

BEYOND A WINDING RIBBON OF SAND, the water of English Bay supports mammoth bellies of cargo ships. The trees beside the seawall are still the deep green of summer. Behind the glass buildings of downtown, purple mountains are silhouetted against the sky.

She steps out of the cab and feels moisture on her skin, in her throat, curling her hair. Who says you can't remake yourself? Strange and desperate things happen to everyone. Her name is Lucy Gwendolyn Morgan and she is starting over, this minute.

She checks herself into a hotel overlooking the ocean. Out on the balcony, she leans against the wrought iron railing. In the distance, the dark body of Vancouver Island stretches across the horizon of water like a sleeping sea monster. She runs her hands unconsciously across her abdomen, her eyes drifting over the landscape. A flicker of fear behind her ribs. She turns back inside, starts humming to herself, something comforting, distracting, a Christmas carol about snow and a warm fire. She begins to unpack, taking her time hanging her clothes in the closet, carefully folding and stacking by colour in the bureau drawers. Balling up and throwing the long, striped witchy stockings in the wastebasket – no more magic spells for her.

When she gets down to the beach, low tide has exposed the densely barnacled rocks. Seagulls screech and soar in the wind. Her eyes scan the wave-patterned sand and she bends down, picking up shells and stones to fill her pockets.

After the sun drops beneath the horizon, she walks along Denman Street looking in store windows. At a corner grocer she buys a tin of sardines, a loaf of bread and some pomegranates. Back at the hotel, she empties her pockets, piling the shells and stones onto window ledges in her room. She lines the fruit up beside the shells to ripen. Little altars.

She floats in the bathtub, her legs crossed at the ankles, with the window open beside her, letting in the dark. Holding her nose, she slips her head beneath the surface, listening to the faraway pulse of the building's internal organs circulating heat, hot water, electricity. She bobs up and opens her eyes, inhales, rising higher in the water. Exhales. Sinking down to her eye corners. Inhale, rise up. Such high ceilings here. Exhale. Feeling the weight of gravity like a stone on her chest. Virginia Woolf. Ophelia. Blossoms. Splayed hair, a floating halo, death nimbus.

She pushes her arms against the sides of the tub, alternating, moving her body slowly back and forth. Her hair flows along with her, weeds in the tide. Crackle of wrist bones, small gold ring clinking against porcelain. How long does it take a drowned person to become waterlogged and sink? Do lost bodies move like this when they come to rest on the ocean floor?



A new day. Alone in a new city. The September sun is shining warm, and the air blowing in the window is fresh and salty on Lucy's tongue. She picks clothes in colours she doesn't usually wear together and puts them on. Outside, she buys a coffee and drinks it as she walks through the streets of the West End.

When she arrives at the art gallery, she opens the heavy doors, drops her coins in the box and walks through to the main foyer. White staircases curl up on either side of the rotunda, bathed in

light from a domed window above. She makes her way to the top floor.

The walls are filled with paintings by Emily Carr. Deep, mysterious woods swirling with greens and browns. Tree branches and blue sky with so much life that they undulate against the flat canvasses. She goes to a glass case where some of the sketchbooks are displayed. She leans closer, taking in the ink drawings, the scribbled text. Then she smells cinnamon and senses someone standing to her left. Glancing quickly, Lucy sees a woman with big brown eyes and a mess of copper hair. The woman speaks first.

‘Have you been to the second floor?’

‘Not yet.’

‘There’s a forest down there.’

‘A forest?’

‘Yeah. An installation about trees. If you like Emily Carr –’

‘I like your hair. It’s a great colour.’

Lucy blurts it out. Unintentional. The woman smiles. Her teeth are bad but her lips are full and sensual. She has a lot of freckles. Something about her makes Lucy think of olives.

‘I’m Cassy.’

She extends her hand. Her fingernails are curved and shining, growing out from a body that must be filled with moisture. There’s dirt under her thumbnail and her hand feels cool.

‘Lucy.’

Her eyes flicker up and down Lucy’s body once before she withdraws her hand.

‘Are you an art student?’ she asks.

‘No. Singer.’

‘Where?’

‘Mostly in the shower these days. And you, an actor?’

‘Why?’

‘You’re not shy.’

'You don't seem too shy yourself?

Lucy looks down at her boots, the hem of her skirt. This woman is making her say strange things.

'The Holy Circus is giving a performance tonight. Want to go?'
Cassy asks.

'What is it?'

'Crazy-ass hocus-pocus theatre. Must be seen to be believed. If you want, I can pick you up.'

Cassy flashes her wide smile again. She's playing with a folded piece of her hair, flipping it back and forth with her fingers across her mouth. Near the back of her left earlobe is a tiny silver earring in the shape of a cat. Lucy is feeling hot and prickly, a wave of lava pushing its way up towards her skin.

They arrange to meet at the hotel at 7:30.

On her way from the gallery back to the hotel, Lucy stops and rests on a bench. She takes a folded piece of paper and a pen out of her bag and composes a list:

Catalytic: Variations on Desire

aching behind my belly button

wishing for relief

craving a fancy

I'd give my eye teeth for

a sweet

heart

hunger and thirst

(unsatisfied)

to die for

(a person who is dangerous)

She likes making lists. It smoothes out her insides.



March 16, 1971

Gwendolyn (Wren) Morgan

b. February 6, 1944 d. March 11, 1971, age 27

There it is in black and white. True. Five days you've been gone now. Food has no taste. I carry you in the hollow of my stomach. I must write to you to feel human. I'll tell you everything so you can take part in the lives of our children. So you have eyes to see. Their lives and mine. So you never feel alone.

This is what I saw.

When it was time to move, the boy came first, one arm stretched out before him, reaching. The girl followed three minutes later, pushed forward on a tide of blood. Clotted and slick onto the sheet between your legs. It seemed to happen so quickly, all that awful blood. Then, somehow, suddenly, it was too late, and I was holding you. You looked into my eyes. And you were gone.

Fathomless.

I took the babies home, two flannel bundles. Quiet, like they knew crying wouldn't bring you back. Cinders whimpering, sniffing their new bodies, looking for you. I built a fire. The twins and me on the couch, Cinders lying on the warm linoleum beside the wood stove. All of us pulled down into uneasy sleep.

I never dreamed I would be doing this without you.



She gets down to the lobby at 7:25 and Cassy is already there, sitting in one of the big armchairs, drinking and smoking a cigarette. Seeing Lucy, Cassy finishes the rest of her drink and stands up. She is wearing a black sweater and a pair of wine-coloured velvet pants. Her lipstick matches her pants and leaves a waxy crescent on the edge of the glass. She is a tightly coiled spring and moves quickly. Lucy takes a step back to give her space.

In the car, Cassy passes Lucy a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket. It's an address: 453 Richards Street.

She drives like she moves, in short bursts, with a kinetic intensity that is both alarming and attractive. Her head and hands constantly in motion. Lucy opens the window to let out the cigarette smoke, gripping the inside of the door with her right hand. Her head bobs back and forth as Cassy jerks her way into a parking spot, bumping the back of the car in front, and coming to a stop about a foot and a half from the curb.

She runs a hand through her hair, jangling a collection of multi-coloured glass bangles, and looks at Lucy, flashing a smile. 'I didn't say I was a good driver.'

They walk down a back alley and Cassy knocks on a warehouse door. It is opened by a woman wearing a peacock costume. The air is cool and damp inside the dimly lit entrance. They buy tickets and the peacock woman stamps their hands with a star that glows neon in the black light.

'You've only missed about fifteen minutes,' she says, waving them through with a viridescent arm.

Burning candles line the floor of the hallway. Lucy wanders into a room on the left. Cassy follows. A stage is set up at one end. They stand near the door with a few other people. Lucy feels Cassy near her elbow and there is the faint scent of her: cigarettes, cinnamon,

brandy. Lucy shifts her weight from one foot to the other. Her arm brushes Cassy's breast. People stop talking as it gets dark and music starts to play.

A deep bass rhythm begins to fill the room like a heartbeat. Light gradually seeps into the darkness, and choral voices can be heard rising above the bass. As the light and music grow stronger, a tree floats down from the ceiling into the audience. A woman is perched in the tree wearing a sparkling white dress that clings to the curves of her body like fish scales. From her back spring two pale, opalescent blue wings that move slightly in the air. As the music fades out, she begins making birdcalls with her mouth.

Birds start flying in through two open doors and perch on her arms, the wires of her wings and the tree branches that surround her. There are sparrows, crows, finches, starlings, red-winged blackbirds, and they're all singing; the air full of chirping, cawing, trilling. Then the woman starts making loud peeping sounds that go higher and faster than the sounds of the birds. The air vibrates and begins to fill with butterflies, transforming the room into something plush and supple, alive with wings, colour and sound. After some time, the woman changes her tune, and as fast as they came, the birds and butterflies stream out through the open doors. The heavy, hypnotic music begins again as the shimmering bird-woman in her tree lifts up and out of the crowd.

Lucy can't speak. Cassy touches her arm and motions towards the hallway.

In the next room, a man is tied to a cross in front of the far wall. Censers billow fragrant smoke and stained-glass panels cast patches of coloured light onto the faces of the audience.

Lucy shoots Cassy a startled look.

'Is he okay?' she whispers.

Cassy nods quickly without saying anything.

The man hangs peacefully, his eyes half-closed, trance-like. He doesn't appear to be in pain and there are no nails, but he's got wounds in his hands, feet and side, which are dripping slowly, making small pools of blood on the cement floor. A recorded voice wraps the room in a cocoon of echoes. *You are free to approach and touch his wounds, take his blood into your hands and ask questions: Who is this man? Is he different from me? Is this a strange phenomenon? Can I believe it?*

Lucy moves forward and dips her finger in the blood by his left foot. It seems genuine. It's starting to congeal. Blood is dangerous these days. It's quite bold of him to bleed so flagrantly.

Cassy has gone on ahead. Lucy wanders towards a room that pours out electronic music, her body pulled towards the sound. Tall lightboxes line the walls. A naked woman with no hair moves in time to the music, doing a kind of slow underwater dance, snaking her body against the backdrop of light. She is sensual at the same time as she seems impossibly immaculate, having no superfluous flesh or hair to break her smooth surface.

When her eyes adjust, Lucy sees that the lightboxes are making the woman into an x-ray, her internal organs clearly visible through her skin, which forms a hazy white line around her edges. Lucy can see her liver, her intestines, her stomach. She can see her heart beating. This woman conducts light like metal conducts electricity.

She feels a hand on her shoulder. Cassy pulls her out of the room and into the corridor, where a man is standing.

'Lucy, this is Phineas Drake, the founder of the Circus.'

She extends the hand without blood on it.

'Hi, good to meet you.'

Something familiar about him causes her stomach to catch.

'I see you've experienced our stigmata man,' he says, glancing quickly at her fingers. 'How are you enjoying the show?' His head is cocked, a smile playing around his eyes.

Her mouth feels dry. She licks her lips.

'It's different.'

'She's a singer,' Cassy chimes in, leaning forward and squeezing Lucy's elbow. 'But she's too shy to tell you.'

Lucy feels herself blushing.

'What do you sing?'

When she answers, her tongue feels like wool in her mouth and her voice is an octave higher than usual.

'Oh, you know, standards, stuff I make up. Just odds and ends, really.'

He reaches into his jacket pocket and hands her his card.

'I'm auditioning new acts on Wednesday, if you're interested.'

The peacock woman comes up behind him, murmuring something into his ear.

'Please excuse me.'

He bows slightly and walks away.

Cassy leans over, her lips brushing Lucy's ear.

'I think he liked you. Not everyone gets a personal invitation.'



March 19, 1971

Wren,

Their names are as we planned: Levi if it was a boy, Lucy if it was a girl. Levi and Lucy. Our beautiful golden-haired twins.

After the funeral I wanted only to lie down and sleep. Being there was exhausting – seeing your parents, my mother and sister, all our

university friends. Could barely talk to anyone. Going through the motions.

That damn poem we used to sing has been circling round my head now for three days – the Christina Rossetti one. Remember?

*'Ferry me across the water,
Do, boatman, do.'
If you've a penny in your purse
I'll ferry you.'*

Now it's part of me, like a deadhead on the lake, knocking up against the shore with each wave. Useless without you.

How could you leave me with all of this? My hands so full and so empty.



The day of her audition, Lucy sleeps in late, wakes up ravenous and orders room service. When the food arrives – French toast with butter, maple syrup and strawberries, scrambled eggs, a pot of tea, grapefruit juice – she suddenly feels nauseous and loses her appetite. All she can manage is the tea. She runs a bath, pouring bubbles under the tap, making a mountain of suds. She looks at herself standing naked in front of the bathroom mirror. Her body feels unfamiliar, as if it belongs to someone else. She is tired. Her breasts are swollen and hurt with the slightest touch or movement. A seed of panic sprouts in her. *What if I billow up like a huge balloon? What if I start growing and just don't stop?* She wishes that this were Wonderland, that there were a little bottle or cake to shrink her into a smaller size in case she gets too big. She climbs in the tub and leans back, sipping the clear tea, comforted by the weightless suspension she feels. Amniotic.

She had that sense of certainty when Phineas mentioned the auditions. Like those times when she's showering, eyes closed, head streaming with the wet rush of hot water, and she can feel the vast oiled machine of the cosmos clicking behind her skull. A glimpse of events usually hidden from view – the entire mechanism in sync, one gear grooved to fit into the next. Singing with perfection.

She prepares, deciding to wear the pink skirt with silver flowers stitched onto the hemline. She has chopped her hair off and dyed it a deep bluish black, a mess of twirled licorice. Midnight Sky, the box said. A new colour, a new you. Addictive.

She puts on pale blue eyeshadow and the lipstick with peppermint oil that makes her lips tingle. A close-fitting black shirt and she's ready to go.

The place is distinguishable only by a small turquoise bird painted above the door handle. She climbs the steep stairs slowly, taking deep breaths to collect herself, sniffing quickly under each arm. Her mind skitters back to her audition at the Royal Conservatory in the spring. How she was sweating then, trying to maintain her composure, smiling at the jury before opening her mouth to sing.

She looks up just as a woman wearing a feather boa brushes past on her way down. A couple of brilliant blue feathers are swept up in the air behind her as she disappears out the door.

At the top of the stairs, the room is dark and quiet. Plush burgundy chairs and violet glass. Lucy stands for a moment listening to her own breathing. Calm. Her clothes cling damply to her skin. She licks her lips. Thirsty. A mild wave of nausea grips her and then passes. She swallows, her throat dry.

'Yes, please come in.' A man's voice somewhere in the darkness.

She moves towards the voice like a swimmer, arms pushing through humid air. Then he appears before her, seated at a round table beside a dance floor.

He pours her a glass of water from a pitcher in front of him and motions for her to sit down.

‘Thank you.’ She drinks half the water from the glass, keeping her eyes on him.

‘I’m Lucy. We met the other –’

‘I remember.’ He refills her glass, smiles and leans back in his chair. He is wearing a white cotton shirt, open at the neck. His dark hair falls in loose curls around his face. His hands are graceful, with long fingers. She can imagine him playing an instrument. She wonders where he is from, how old he is. She feels conspicuously pink and blue and glittering.

‘To be honest, Mr Drake, I’m not sure why I’m here. I enjoyed your Circus, but I’m not like any of those people. I’m not really a professional singer yet. I mean, I got a scholarship to the Conservatory but I had to defer until next year, so ... I’m just starting out.’

Phineas looks at her as if he’s seeing something just beyond her head. She pulls herself up so she’s sitting straight and meets his gaze. She can’t decide if it’s pleasant or unnerving. She hopes her voice doesn’t break.

‘And yet you came here today. So why don’t you try singing something for me and we’ll go from there.’

She notices that he is playing with a small aqua-coloured bird like the one on the door, rolling it back and forth across his palm. It looks hard, like it’s made of some kind of stone or mineral. She’s feeling hungry. The bird looks good enough to eat. She wants to lick it.

‘Anything?’

‘Whatever you want.’ His voice is smooth, gentle.

She stands up and moves towards the middle of the dance floor. Her black shoes make a good clip-clap sound as she walks. She turns her back to him and closes her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she begins quietly, remembering how Judy sang it in the movie, yearning, her face young and fresh, with those big eyes and ruby lips.

*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high,
There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby,
Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.*

Her voice is faint, barely more than a whisper. She hopes that he can hear her.

*Someday I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me,
Where troubles melt like lemon drops,
Away above the chimney tops, that's where you'll find me.*

She is gaining strength now. Feeling something like elation building behind her ribs.

*Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true,
If happy little bluebirds fly
Above the rainbow, why oh why can't I?*

She finishes, feeling taller, wider, sweat beading on her forehead. She wipes her face with the back of her hand and turns around. His expression is unguarded, hands folded in his lap. She smiles as she approaches the table, and so does he, his teeth a white puncture glowing in the murk of the room.

‘Thank you. That was lovely.’

She isn't sure if he is serious or not. She looks down at her fingers. She did a good job of applying her nail polish this morning. It is perfect and shimmering and doesn't touch any of her cuticles.

‘I need to hire a personal assistant. Would that interest you?’ he asks, his voice pulling her back.

‘I know it was just a standard song –’

‘The song was fine, Lucy. Don’t get me wrong, I think we could use you in the Circus, but right now, I really need an assistant. Our shows for this year are finished, and I’m preparing for our spring tour. Paperwork, interviews, promotion, that kind of thing. You could start right away.’

She pauses, realizing that her nervousness has disappeared.

‘I’ll need some time to think about it.’

‘Of course. Call me when you’ve decided.’

She stands up to go and they shake hands. His grip is warm and firm.

She looks in his eyes; they’re dark brown, deep-set. ‘Is it really happening, what goes on in those rooms, or is it done with a lot of gizmos?’ she asks him.

He nods, pushing his hair behind his ears and walking with her towards the back of the room where she came in. ‘Well, I’m not the great Oz, if that’s what you mean, but it’s an understandable question. They are things we aren’t used to seeing every day. My question for people who come to see the Circus is whether being unable to explain something means that it can’t exist. Science can explain how a fetus develops inside a woman’s uterus, but it still can’t understand the innate ordering of information, the miracle of cellular intelligence.’

She realizes she is looking at him with her mouth agape and snaps it shut. He starts talking again before she can reply.

‘I’ve come to believe that there are many possible ways of being human.’ He smiles and shakes her hand again before turning around and disappearing back into the dim room, leaving her alone at the top of the stairs.

‘See you soon,’ she hears him call out.

She makes her way down to the door. Out on the street she feels rain on her head and lifts her face to the heavy dusk of the sky.



March 23, 1971

Wren,

What is left is here beside me in a canister. A few ashes. Your body.

There will be no burial and slow decomposition. You will not become worms. I know this is the way you would have wanted it – the clean sweep of fire, pure and final. Though we never spoke of such things.

I will carry you outside after daybreak. Into your birds, your sun on my back and face, into your wind. I will take you up onto the hill near the plum trees, and I will free you to the elements there. You will live on this land and around this house forever. You will always be a part of this place.



In Kitto on Granville Street it's starting to get busy with early dinner customers. Japanese pop music blares above the buzz of conversations. Steam fogs the windows, transforming the restaurant into a cozy bubble of happiness. Lucy orders her new favourite things: green tea, vegetable tempura, steamed rice and a salmon roll. The perfect meal to fill her up and keep her light. Just the right amount of food – satisfying without giving her that stretched-out feeling. A tiny laxative every other day to keep the whole thing moving, and she is a pipeline, narrow and lean.

She is letting herself be absorbed here, becoming Asian from the inside out. Transforming through the powers of daikon radish, ginger, green tea, seaweed and rice. Loving the way that sushi looks

like cells. Seaweed cell wall, rice protoplasm, fish and vegetable nucleus. Like eating a miniature version of life itself.

She imagines her new Japanese self: beautiful, with a musical laugh and a sweet smile. Flawless skin. Straight black hair. No unnecessary body fat. She will stay up late eating noodles, drinking coffee and watching movies with her friends, laughing. She will travel all over the world taking pictures. Happy all the time.

She walks to Chinatown, giving herself over to the exotic, basking in the frenzy of stimuli. Weeping carcasses of meat in windows. Salted turnip, two bags for ninety-nine cents. Tea in tins: gunpowder, jasmine, chrysanthemum, Oolong, Pu-erh. Bags of fortune cookies. Heaps of bok choy, knobby jackfruit, flattened chicken legs, pork hearts, lychee nuts, spiky-haired rambutan. Shelves of clear plastic boxes containing preserved plum, mango and pineapple. Everything salted and shrivelled, with a shelf life extending into eternity. She allows herself to be carried along, unnoticed in the warm press of bodies and the hubbub of voices. It's like she's in another country, among friends, but safely anonymous. Entirely at home in the sea of people.

Back at the hotel, suddenly exhausted, she sleeps and dreams of dogs. When Cinders disappeared, her father said she had run away with the wolves, but Lucy never believed him. In these dreams, Cinders is back. Lucy holds the dog's head in her lap while Cinders licks her hands. She strokes the floppy velvet ears with her fingers, pressing her cheek against them. Nothing in the world as soft as this.

She wakes and catches herself thinking of Cassy. Imagines being curled up in her arms, Cassy's hair falling in an amber curtain between them and the world. Finding a kind of shelter in the glow of her fire.

