

ALICE

Eleanor lies naked on the bed. No thoughts, she is pale and empty and a little chilly from the air-conditioning. She receives information from her senses but barely processes anything: she imagines how the light that penetrates onto her retina creates minute-by-minute changes in local R-rhodopsin molecules and how this news is captured and flashed along neurons, releasing keyed neurotransmitters along the way only to arrive breathless at the sluggish halls of her brain. New data mixes with the old and just wanders about unrecorded, unremarked until it slips onto the mound of grey memory that's been building up for...? How long had she been like this, afloat in a pool of empty white time?

She rolls her head on the pillow and there's the world framed in the floor-to-ceiling window: the resort grounds, astro-turf, pool, rattan bar, Budweiser umbrellas; next, a patch of scrubby wasteland and then, filling all the middle ground nearly up to the ceiling, the desert cliffs blazing in the afternoon light.

‘What do they think...?’ her lover Eric says as he pulls off his shirt and throws it on the floor. Eric had become Italian for this trip. Dressed in seersucker pants and loud shirts he uses words like ‘bella’ and ‘caro’. ‘Tomart.’ He’d said this at the salad bar yesterday: ‘Back in my family’s village, my Nonna used to grow the sweetest largest...*tomaart*.’

She looks at the shirt on the floor: vivid against the charcoal rug, the arm outstretched like an omen.

‘...They think that we have the strength,’ Eric continues, ‘to pull these’—he huffed—‘damn bedclothes back every day over and over?’ He climbs over to her, nuzzles her neck and takes a nipple into his mouth.

She continues to stare at his shirt, while from afar she receives signals from his teeth at her breast. He pushes her legs apart. Beyond the window is the glory of the desert: rocks burning in forty-degrees, scarlets, salmons and ochres and tumbles of pink boulders down toffee-coloured slopes. ‘Amore bella,’ he says as he moves inside her. She plays with the curls on the back of his neck, idly running a finger back and forth. A bur on her nail catches and she plays it across the thin skin covering his spine and all that vulnerable wiring. She presses a little harder wondering just how much pressure would be needed to...

Being Italian, Eric mistakes this for arousal. ‘Bella ti amo,’ he growls and pulls her harder against him. Her view of the ridgeline shifts and now she can see a curl of grey smoke rising into the sky.

—

Every morning Eric swims while Eleanor stretches out on the bench beside the pool. His body plunges through the water again and again and at each end he tumbles over causing a wave to fall on the mats and trickle down into the gutters and from there drain into the thirsty sand. Twenty, twenty-five, forty. At fifty he stops and presses himself up onto the decking, chest heaving, hair flattened against his skull. She holds a towel out to him and then lies back watching the sky and the black angular birds orbiting in the thermals, hawks, desert eagles, shrikes.

‘What do you think they eat?’ she muses as one closes its wings and hurtles down. ‘I mean in this desert? Bugs, rodents?’

Eric pads away rolling his shoulders and stretching from side to side. ‘Probably rubbish,’ she thinks. ‘Rubbish from the town’.

‘Ungh.’ Eric is panting into her shoulder as she watches the fire’s approach. It’s rushing down the slope and catching in the long grass at the edge of the lawns.

‘Uuu-ungh.’

She lifts herself onto one arm. Neck cords straining, he starts cursing her. ‘Battona. Con avere rapporti sessuali. Fica. Fottere.’ The fire has whirled up a storm of burnt leaves and ash which is falling onto the pool and the deck. Tourists are running about swatting at their hair. The cabana is alight and flames are along the gutters heading for the main buildings. Some resort workers have dragged a hose over and are squirting a thin stream at the flames.

On the second day they had signed up for a bus tour. While waiting they had made polite conversation with the other tourists: incidents with itineraries, accommodation in-experiences, flight dis-combinations, landscape options. But when a cheerful honk announced arrival of their bus the conversation died. Tension ran through the group, as they each had to face that in-between moment: the moment of exposure to raw space between airlocks; cross the gap between the stewed-coffee air of the lobby and the pine-freshened air-con of the coach. It was only a step, maybe two, but the heat of the day and the essential desert waited for each of them.

Then they were off.

She pressed her head against the glass as scenes of the town passed like postcards:

- A white man sitting in the gutter with no shoes and no shirt;
- A brown dog with a broken paw snarling at a small black dog;
- A woman in a floral dress scolding a child and dragging her by the arm, the child reaching back for a doll dropped in the gutter;
- A tall boy playing a didgeridoo, resting the body of the instrument on the bare shoulder of a girl who walked in front holding a cap out for coins;
- A black man staggering through the arcade, two policemen in khaki uniforms leaning, watching;

- Two women and a thin boy joggling a laden shopping trolley along the dry riverbed.

As the bus left the town behind she watched the hills and the grasses and the low bushes flash by—

— The ocean had returned and once more inundated the desert. She was a diver signed on to catalogue the flora of this pre-Cambrian reef. But the current was vast and unexpected and now, helpless she's carried in the flood rushing over mountains. She was just more flotsam ready for the sea machine to abrade and render opaque like the glass she used to find on the shore walking with her father.

'Aboriginal artefacts and cultural centre,' said the driver as the bus slowed. Coming into view was a flat plain where children sat in the dust. The bus stopped and with a hiss of pneumatics the door popped open. 'Fifteen minutes.'

Eric was already up and down the steps and strutting about making expansive Mediterranean-style arm movements. The rest of them sat where they were, anxiously peering across to the tables set with trinkets.

Two old women strolled over to the bus.

Behind Eleanor a man was whispering gently to his wife, 'Come on Alice, it'll be fine.' But Alice would have none of it and started crying softly while clinging to her seat.

Eleanor put on sunscreen, a hat and wrap-around sunglasses and climbed down but on the last step she slipped. 'Ay you want a watch your step laydee,' said one of the old women, eyes twinkling like stars. 'Doan want to hurt yesself

on our land now.' The women cackled at this but one offered a strong hand, which Eleanor took.

She walked unsteadily across to one of the tables on which some small squares of art were laid out like hankies. 'Whachew got behind them glasses missus?' said a young girl in a *Nike* sweatshirt. She reached up for Eleanor's sunglasses. 'A wonder you can see anythin.' The girl took the glasses by the frames and lifted them gently away. Part of Eleanor wanted to pull back but instead she lowered her head so the girl could reach more easily. 'That's better eh?'

And the light came rushing in.

—

Afterwards on the bus Eric berated her. '...And what's she going to do with a pair of Vespucis? They don't need glasses, this is their home, they're comfortable in the brightness, they've been here for ages, for millennia. It's us who need the protecting.' She sat silent feeling the place where the girl's fingers had touched her forehead.

—

Back in their room Eric was doing push-ups, 'ventiquattro, venticinque, ventisette...' while Eleanor was in the bathroom. The spot where the girl had touched her stung. She examined it closely in the mirror adjusting the lighting. She felt a trembling hot nervousness: perhaps she should vomit. Maybe the girl had some deliberate allergenic dust on her hands or was a carrier for some form of canine eczema. No matter how hard she looked there was nothing there, really nothing.

She filled a glass and took a mouthful of salty tap-water and then held the tumbler up, feeling the weight, the bulbous rim and the heavy base in which a spritz of bubbles were fixed—what would it take to...?

Glass exploded across the marble floor and jagged into the soft mound of her palm. Rubies ran across her wrist and dribbled down her elbow.

'Shit,' Eric said, 'you've...'

'I feel...' she said holding her bloody hand out to him. It stung and burned but she was oddly pleased. Here was proof that she was alive or at least had some capacity. That was something surely? 'I feel,' she repeated, trying the phrase out. Yes, this was definitely something.

—

Their room is now hazy with fumes and an alarm is whooping away, so they get up, pack quickly and step out into the smoky corridor. Ignoring the sign that reads *In case of fire do not use the elevators*, Eric bundles their suitcases into the mirrored lift and presses the G on the console.

'Level 2' is the last thing the lift said to them. That was five minutes ago. The floor indicator failed, the recessed halogens dimmed, there was a judder and the lift stopped.

They stand in the darkness.

'Things just happen and then they're over and then the next thing starts,' she thought to herself as smoke rose up about them. Eric is saying something but she can't make out his words, it's like he's talking from really far away even though he's right next to her. She's not sure she likes Eric as Italian. He's too fiery, too

impulsive (take the lift episode for instance). Maybe she needs someone cooler—someone Scandinavian, maybe a Norse.

Eventually, they collapse over their luggage like a pair of dolls and Eleanor dreams. She's at dinner at that expensive terrace restaurant with the Aboriginal girl from the camp. The girl is still wearing Eleanor's sunglasses even though it is evening and the room is candlelit. It's distracting because she keeps catching her sour bent image reflected back at her. Courses come one after another and before she's even had time to start on one the waiter plonks a new dish right on top: 'confit of duck with lemon myrtle', 'crab bisque with lobster veloute'; parfait of quail, cherries flambé. No matter how she tries to tidy, to contain, food falls off, plates overflow and tumble onto the floor. She hasn't much of an appetite anyway and she's worried because her money and credit cards are back in the lift with Eric who's saying something to her in Swedish and shaking her by the shoulders. The dream continues in this way until the fire brigade pries open the lift doors and applies oxygen to the fallen pair.

Later, an ambulance drives them out to the airport and then a plane lifts them into the sky. Eleanor watches from the window as they circle the town passing over the burned acreage and the smouldering ruin of the resort. She pulls the bandage from her hand and looks at the trio of black stitches that the medic has tied in her torn flesh. They look like ants buried in her livid skin, just the stiff little legs poking out. What are they up to in there? She puts her hand to her mouth and bites down hard.

—