

HAZEL ATKINSON

Venus Rising

The sea just before sundown is alive with colour; the usual dark and rolling emptiness pales on the horizon, a lighter, brighter blue than the heavy clouds above, while all around gulls skim the surface. White surf glints as it kisses the shore, the sharp rocks.

These are the liminal moments; the edge lands. Alice is sat, knees pulled up to her chin; she watches as the last flashes of light dip and fade into the waves, which now swell black and bloated. Breathes in-out, in-out; the soothing suck and pull of the tide.

She walks back slowly, dragging her feet a little as she passes the old stone church, looks hopefully up the steps. The beeping from a battered Audi shocks her almost out of her skin, and as Father Bride drives past, one arm waving from an open window, she catches sight of her own pale face and wide, staring eyes in the shining metal. She rubs at the back of her jeans, hopes the stain where wet grass has soaked through is not too visible.

"Alice? Is that you?" Her mother's voice as the door creaks open. She bustles into view, red-faced and a damp tea towel in her hand. "Where have you been? Tea's almost out the oven."

"Sorry. Just went for a walk."

"Well get cleaned up. David's coming round."

Alice rolls her eyes. "Oh joy."

Her mother shoots her a sharp look, tightens her grip on the tea towel. Her high cheeks deepen in colour.

"Come on now. None of that."

HAZEL ATKINSON

"How was your day, Ali?" David always talks with his mouth full. She can see the pulp of green broccoli stems crushed and churned beneath his molars as he turns in her direction, and wrinkles her nose.

"It's Alice. And fine," she corrects, short. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see her mother glaring. She ignores her, picks at the food on her plate. David, as usual, is oblivious and chunters on happily—"amazing potatoes Moira"—as Alice feels her stomach tighten. She sighs.

"May I be excused? I'm not feeling well."

"What? You've hardly touched your food."

David lays a hand on her mother's arm. "Let her go Moira, she's probably coming down with something. Lots of bugs going about at the moment. Means more for me anyway—seconds?"

Alice does not look at him as she stalks from the table.

As she lies in bed, she can hear a low murmuring and the occasional throaty giggle from the kitchen below. She stuffs a pillow over her head, tries to sleep.

"Bless me father, for I have sinned."

There are candles this evening; they line the church and cast a soft glow over the pews, the altar, the red-brown wood of the confessional box. She can feel the light dancing across her cheek as she turns her head this way and that, and wonders if it makes her look pretty.

"Alice, this is the fourth time this week. It really isn't necessary for you to confess so often."

She pauses.

"You can't call me Alice. This is an anonymous confession. Else what'd be the point of the screen?"

She can hear the smile in his reply. "Very well then. Regale me with your latest transgressions."

Later, he lets her sit with a cup of strong cocoa as he prepares for evening mass. She watches him, quiet. Then—"So what do you think I should do?"

He is surprised. "Do? Whatever do you mean? Try and accept

VENUS RISING

this David, I suppose. For your mother's sake. And your own."

"But she's married still."

"Well, in the eyes of the church, yes—but you know that cannot be undone."

"In God's eyes," she retorts. "And mine. Do you believe in God?"

Father Bride laughs, and the sound echoes around the vaulted room. "Alice, I'm a priest!"

Serious. "But do you?"

He stops laughing, and looks at her. Properly looks, so that she can see his wide, ink-dark pupils, the golden flecks in his brown eyes; he seems suddenly very young.

"Yes, Alice. Yes, I do."

She looks down. "So do I."

"But," he continues, slowly, "I also believe that He would want you and your mother to be happy. Whether that is with your father or, if that is no longer possible, with someone else. Love is strange, you know. It does not always work in the ways that you might expect."

Alice fingers her mug. She is not convinced. "Okay. I will try."

"Good girl." He stretches. "Now, I'd better go tend to the masses—are you staying for the service?"

"Yes. I always do."

There is a shimmering from the many lights which circle his head as he stands, greets people from the altar. If Alice squints, it becomes quite clear to her that Father Bride has a halo.

"Why did you become a priest, Father?"

Father Bride looks up at her from where he is crouched, hacking away at a wilting rose bush with a pair of old metal pliers. A thin sheen of sweat coats his forehead.

"Do you know, I'm not sure. Why do men do anything? He laughs. And no need to call me Father here, makes me sound like an old man doesn't it—all grey-haired and infirmity. It's Niall."

"Niall," Alice tests; her mouth makes a small moue as if the name ended in a kiss. She isn't sure.

"I had originally planned to study Law, but when it came round to it...I don't know. Somehow I was called from the bar to the seminary. And my father approves. The things we do, to make our

HAZEL ATKINSON

parents happy.”

“Hmmm.”

He smiles again. “I enjoy it too. And of course—” He sweeps his arm back, gestures to the rectory at the top of the lawn “—they gave me a house. Even if it does mean having to trim these ghastly bushes—I was not blessed with the green thumb. Here, you can give me a hand.”

She crouches down beside him, gingerly bends back the branches for him to snip.

“Careful, their thorns are sharp.”

She is being careful. “Perhaps one prick will put me to sleep for a thousand years.”

“I am sure a handsome prince would find you within minutes.”

She giggles, then—“Ouch!”

“I told you—is it bleeding? I’ve got a plaster here.”

Alice looks down at her thumb. She squeezes and a bead of blood bubbles up.

“Yes.”

“Come here.” He fusses over her, rests one hand on her leg as he wraps the bandage round. “Feeling tired?” He does not move his hand from her thigh.

“Not at all.”

He hesitates for a moment and then, standing up—“Well, let it never be said that I endorse slave labour. Cup of tea?”

The Virgin Mary is staring at her. Alice stares back, pokes out her tongue as she concentrates on capturing the jut of the statuette’s jaw. It is almost arrogant she thinks: ‘not good enough’ its tilt seems to say. It is right, of course. Alice grits her teeth in frustration, screws the paper into a tiny ball and hurls it across the room. It nestles comfortably on the growing pile in her waste-paper basket.

“Alice?” Her mother’s voice floats up the stairs. “Are you in there?”

She sighs, slams the sketch pad down. “I’m busy!”

“Don’t take that tone with me! I’ve left dinner for you in the fridge, I’m off to work—I’ll probably be home by about eleven. Remember to put the cat out.”

Alice does not reply. She hears the click of the front door, and

VENUS RISING

the familiar, pained sound of the old car's engine as it tries to start. She closes her eyes. It isn't working, no matter which way and that she turns the wooden model the edges are still too hard, too cloaked in cloth. She thinks of the way the sea looked from the headland; the gentle, rounding waves: a mother's swollen belly. She stands up, pads over to the mirror hanging from the door of her wardrobe and presses a hand to her own stomach. Her image stares back. The light is dying now, the room filled with a soft orange glow as the streetlight outside flickers into life. Slowly, she unbuttons her blouse, watches in the glass as it it peels from her skin. Her bra pushes up her breasts, she can feel the wire digging into her ribs below and when she removes it there is a small red imprint, a groove left that she can trace with her little finger. Gently, she brushes her fingertips over her torso, feels the rise and curve of her flesh. There is a strange feeling running through her, blood pulsing along shallow veins; she wonders what it would be like to have someone else's hands trace the contours of her body, to press their lips to that little indent. She remembers walking in on Seán O'Neill and Rhona Halliday in the girls' toilets—the bared, ghostly skin with that smell of sweat and cheap perfume, the nausea she had felt and Rhona's neck all the next week covered with a scarf to hide the deep purple flowers which blossomed over it. Then she thinks of Father Bride and the warm, solid weight of his hand on her right leg, left for just a moment too long, the slight excitement she feels as she sits in Confession, her breath and his on either side of the thin gauze. She feels a pang of guilt, the Immaculate Conception's painted eyes watching in silent reproach. Hastily, she whispers a quick 'Ave Maria' and places the Blessed Virgin face down on her bedside table before returning to the mirror. Then carefully, never taking her eyes from her reflection, Alice lifts up a pencil and begins to draw.

She knows she should be at home. David is round again (she has a suspicion that he may have stayed the night) and so this would be a prime opportunity for her to carry out her promise to Father Bride, but she can't. She feels too hot inside, too cramped, with a restlessness to her hands and feet. His voice grates on her.

"Where are you off to then?"

HAZEL ATKINSON

She jumps. Father Bride in the flesh is standing in front of her, grinning like the Devil. For a moment she wonders uneasily whether her thoughts had somehow summoned him, if he could read her guilty mind.

"Just down to the coast."

"That's quite a walk!"

She shrugs, taps the leather folio under her arm. "I have some sketches to finish."

His eyes twinkle down at her. "Ah yes, our resident artist. And I hear you're away to study soon?"

"Yes, Dublin."

"Wonderful city—I was born there myself you know. We'll miss you here of course."

"Will you?" Curiously. He meets her frank gaze for a moment and she sees a slight shift, his dark pupils twitch and widen, before he drops his eyes and clears his throat awkwardly, gestures at the pile.

"Mind if I have a look?"

"I—no, of course." She heaves the heavy bundle into his arms, watches carefully as he turns over the leather bindings. His face deepens in colour as he stares down at the sketches.

"I haven't got the sea quite right yet," she says, softly. "I need it to flow better around her legs."

"They look quite—" Father Bride coughs "—quite lovely to me. Although to my knowledge it was Cyprus that Venus came ashore, not Ireland. I fear she'd have been rather cold in these waters."

Alice smiles. "Perhaps." Her arms feel empty, exposed; she smooths down her dress, lingering a little on the curves she knows he is admiring on paper. She remembers how hard her hip bone had been to get right, the shadows it had thrown as she twisted this way and that in front of her bedroom mirror.

"Well, I mustn't keep you. When the muse calls and all that! I was planning a drive that way myself later so perhaps you will have to find a place for me in your work, though I'm afraid I wouldn't cut quite the same figure rising from the waves."

He chuckles a little self-consciously and she smiles back, watching as he disappears into the church.

VENUS RISING

The sea is rippling today, pooling over the pebbles on the shore too fast for her pencil to catch. The light is all wrong as well, too dark somehow, none of those bright shafts of sun she needs to dance over the surface, reflecting upwards. She sighs in frustration, wraps her work up once more. She can hear the sea whispering; there are little pulling, hissing noises as it works its way towards her. Looking around, it is clear there is no one else in sight. And so, hesitantly, she takes off her jumper. There is a slight wind that raises the fine hairs on her arms, covers her in gooseflesh. She pauses for a second and then, in one fluid motion, pulls her dress over her head and runs down, down the beach and into the water. It hits her like a punch in the chest and she gasps, forces herself to keep going one stroke at a time until the pain becomes a comfortable numbness and her limbs relax.

She lays back, feels the cold climbing up to the roots of her hair, her scalp; buoyed up on the gentle waves. Her ears dip below the water and the world beneath is very quiet, very low. She closes her eyes, breathes as the sea swells under her.

Then, through the muffled silence—"Alice!"

She blinks.

"Alice!" Sits up, eyes wide. A figure stands on the shore, hitching up dark robes, wading forward. She opens her mouth in surprise and immediately water floods in, a sharp shock at the back of her throat and she splutters, coughs as her head is submerged. She rises, gasps, the sea stinging her eyes, and she struggles to stay upright as another wave crashes over her.

Then she feels strong hands on her arm, around her waist, something pulling her forward and she rubs at her face in an effort to see, kicks her legs as she is dragged through the deep.

"It's alright, I've got you." A soft voice in her ear as her feet find solid ground and she stumbles. Father Bride does not let go of her, but guides her out of the surf and onto the dry land, lowers her down onto the pebbled beach. She coughs.

"Are you alright?" He still has hold of her waist. She works for a moment, tries to speak; her throat is raw.

"I was fine, you surprised me! I was—just swimming."

He tightens his grip. "Alice, look at the weather!"

HAZEL ATKINSON

She looks. The waves are rising now and falling hard, angry beneath the dark clouds. Further out she can see the beginnings of rain.

"It wasn't like that when I went out," she says in a small voice. "I'm sorry Father."

He gapes.

"You little fool!" But his tone is gentle. "And I told you to call me Niall."

The brine has gone from her lungs; she feels breathless, baptized—Christ born again in the arms of John the Baptist. She can count each droplet on his face.

And then, he kisses her.

There is salt still clinging to their lips from the water, she can taste it, and the slow, warm, wet makes her think of oysters, shellfish; small bodies turning restless in their hard casing. The damp sea smell. She can feel his breath quickening, oxygen pulling deep, deep into open lungs and his fingers on her skin like seaweed, slick and soft and winding and then—"Shit. Jesus, Alice. I'm sorry. I don't know what came—you're a child! And I'm—I'm sorry. Shit."

Small patches of cold on her bare mouth and body as the breeze hits them. She shivers. His eyes on her, wide and black.

"I'm sorry. Oh God—"

"You oughtn't blaspheme," she says, quietly. Her voice seems to come from somewhere very far away, it blows through her. "Not on my account."

He stares. Her bones feel hollow.

"I should take you home."

Alice gazes out of the open window while tall hedgerows fly past in strips and blurs of green. Every so often Father Bride groans a little as if she cannot hear him, grips the steering wheel with white knuckles. By the post office she says without looking at him: "I'm not, you know. A child." It is not an attempt at persuasion, but she feels it would be remiss not to point it out. He does not reply.

When she steps from the car, some 100 yards from her front door, he leans out anxiously, tries to read her face. She shivers a little, hair

VENUS RISING

damp and cold on her neck.

"You won't—" His sentence hangs in the air, apprehensive. She shakes her head: who would I tell?

"Thanks for the ride home."

A curt nod. The window rolls up; a confessional screen. She turns slowly on her heel and walks up the cobbled lane.

Her period starts that evening, the bright blood staining white linen like an admission. She smears a small, red cross on her pale thigh, thinks of Jesus strung up on that Holy Land wood, the sharp pain as thorns tightened around his scalp; her mother and father, hands nailed together in the sanctity of their marriage and wounds gaping as they try to pull free; Father Bride—Niall—pinned to a church door by the penitential stake. She shudders. Runs herself a bath and watches as the blood and sin are washed down the drain and out, out into the sea.

Wrapped in a clean dressing gown, Alice trips downstairs. The salt is gone from her hair, her skin, but she can still feel that soft, warm pressure on her lips and she raises a finger to them, wonders if it shows. There are voices on the other side of the door and as she makes to push it open, she catches her name. She slows, listens for a moment.

"I know, I know." She can hear her mother. "But she's so strange at the moment, so silent. Always in her own head, or church—she probably tells that nice young priest more about her life than she does me! And she'll be leaving for college soon—I wanted to make the most of her this summer, but how can I when she's never here?"

Alice feels a twinge of guilt as David makes soothing noises.

"There now, love. You mustn't worry. She's not a kid anymore, it's perfectly natural that she should want her own life. And from what I can see there's nothing wrong with her—just keeps herself to herself does our Alice."

There is a long pause. Then, quietly, so quietly that she has to strain to catch it—"I feel like a bad mother."

There is a small ache growing in Alice's belly; it weighs heavy and hot. She wants to stop listening, to run back up to her room,

HAZEL ATKINSON

but she knows that the noise from the stairs will give her away. So she stays, hears David admonishing: "Don't be ridiculous Moira, you're fantastic to her. Come on now, you're just tired. You've been working far too hard."

"I can't help it, I just worry that, ever since Michael and I... separated—she just never speaks of it. Doesn't ask me a thing, not even when I drive her down to Dublin to drop her off for the weekend. God knows how she's feeling—I don't even know what he's said to her about the whole business. Its hard enough getting him on the phone for five minutes as it is. And then work has been so hectic—"

"Shhh. Hush now. Come here." David interrupts. Then she hears small, soft noises—gentle lips on tender skin—and a hiccuping sob. It had not occurred to her that a parent could cry.

Slowly, very slowly, she raises herself from her position by the door and creeps, one foot after another, up the stairs. She stares at herself in the bathroom mirror, her dark hair and long nose. She narrows her eyes and her face blurs a little, the features out of focus. For a second, she could be looking at her mother. The dull ache in her stomach intensifies.

On Friday she wears her shortest skirt to church. She can feel it tightening around the top of her legs as she sits in the pew, the slight strain of her thighs against it as she stands for the psalms. She knows that Father Bride is looking and smiles, beatific.

After, as she makes to file out of the door with the rest of the congregation, he catches her arm.

"Alice, can I have a word?"

There is something in his gaze as he looks at her that she recognizes, a mixture of guilt and desire; David's hungry eyes as he watched Bathsheba bathe.

"I'm sorry," she says, placidly. "I'm expected at home. Maybe another time?"

She pulls free and sways down the steps leaving him standing in the doorway; a thin exclamation mark, radiating heat.

Her mother is waiting for her in the kitchen.

"Are you ready? I've got the afternoon off to drive you over to

VENUS RISING

your Dad's."

Alice looks at her. There are fine lines across her forehead, at the corners of her mouth and hollows below her sharp cheekbones. She looks old, Alice realises suddenly, and tired. She remembers that quiet, defeated tone—"I feel like a bad mother"—and hesitates.

"Well, seeing as I'm going down to live there in a week I thought—?"

She feels almost shy. Her mother's eyes brighten.

"I mean, if it's not a bother," she adds hastily. "I don't want to be in the way."

But her mother is beaming. "Not a bother at all, but best give Dad a ring and let him know."

Spontaneously, Alice leans over and kisses her on the cheek. "Okay."

They spend the afternoon baking bread and listening to the radio; Alice thinks of Father Bride as she kneads, a pleasurable warmth oozing someplace below her stomach every time she slams her knuckles into the soft dough.

Later, she wonders whether she ought to have stayed. What he would have said. The "I want you I want you I want—" each another blow of the hammer to drive that stake home. Or something gentler perhaps, more apologetic. Her own quiet certainty: "I'm not, you know. A child." And she's not, she's not, and yet—The Virgin eyes her and she squirms under the gaze.

It is early, when Alice slips out of the back gate and up the road. Quiet too, only the faint rustling of the hedgerows as she passes and her own, certain footsteps. The air tastes fresh, clean; the way it does at the turning of a season. She swings over the low wooden gate and strides up the hill, feels the grass damp with dew below her feet and takes off her shoes, digging in her toes. From the crest the sea pools out before her, open and aching. She sits, mute, watches as it shivers and shudders below in the soft breeze. And then, or so it seems, the moving creature gives a great, moaning sigh and gently splits, giving way to rolling pink rays of light which swim across the sky and surface as dawn breaks from its dark belly. Something stirring in her own, a sudden small pang of grief and a hot lump in her throat as she

HAZEL ATKINSON

adjusts to the beauty, but she does not look away until all that pink and gold has been painted over by a bright, cloudless blue and when she walks home it is to the singing of the morning birds.

Her mother is waiting with a suitcase by the door. She runs a hand through her hair, and her voice wobbles a little.

"I just can't believe you're really leaving."

"I'll be back for Christmas!"

"Oh I know, but—"

David helps to heave her bags to the car.

"Alright kid, you take care now. Give us a ring this evening." He pulls her in for an awkward, one-armed hug. She nods, polite.

As they drive along, the car rattling under the weight of half her life, she spots Father Bride ushering in the congregation from outside the church. Impulsively, she leans out of the window and blows him a kiss, a strange, satisfied feeling creeping over her as she sees his face redden. Sitting back, she smiles to herself. Later, he will find the small statue of the Virgin that she has left, wrapped in red ribbon in place of the Bible she's taken from the slot behind her usual seat in the front pew. He will only half understand that it is well meant, but will keep it in the confessional box anyway to be what he considers a necessary, uncomfortable reminder. More and more frequently, his eyes are drawn to Our Lady's subtle, swelling curves, the teasing glint in her eye. He wonders if he needs a holiday.

Forty miles away, Alice laughs as her mother begins to hum "The Rocky Road to Dublin" and the land peels back.

ALEX REECE ABBOTT

When the Call Comes...

When the call comes, get the hell out of Townhead. Leave your adopted home, your higgledy-piggledy, East End Lascaux. Leave your sunny, top-lit, studio above the scrap-metal store. Down the spiral stairs, return the sleeping babbie you've been minding to his sister, playing with her broken toys out on Rottenrow's grimy cobbles.

Leave crying weans and squinty, snot-nosed bairns in the friendly backstreets, rich with life. Leave the mithers gossiping in shadowed doorways, the fathers clustering on the gloomy street corners. Whatever the time, leg it down St James's Road, pass the crumbling, scaffolded tenements with their gaunt, ruddy faces.

Take the first train from Glasgow Queen Street, and ride over one hundred and thirty miles, northeast to Stonehaven.

Grab the battered, black *Lambretta* that you store at the station. Fire her up, and drive, drive those final six miles to the east coast. Go, lassie, go, as if your life depends on it.

Go to isolation, where you can paint with freedom and power.

The news forces others indoors, but that phone call promising a Catterline bowder draws you out; every storm a gift.

Arrive in time for the wild North Sea to show you her teeth. Land at South Row, your cliff-top perch scoured low by wind and tide.

Seize easel, paints, brushes, rags and boards too. Get outdoors as fast as you can.

Plant yourself on Arbuthnott's stone pier. Stand, a monolith against the soft crescent bay. Root yourself in the landscape, capture

ALEX REECE ABBOTT

this perfect light, this perfect day. Paint between reality and abstraction; this place and you, both liminal. Draw emotion from what your eyes show you, this remote beauty, this perfect storm.

Get up on the brae. Draw, draw, draw. Paint clogging and dripping, make this moment indelible with pigments of oil and pastel. Nothing escapes your eye. Take the temporary, the mundane and make it beautiful.

Choose your unlikely subjects. The gable end of your cottage. The margin where wildflowers meet the crops. The crab creels. Six low-bottomed boats, hunched on the stony shore. The breaking waves.

Look past the picture postcard pretty. Down on the Makin Green, beyond the old stone bothy, the giant bag nets hang from larch pole crosses, waiting for the next salmon run. Find beauty and order in the chaos of golden webs drying in the morning sun.

Burnished happy by the seasons and the work outdoors. Hair, plain and wild, your collar skewiff. Smock spattered with paint. Flat, sturdy shoes. Baggy cords, and thick jumpers against the elements. A fur coat for the worst. Draw, draw, drawing since you could reach the kitchen table. Pastel, paint. A scrap of paper, a large canvas. Recto, verso.

Tell her: I don't really know what I'm painting, I'm just trying to paint.

Retreat indoors to your primitive cottage; an earth floor igloo. No electricity, sanitation, or running water. No post or milk. Unphased by deprivation, make do with an outside pump and an open fire. Everything you need lies at your backdoor: garden, cliff tops, fields and harbour, your studio.

Rest, rare rest.

Read, beneath the old lantern that hangs in the window. Kant, Ezra Pound, and Burton your companions. And her. Single-minded, not single. Write, write, write to her daily.

Dear, dear her; the tension to communicate, to share, to paint.

Live quietly among the villagers. Earn respect with your iron determination, your quiet, kind, hardworking ways; they will love the tough artist for loving their harbour on the edge. This place speaks to you, and you answer in the best way you know. Draw,

WHEN THE CALL COMES

draw, drawn by time and tide, a dozen paintings on the go. When the weather's too bad, no matter. Draw still life from your studio, one eye on the desolate bay.

Rise. Early as you can. Catch the terrific light before it changes.

Draw, draw, draw. Find joy, still and quiet in one place until that place becomes you.

Grab another canvas. Set up, the way you like it. Study the light, the colours, the composition. The skies, the clouds that grow from the sea. The harvest field, coming flowers, the growing colours. Take another view from the same spot, another and another, in different weather—the notion of missing something is unbearable.

Capture it on fine-tooth paper, static, yet dynamic. Bold strokes, so fresh and free they might take flight from the page at any moment. Forceful, delicate, the immediacy of pastel. Score deep with brush end, gouge with palette knife. Collage: metal paper and sweet wrappers. Graffiti, grit, grass seedheads and sand in your oil, accomplices anchoring your work in this moment.

Sit in peace and find the essence, an honest truth.

Tell her: No one comes near and you can work away, undisturbed.

Fall for the country, the sea and the fields behind it. Return to your spot, day after day until you mark that land. Decay and decline do not frighten you. A leaning haystack—tomorrow's fodder—transforms to a brooding monument by a failing fence. Yarrow, tansy, sedges, carline thistle, elderberry and willow. Wind shuffles the barley, the tall fescue sways. True to your subjects, true to yourself. Find the essence. A blasted hedgerow. A wee, wind-blown tree. Beehives. Your white cottage sanctuary on the edge of the village.

No people, yet your landscapes sing, alive.

Draw fieldscapes untamed as your seascapes. Tell her you have found the absolutest, best and most beautiful spot in the village.

Drawn by the wildness of town and country, work in wonder, knowing that as is it is being lost, you are being lost.

A blow's a coming, hold fast. From the sliding cliff top, south of the cottages, look back on the grey, stormy day; the bay frothing and fermenting until the pier is almost gone.

Find your spot, face the storm. Fearless.

The skies and the winds; Kale Tap, the rocky mound; the

ALEX REECE ABBOTT

lighthouse at Tod Head; The Reath fields; the uneasy tumult of Neptune's waves—they cannot escape you. So vast, so many subjects, it's hard to keep up. The silent, snow-bound village, the angry roar implicit in the Kincardineshire coast; find infinite space in nature and the unknown.

Tell her that the more you know of something, the more you can get out of it. Work away, out in all weathers, the grimmer the better, brush fully charged. Paint on boards; they take the gales and rain better than canvas. Relentless, the urgent sea beats and tears at the rocks. Understand the bewitching waves that can sustain; waves that can kill.

Fight the raging storm. Relentless, anchor your easel and hold fast. Drunk on wind and tide, wield your independence against the menacing waves; like this place, beyond any pigeon hole.

Fight the empty board with paint. Where others see sombre black and white, see splashes of colour. Among the constant shift and turmoil, seize a fleeting moment, make it permanent. Paint for hours, express nature's raw power until the breakthrough comes. Cuss and swear, when the gale lifts your enormous board up and flings it face down on the shingle.

Scrape and scrape and start again. Tough, indomitable.

Stand firm. Paint the changing light. Every time it looks a bit different. Face the elements with resilience, day after day.

Mostly, you win.

Hard blows the east wind, churning the sea to whiteness, the shingle bay thick with yellow foam. The blizzard blasts, does not abate.

You do not abate.

Look ruin and decay in the eye directly.

Express it now. Scrape chunks of paint straight off the palette, bang them on your canvas, urgent marks, stronger and more confident, each passing day. Easel anchored down to the shoreline, paint, paint, paint. Never satisfied.

The sky morphs, against the wide horizon, running bright to dreich. The north-east wind bites. The receding tide, the sinister undertow. Great mists swirl, suds from the big, rough seas come over the cottage and into the fields, reclaiming you.

WHEN THE CALL COMES

Immerse yourself. Think of your father, his black dog nipping at your heels, the hound biding his time to walk with you. Occupy your mind; leave no space for the lurking, melancholy cur to feed on doubt.

Battered and salt-crusted, as night closes in, when the ice is too bad, and the gale too fierce to bring up your gear, cover it. Fix it down with rocks, and leave it out overnight.

If you can, haul your work back up the ice-bound cliff. Drag the heavy hardboard that's bruised and marked, where the gale has torn it from the grip of your G-clamps. Bash the corners as you struggle home.

Work in the face of nature's violence, storm ravaged while another storm ravages you.

Face your ruin. In sickness and in health, you are bound—every living moment, paint.

Time and tide rush at you.

Draw, draw from your last bed.

The light ebbs, but you can't stop recording things in your mind.

Tell her: Tomorrow, perhaps there will be the possibility of this sun again.

Tell her: I must get it out of me.

Tell her that she is in all the paintings anyway, makers bonded.

The sweeping beam of the lighthouse cuts the water no more.

Face the final fall.

Return in ashes to the land and waters to which you are long wedded.

Every storm your gift.

Artist, Joan Eardley (1921-1963) is famed for her wild Catterline seascapes, painted en plein air. The villagers would phone her in Glasgow's East End, to let her know when a storm was on its way, so she could reach her cliffside studio to capture the gale in real time, before it passed.

ROBIN JONES

Alone Into the Alone

On the afternoon of March 20th, the day that marked the vernal equinox of 1994, the body of Robin Jones, 34, was discovered by a hiker in Ae Forest, Dumfries and Galloway. Found lying in a stream bed at the foot of an overhang of some 40 feet, Jones was initially presumed to have been the victim of an accident. This cause of death was subsequently revised, however, owing to the discovery of a makeshift camp nearby.

Further to extensive provisions of food and water, there were discovered at the camp two items of significant interest: a JVC GR-AXM800U compact-VHS camcorder and a Olympus S830 dictation recorder, both carefully wrapped in a single tarpaulin. Inspection of the camcorder revealed a video cassette containing four recordings of approximately six minutes and one shorter recording of twenty-four seconds. Each was digitally marked with both time and date. Inspection of the dictation recorder revealed an audio cassette containing upwards of a dozen recordings. Unlike the video, the audio contained no digital time imprint.

The transcripts that follow represent the unabridged contents of the audio recordings found at Jones's camp. They appear here accompanied by stills from the video cassette. Though filmed in colour, most of the images appear in near black and white, a shortcoming resulting from the high contrast levels of the recordings. Both video stills and audio transcripts are reproduced here with the permission of Jones's only surviving relative, his sister—hereafter referred to as J—on the condition that it be noted

ROBIN JONES

in these introductory comments that permission was given contrary to her own inclination but in accordance with what she believed to be her late brother's wishes.

Further to this permission, J also gave one piece of editorial advice regarding Jones's recordings, namely, that she believes he intended the audio and video elements to be considered together, i.e. with the audio functioning as a voiceover to the video. Though impossible to confirm this hypothesis with any confidence, the similar total duration of both elements make J's suggestion a plausible one. As such, and at J's request, the two elements have been presented with this editorial concern in mind.

II

Video Still: 01:22, 21/6/1993



The first video clip lasts a little under six minutes. Filmed at night, the frame is almost entirely black excepting a small, single light in the distance that lies off centre and to the right of the frame. Close inspection of the video

reveals a vague outline of tree tops discernable on the left and in the centre of the frame; a hill-top horizon appears on the right above the light. (June 21st was the summer solstice of 1993.)

Audio Transcript

(Very little background noise, Jones is speaking in a whisper. Here, as in the other recordings, Jones occasionally sounds rehearsed/performative. Significant pauses in Jones's speech are indicated with a dash [—].)

JONES: *A light in the distance. Doesn't seem to be moving. I*

ALONE INTO THE ALONE

haven't come far enough.

This is where it starts. Today's the day the earth's axis is at its most inclined towards the sun. Maximum axial tilt; estival solstice; summer. Longest day of the year, strongest light of the year. For us in the northern hemisphere, I mean. Over the next six months the sun will fade; the hours of light will shorten; the axis of the earth will incline away.

I don't mean that obliquity changes, that's not what I mean. The earth's orientation relative to the stars doesn't change or anything. Or, it does, of course, but with obliquity we're talking tens of thousands of years, not seasons. Right now, we're talking annual; a single orbit of the sun. The fact that soon we'll be moving towards the second solstice. Southern hemisphere's estival; our hibernal. Winter is what I mean. That's what all this is for; the darkest day, the longest night. The definitive absence of the year.

The light in the distance and the light in the day mean the same. I have to move deeper into the forest.

Video Still: 05:03, 21/06/1993



(Recorded the same morning as the first, though some hours later, this clip lasts 6 minutes precisely, running from 05:01 to 05:07. It is clear that Jones has changed location in the intervening hours.

Given the contrast in this clip, it is difficult to make out any details other than the outline of the surrounding trees. The framing and light suggests that Jones is looking slightly uphill and, most likely, to the east. Sunrise took place at 05:35; the earliest of the year, owing to the summer solstice.

ROBIN JONES

The frame, therefore, shows Jones's view during the final minutes before the sun appears over the horizon.)

Audio Transcript

(Background noise suggestive of light rain. Jones sounds relaxed; this is the most conversational of his recordings.)

JONES: *Mithridatism. The practice of self-administering small, non-lethal amounts of poison; the idea being that you protect yourself against future exposure. Name comes from Mithridates the sixth, King of Pontus; the one who was a real thorn in the paw of the Roman Republic. Responsible for the Mithridatic Wars, hence the name.*

All came about because of his dad, Mithridates the fifth. He was poisoned and so the son wanted to protect himself from being killed the same way. Idea was to take a little poison each day to get used to it. Habituate. Worked too; worked too well, in fact, because the inevitable day came when Mithridates wanted the poison. Needed it. And for original purposes, I mean; death not habituation. Suicide, is what I'm driving at here. And thing was when he wanted it, it didn't work.

64 BC—and this, by the way, came after a whopper of a military defeat and some serious family betrayal—Mithridates had fled to Panticapaeum and was surrounded by enemies. Trouble was, the city's council didn't have much in the way of fight left in it and so, in the face of the advancing army, they just went and submitted voluntarily. Right off the bat, submitted. Which left Mithridates in some serious bother. In other words, he knew the end was coming and that it was only a matter of time. If not hours, days. Max. And, so, he decided to take his own life—the aforementioned suicide—but his plan snagged from the get-go because hearing of his plot, his daughters demanded that they be allowed to accompany their dad into the afterlife and so Mithridates, thinking he was sparing them from a debauched approaching army and daughters being forced to marry conquerors and etcetera, he went and mixed poison for all three, and we all know what's coming here: the daughters died immediately, and Mithridates, because of his immunity, just shrugged it off like it was a head cold or something. In the end, one of his guards had to decapitate him with a

ALONE INTO THE ALONE

sword. At his request, I mean.

Point is though, it worked. Didn't go to plan, but the original premise—the poison tolerance theory—proved sound. What I'm getting at is that this trip into the alone is the same. For me, I mean. It's like a little poison just to start things off, to get things going. A small act of being alone and it'll act upon my mind and blood and ligaments and soul even. And when I'm habituated, I'll test my resilience to a real dose. A lethal one. And then we'll see.

Audio Transcript

(No background noise, silence.)

My father lived alone. I'm like him, I think. Loneliness killed him, took him in a way that meant he went from loneliness into the definitive alone. Into full non-attendance. The Mithridates father-son pairing had poison; this Jones pairing has loneliness. Or now just me, owing to the old boy fully non-attending these days. Plan is to escape the old boy's fate, like Mithridates the younger; the sixth. 'Course, you can argue Mithridates didn't escape it, but that would be ignoring the main take away from the miserable ending which is that he was onto something with this poison theory. And so, if he was onto something, chances are good that I am onto something too. I won't die the same way as the old boy is what I'm driving at. Here, in this forest, I'll be alone and then, when it comes to the journey into the definitive alone, I'll be ready for it. For me it will be merely more of the same. Alone into the alone, through it, and out the other side.

Audio Transcript

(Some background noise suggestive of a slight breeze. Occasional birdsong.)

Morning's on its way again. Out here you start to appreciate the different qualities of twilight, its different character movements. You feel the moment the sun passes 18°, deep below the horizon, and how the night lets out the breath it's been holding to let you know that this is it: astronomical dawn.

ROBIN JONES

To the untrained eye there's no perceptible change but for a twilight disciple it's obvious. Death blow. Coup de grâce.

Imagine this one: a deer just grazing in a clearing, nibbling at shoots or whatever but with a rifle trained on it and a hunter on the end of the rifle who's just squeezed the trigger. What I mean is, the deer isn't aware that the tip of a bullet moving a thousand metres per second has just made contact with the fur on its neck; the deer's reality hasn't had time to embrace the reality of the bullet yet. But even then a change has occurred somehow. The hunter can feel it. It's true he couldn't describe how the change is manifest but it's also true that he'd absolutely, definitely swear that the change is there and that he felt it the moment the bullet left his gun. Like a qualitative shift or an instinct frozen in time or like a promise that the deer's already wide eyes will—in the minuscule future; minuscule to the point of infinite right now—widen even further and in real fatal surprise. To the hunter, the deer is already a former deer: the bullet has done its work in advance.

In the twilight business, I'm a bit like that hunter. I've followed the night. Got to know it and its habits, got to learn its instincts for myself. Now I know the night as well as anyone. Better even.

When the sun is 12° below the horizon we get the second dawn of the morning—in the twilight business it's called nautical dawn—traces of illumination aren't easy to pick up yet, but they'll intensify as nautical twilight progresses. Soon the signposts in the sky for nocturnal navigation will begin to fade into the golden-blue noise of the morning. Nautical dawn is nice, pretty—even to me.

But the day quickly sweeps the night away. Imperfections rush in; imperfect somethings where before there was only clean nothing. You see, at 6°, the nautical twilight is over, replaced by civil dawn. The sun's not up yet, but it's all over the sky already. From here the dark pulls back altogether until you no longer need electric light to find your way around out of doors. Reds and oranges bleed up until the sun passes 0°, breaches the horizon, and forces itself upon the sky. True dawn; sunrise.

ALONE INTO THE ALONE

The alone of the night is over and the together of the day begins.

The day—the Great Together. The enemy of the Great Alone.

III

Video Still 3: 14:07, 23/09/1993



(September 23 was the autumnal equinox of 1993. The time 14:07 represents solar noon, i.e., the moment the sun is highest in the sky. The clip lasts for 6 minutes, starting at 14:05 and finishing at 14:11. The lens is focussed on the sun in

the sky as it passes its highest point. The six months that follow the autumnal equinox are, in Jones's words, 'the dark half of the year'; the duration and intensity of light reaching its nadir on the winter solstice.)

Audio Recording

(Little discernible background noise.)

JONES: *This is solar noon; the moment the sun transits the celestial meridian. A sort of a sacred time for me; a declaration of the worst being over. Or that it won't get worse than this, I mean. In other words, this self-delusion that everyone else buys into is at its peak and from here on in it can only decline. Won't survive. The sun's on its way out, is what I mean. The great together has tried another time and another time it's failed. From noon onwards my thoughts can turn to preparation for the night; for the dark and the great alone.*

Audio Recording

(The sound of strong wind. Jones is speaking at a high volume,

ROBIN JONES

though occasionally his voice is obscured by the wind.)

JONES: *Three months now. Three months. Insignificant really, but to be in the middle of it is more than I... (inaudible).*

Compared to eternity, to the definitive alone, it's nothing; this is what I came for. I'm becoming part of it already, I think. Allowing it in.

I'll sleep during daylight hours now; during the hours of company and communion. Or when the others commune, at least, though what... (inaudible).

From here on in, I wake only for the night.

Audio Recording

(There are frequent pauses in Jones's speech during which the listener can hear the rustle of his waterproof clothing. Jones speaks quietly in this recording and sounds less sure of his words. Frequent sniffing reveals, perhaps, a cold.)

My judgement is off, I think; tonight I hurt my ankle in a fall. I've been here all these months, I know this landscape better than anyone but I still managed somehow to fall. It was on the embankment to the west of camp, a rabbit hole. It's minor really, not significant, just a limp. It'll go soon. But something else happened and it worried me a bit.

Worried me a lot really.

Not the injury, but my reaction to it. For a moment my body sort of rejected what was going on. I don't mean it rejected the pain—that I felt—I mean it rejected the experiment for a moment, and that I thought of home. There was the pain in my leg and the panic had me scared and it made me sort of long for the comfort of civilisation; warm beds and hot tea and some mindless television and mashed potato and I have a favourite jumper that I wear around the house, and Christmas with my sister—which is stupid because I've always hated Christmas with my sister, and then I felt bad about having never hidden the fact that I hated it—and I longed for these things in a very normal person

ALONE INTO THE ALONE

way. In a way I never longed for when they were there in front of me—and definitely not in a normal person, great together sort of way—and then very quickly I felt isolated out here.

And I feel like it all came about because of one sprained ankle, as if the desire for comfort is all too soon the desire for company, togetherness, life among the crowd and the definitive together, and if that part of me is still here now, then what's going to happen when I finally go into the definitive alone?

Which means I'm not cured of all my sentimental weaknesses yet, not even now after all this time, and that I need to be stronger because if I confront the great alone with that weakness still in me, I haven't a hope. Only someone who's already truly alone will ever conquer it; will ever go through it and come out the other side. Stands to reason. Obvious.

Audio Recording

(Jones sounds anxious, in a hurry. This is the only recording in which background noise suggests that he is walking or, perhaps, jogging.)

JONES: *Walked further today. Discovered a train track. Communication. Company. I must move deeper into the forest.*

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

JONES: *Sunlight doesn't penetrate here, the dark beneath the trees. Still, I should be sleeping. Even the day is practice for the darkness. Isolation is right here, it's with me now, and the sentiments that betrayed me before—the ones I thought I'd buried—have now begun to truly leave. The longing for others; I can feel it going, leaching out of me.*

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence. Jones speaks quietly and occasionally sounds younger than his 34 years.)

When it was just my sister and me and my dad we were sort of happy,

ROBIN JONES

I think. Even though it was difficult when my mum died; but that's not the point really, the point is that a strange thing happened when my mum died—I was about seven—and that thing was that I became afraid of the dark. Scared of it, so that at night I'd sneak from my room into my big sister's room, knowing she would let me into her bed; knowing that if I tried to get into my dad's bed he would just wake up and walk me back to my room and show me that there was nothing to be afraid of, and he'd be really reassuring and everything, but he wouldn't ever realise that the scary thing was really just the alone and that showing me there was nothing just made things worse.

I can't remember how it went away in the end. I kind of think it never went. Maybe it was just that my sister left for university the following summer. Now, when I look back, I'm pretty sure that I was waking at solar midnight—the moment right between sunrise and sunset, the moment furthest from light, the deepest dark.

When the moment comes it'll be solar midnight on the night of the winter solstice. The moment furthest from light on the longest night of the year.

IV

Video Still 4: 15:47, 21/12/1993



(The clip runs from 15:45 to 15:51. This video was recorded precisely an hour before sunset which took place at 16:48. December 21 was the winter solstice of 1993—Jones's avowed 'target'. The night that followed this sunset

was, therefore, the longest of the year.)

ALONE INTO THE ALONE

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

December has a special light. A last light. In deep winter months the sun hangs low in the sky; solar noon's barely 10° above the horizon. Prolonged twilight, then prolonged dark. I think now about the eternal twilight of the polar circles. Sometime in October the sun sinks deeper than 18° below the horizon and that's it. From that day on there's no civil twilight, no nautical, no astronomical. Five months of polar night. Total absence. That's purity. That's really something.

But if you're doing it here, now is the only time for an experiment like this. In an hour precisely it'll be sunset. 16:48, civil twilight begins. 17:34, nautical twilight. 18:21, astronomical twilight. And at last, at 19:06 it will be night. Twelve hours of night. More. For me, tonight, this is my polar circle.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

Something isn't right, something is missing. Or present.

Something is present. Something is here.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence. Jones is speaking quickly.)

JONES: I was wrong; I was premature. Longing left me, but now I realise that when it left it was replaced. And replaced by hate. I don't long for the together anymore, but I've allowed myself to hate everyone who can't live without it. And what is hate for others if it's not love for myself? I thought the polar night was the end of it, some sort of summit to my climb. Now I realise that it was a false summit.

All these months of preparation and now I discover the hate and love. It has been with me all along. Something where I need nothing. There's work to do, but not much time. When the hate leaves me, the great

ROBIN JONES

together will leave me too.

Or perhaps it will be another false summit. I won't know until I stand at the peak. It has to happen tonight.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

JONES: *This is not an accident but part of the process. Part of the movement into the alone. I've known it all along, why did I let myself forget? My judgement's off, maybe.*

Who else has done this? No one. No one has come through the other side. That's the challenge, the science, the religion of the thing.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

I was stupid, I realise that now. Words kept me here. Words and video and memories. They're all part of it; a link to the together. An acknowledgement. I thought it was for posterity; believed it was. But now I see it for what it really is: unwillingness.

Leave it all behind. Forget. Alone into the alone.

Audio recording

(No background noise. Silence. The recording captures no dialogue. It lasts for approximately six minutes.)

V

The above audio recording marks the end of Jones's testimony. Even so, there is one recording that the reader has yet to see. An outlier to the above, the short video clip does not originate from the period of Jones's journey into the isolation, but was made a number of weeks earlier, on May the 24th, 1993.

Depicting a leafy background similar to those in his testimony,

ALONE INTO THE ALONE

the clip lasts only twenty-four seconds and is unexceptional but for the last few frames. Here viewers are confronted first with a hand and then—for a brief instant before the recording is cut—with Jones's face, slightly obscured by the hand reaching toward the lens. The filming appears accidental; it is possible that Jones dropped the camera and that he was not aware it was recording.

What took Jones into the forest at this earlier date is unknown, though for reasons of completeness—and with J's permission—a frame from this clip is here included. It is, to the best of her knowledge, the only surviving image of her brother. The clip appears at the very start of the video cassette discovered at Jones's camp. It ends where the first testimony clip (recorded June 21, 1993) begins.

Most likely we owe its existence to little more than practicality: Jones, it seems, chose not to record on a blank cassette.

Video Still 5: 17:31, 24/05/1993



