or sisters or neighbours or salesmen, and there will no longer be anyone for our dead grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins to spy on through the knots in the walls. I will feel myself grow older one day at a time, and I will become a more silent and hardened person than I am now. I will get up each morning to bring in the newspaper and feed the animals. I will chew my nails to the quick and sit in front of the vanity mirror each night, moisturizing the skin around my eyes with a cream ordered from a catalogue. I will attend to my routines as if they were the rituals of the devout. They will mark the passing of each day in much the same way that one crosses yesterdays off a calendar.