Even in the summertime the sea here glistens a chill, leaden blue, the late afternoon shadows darkening the water. The gloaming, they call this hour. Though that is altogether too mild and warm a word for this slow leaching of light. It's a golden word, something liquid and magical about it. Something fey and friendly. In Suffolk the sky is grey and close, the light salt-washed and cold. The sea today is flat, its surface barely marred by wind. No sign of what swells and moves beneath it. No pealing bells from Dunwich's famous drowned churches. No sound at all but the quiet lapping of the waves against the shingle beach.

Further up the shore Flora crouches by the water's edge, her hands full of small stones. Her shoulder blades move under her dress like tiny wings. She is a child who has never seen the sea. If there is fear of it, or wonder, none of this is visible. Only a quiet watchfulness. Sometimes she cries out at night, high, warbling calls that startle her out of sleep. I keep the door between our

bedrooms open so that I can listen out for her, but she never calls for me. If I go to her she gazes up as if from a great depth; as if she has been somewhere very far away and it costs her enormous effort to return. There is something unfocused and full of terror in her eyes in those moments and I think perhaps she does not recognise me when I come to sit beside her. She rarely cried when she was a baby. Perhaps she knew, even then, that crying would not get her anywhere.

The small waves creep further up the shoreline and Flora steps hastily back beyond the water's reach. A lone seabird wheels and calls above her, but she doesn't turn her face to look up. In the weak sunlight, her pale hair looks almost translucent. It's so long now, reaching nearly all the way down her back, but I don't dare to ask her if I can trim it. If I narrow my eyes, she is just a shadow. A small shimmering smear at the sea's edge. Some ocean sprite. A changeling child. Which she is, in some ways.

Sometimes, Max, I imagine that I see you in her. Not in the sense of any physical inheritance, but a fleeting essence. Something wary and remote. Haunted, you might say. Though her ghosts are not yours.

You wrote once that you did not believe in time, but in spaces that interlocked according to a higher order of stereometry and between which the living and the dead could move back and forth at will. A kind of ghostly curtain, perhaps. It was those of us who were still alive who might appear the more unreal in the eyes of the dead, you said. Only rarely, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, were mortals visible to those who had slipped to the other side. I look at Flora's tiny silhouette by the sea's edge, staring at the horizon in a vacant reverie. Just one step and it seems she might slip quietly beneath the water.

Can you see her from wherever you are now? Can you see me, sitting here on the hard stones of the shingle beach, my arms wrapped around my knees, my linen coat too light for the strange chill of the autumn afternoon? Forty-one this year, almost the same age you were when we first met. Too thin, a few strands of white in my hair, a little greyness creeping into the skin. 'She remains in possession of her formidable beauty,' an earnest journalist wrote rather obsequiously in a magazine profile last summer. As if beauty were something that might be carelessly misplaced and I should be commended for holding onto mine, however diminished. Still, a little thrill of satisfaction on reading that line, a little quiver of vanity. Formidable, though. It hardly seems the right word. My shaking hands, my pounding heart.

You gave me a stone from this beach, pale blue and perfectly oval. A parting gift, pressed into my hand like a coin or a key. We are so accustomed to leave-takings, you and I. So many departures and farewells, trains rolling out of station after station. India, London, Suffolk. I can never stand on a railway platform without a pang of remembered desolation, a sharp little stab of abandonment. Your hand on the glass of the window, your figure disappearing into the crowd, hurrying back into your real life. Sometimes it felt that I was always watching you walk away, Max. That even when I held you in my arms you were on the brink of departure, a part of you poised to go. I remember once thinking desperately, as I lay in bed watching you dress to leave, that if you were to die, if you were to no longer be in the world, then perhaps eventually it would be less painful than this. That then I could turn you into a memory, make you become the cleanly grieved past rather than a wound pressed on again and again. Something as simple as sorrow would surely be easier to withstand than this welter of pain and pathos

and jealousy and yearning. But now you are gone and I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it. Since I have been in Dunwich, the reverse haunting you wrote of has come to seem entirely possible; our solid earthly lives rendered insubstantial and precarious. Because it is you, Max, dead these last three weeks, who seems the most potent of any of us.

So many times, over the years, in the minutes after you left me, I would imagine that you might return. A door banging or the sound of footsteps in the hall and I would be sure for a moment that, halfway down the stairs, or reaching the corner of the street, you had changed your mind and come back. That you had not been able to leave me.

How pitiful I make myself sound, how passive and lovelorn. A woman waiting. But still, my hopefulness would hang in the air, as potent as the scent of you on my pillow. It was a hopefulness that always had something sickening and desolate about it, because I knew it was false. Even as you sat on the edge of the bed to tie your shoes, you had already left me. Your mind was already on the journey ahead, the journey home. *Home*. Strange how that one small word, spoken by you, always held the power to turn me queasy with loss. It was a word that slammed a door in my face.

Long ago in Holland, in homes where there had been a death, it was customary for all paintings depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field to be covered. This was so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted by a last glimpse of the world it was leaving forever and refuse to depart. The ambush of longing. The stubbornness of desire. Sometimes I think that we never stop wanting what we can't have. Did you glance back, Max? Did you want to stay? Even for a moment, did you want to stay with me?

*

The legends here in Dunwich are all of grand losses and epic disappearances. A whole city swallowed by the sea. A merchant town, a trading town, second only to London in the Middle Ages, full of churches, convents, monasteries. Slowly, year after year, the city slipped into the sea. The storm tides, the crumbling cliff face, the relentless incursions of the ocean. Every kind of defence was built; stones and sand shovelled away furiously, elaborate sea walls constructed and reinforced. But none of it was any good and the townspeople were forced to retreat inland, their city sleeping under the water like a lost Atlantis. Now the town is just a placid seaside village; a handful of shops, tea rooms, a gloomy pub. There is a little museum on the main street with detailed maps of all that has been lost, tales of tempests and floods, careful inventories of what the sea has taken. And the many ghoulish legends; graveyards sliding into the ocean along with the churches, fragments of bone scattered among the smooth stones of the shingle beach. And the old story about the sound of church bells pealing beneath the waves on stormy nights. I wonder if that's what drew you here, the sense of living in a place only precariously lodged. Where everything important is hidden below the surface.

We swam here, you and I. It seems impossible to imagine, but we floated on our backs together one summer, and then sat in the shadow of the cliffs rising sharply up from the beach. Such a strange, sultry August day it was, the sky high and scrolled with clouds, a shimmer of heat above the water. It didn't feel like England to me at all, though I knew England so little in those days. There was a lightsomeness I sensed in you that made me think of those first days in the gardens at Rajakkad.

'I envy you, Cressida, your inviolable Rajakkad,' you said when I told you this. Your hand was resting on my waist, your wet hair

falling across your forehead. 'I can't imagine what it must be like to fully belong to a place like that.'

I had never felt that I fully belonged to India; I only ever lived on its edges. And while it was true that I loved my father's old coffee plantation in Tamil Nadu, my connection to the place I had grown up in was fraught and often painful. A certain order had been broken apart when my father died and my mother turned the estate into a hotel. Now when I went back to India there was the strange sensation of being a guest, in the same way that my life in England still had the uncertain feeling of an extended holiday. But I didn't say this to you. Instead I asked you where it was in the world that you felt yourself most at home. Was there a particular place, a stretch of coast or view from a window that you had taken into yourself?

You thought about this for a moment. 'Well,' you said at last, staring out at the water. 'I suppose I'm a bit like Goethe. "Everywhere a stranger and everywhere at home, letting my life run its course where it will."'

So often you did this, Max. *People say. Freud says. Some philosophers say* . . . Faced with a personal question, you reached into that endless trove of European literature for a line of poetry or Latin quotation, some perfect aphorism or anecdote. Herodotus, Dante, Walser, Hölderlin, your beloved Goethe. You never had to search for very long. In those first years I knew you, I was dazzled by the vastness of your knowledge, your easy summoning of the right words, the illuminating reflection, the obscure but essential detail. I wanted to take notes when you spoke, like the diligent student I was back then. Though never your student, you would have hastened to say, as if there were a hierarchy to transgression, an order of moral failings. For so long I felt I contained so little in comparison to your extraordinary interior universe. But it was a

rather ruinous depository, this storehouse of history, full of human wreckage. I think that you saw yourself as Benjamin's Angel of History, looking ever backwards into the past and perceiving not a chain of events but a single, unending catastrophe. History, you once wrote, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark.

There were times when I hated this in you, this retreat into anecdote, into history. But later I realised that it was part of your habit of keeping people on the periphery. You used the words of others as a form of deflection, a way of distancing people from the truth of your own thoughts, your own heart. It struck me sometimes as a kind of dishonesty, but I find myself doing it more and more as the years have passed. Faced with a probing question, I reach for someone else's words. Virginia Woolf about human happiness being found only in small daily miracles, matches struck in the darkness; or Paul Valéry on the way that a work is never finished, only abandoned. Sometimes I quote you, on the most important appointments being those we keep with the past, or on how history changes direction at the crucial moment because of some tiny, imponderable event. Little scattered clues, though clues too obscure for most people to notice, and too impersonal to incriminate even if they did. No earring left slipped between the bedsheets.

It shames me faintly sometimes, to read back over interviews and to realise that I've parroted the same lines again and again. A young American journalist caught me out once during an interview for my last novel. 'Yes, you're fond of that line,' she said to me, when I quoted Simenon on writing being not a profession but a vocation of unhappiness. 'And Nabokov, too, on sorrow being the only thing in the world that people really possess.' I thought

she was parading her cleverness, but then she closed her notebook, leaned back in her chair and regarded me across the table. 'All these references to sorrow,' she said quietly. 'Are you very unhappy?'

I came away from that interview feeling uneasy, as if I had been tricked into revealing more of myself than I had intended to share. It was the same sensation I often experienced with you; that you looked at me and saw me as I really was. That some protective outer layer was flayed away. Sometimes when we were in bed together and I tossed my head to the side or closed my eyes, you would turn my face to look at you, my chin in your hand. You wanted to see my pleasure, yes, but it was more than that. You wanted me to show myself to you. And I did. From the very first with you it was as if some effort of performance could simply dissolve. I could hold your gaze with an unabashed directness I've never experienced with anyone else in my life. I felt myself to be so clarified, so enlarged in the light of your attention. And someone beyond the person I knew myself to be. Someone wanton and hungry. Desire is like a mirror, you said to me; the really urgent questions it asks us are of ourselves. From the first time you touched me all those years ago in India, such a jolt of recognition, a surge in my veins. Everything I had judged at first to be courtly and contained in you fell away and in myself I recognised a ferocity that startled me. Because there was a violence to it, the way I wanted you. There were moments when I felt that it wasn't love at all that resided in the room with us, but something raw and obsessive, some enormous wanting and taking, some necessary emptying and refilling of ourselves.

Occasionally, at certain times of emotion or difficulty, you would stutter slightly. It was just a faint stumble, a momentary tripping over your words, as if you were wrestling to bring to the surface what you wanted to say. Or you did not know what to say

and your body betrayed your uncertainty. It happened rarely, but I could see how much it unnerved you. You who set such store by your command of language, your command of yourself. It felt the same to me, that occasional stutter, as the times when you would cry out when we were making love. Something uncontrolled and guttural in the way you would signal your pleasure, something instinctive. I felt triumphant then; when you collapsed onto my chest trembling, or when I felt you in my mouth, the hot gush of you and your loud cry. That I could bring you to this. No hesitancy, no defence. The spell of our bodies. And the way that you would reach for me afterwards, sometimes clinging to me so tightly that it was hard to breathe. So many letters, so much talk, everything draped in language, and yet perhaps they were the only times we were truly honest with each other, those hours in bed. Though honesty is not a word I think you or I have ever had any true claim to. All the secret lives we have stepped into, the lies we have told ourselves and others. All the times we have turned our faces away.

I was hopeful, blithe, in those early years; I still believed that I could find the key to you. I studied you in the same way I studied the poems you sent me – trying to crack them like a code. I wanted you to unspool your secret, unmediated self to me. We want so much of a lover. We want everything. I wonder sometimes if that was the real reason you would never leave your marriage – because it demanded much less of you. For all the pressed-together dailiness of your life with Clara and Ellen, all the quotidian intimacies, it left an enormous space around you. They loved you, but their focus on you was blurred rather than painfully sharpened in the way that mine was. They did not scrutinise you, study you, force you to meet their gaze. And perhaps it is more sustainable to live

like this. Later, in the quiet years of my own marriage, I came to see the kind of liberty that is to be found in this arrangement. A lonely freedom at times, but freedom all the same.

But I pushed you that day on the beach here in Dunwich. 'No, I want to know really. If there was a place that you could choose. Just one place. A view. A house. A room, even. Tell me something true. Your words, no one else's.'

'A place I would choose . . .'

I was terrified you might say Suffolk. That would bind you to your life here, to Clara and Ellen. To a life where there was no place for me.

I tested you. 'Your study in Dunwich?'

'No, not in England. The longer I've stayed here the less I feel at home.'

'Germany?'

'Oh no. I feel at least as distant there.'

'Surely there's one place?'

You were silent for a long time. 'If I really had to say then I think that my ideal station is probably a hotel in Switzerland.'

Ah, Max. Neutrality, anonymity. A country that had no history for you, no claim on you. Is that where you really wished to exist? Away from the rubble of the past. Away from me.

I said nothing. Your hand was still resting on my hip as we lay there together on the sand but you might as well have pushed me forcefully away from you. Like the time when you read me a poem with a line about the house of belonging. 'I'd like to live there,' I said.

'You can't live in the house of belonging,' you replied. 'You can only rent. Short term.'

I can't give you enough, you told me very early on. A confession, a warning. But I realised that you weren't referring to the

outward contours of our predicament, in which there was never enough of anything. Never enough time, never enough opportunities to meet. No, you were warning me about something else, something in you that couldn't fully admit another soul, some shameful deficit you had always felt in yourself. An essential solitude that could not be scoured away even by the most ardent love. But back then I saw it as a challenge, a gauntlet thrown down. How clichéd and predictably tragic it sounds now. And perhaps it was all imposture in the end. Because you fell in love twice, Max, you who never wanted to be beholden or to have anyone beholden to you. Once with a child and once with me.

By the shoreline Flora is piling stones into the skirt of her dress, holding the edges of the hem to form a kind of sling. There are so many it seems the thin cotton must soon tear under the weight of them. She chooses the stones carefully, picking up several and examining them at length before discarding them or placing them into her skirt. So intent on her task that she doesn't notice the waves creeping up almost to her feet. I should tell her to take her sandals off; the water will ruin the leather. But I have no sway here, no authority. I say nothing. She turns back and stares at me for a moment and I wave to her but she ignores me.

In the years Flora was lost to me I would imagine who she might become. How her voice would sound, if her fair hair would darken, if she was clever at school. She would be someone considered and quiet, I was sure, someone who hung back a little, watching. Even as a very small baby she seemed to take everything in. In the spring I would take her to Regent's Park and hold her up to see the roses, watching her face as the scent washed over her. An alarmed sort of concentration, her nose screwed up. In winter we went to galleries and museums. I showed her Turner's skies,

Greek statues, the twisted skeins of Jackson Pollock, Matisse's blue dancers; once, the enormous body of a horse, preserved in formaldehyde and suspended from the ceiling of the Tate Modern. I found her leaves and flowers, feathers and stones. I played music to her; Bach preludes and Chopin nocturnes, swaying her in my arms in time to the music. All this in the spaces between the real job of looking after her; the ordinary, exhausting chaos: laundry and mess and struggles against my arms as I tried to settle her, the jagged crying that always took me by surprise for its lack of frequency and made its way deeply into me, so that when she went to sleep the air around me rang with uneasiness, waiting as I did for her panic to begin. The breakages in shops, the crash of a jar bumped by her pram and then my apologies, the mopping up, the contrast to well-regulated babies with their Norland-nanny mothers or actual Norland nannies looking coldly to one side. Hush and clean bottles, Virginia Woolf called it. Motherhood is a conspiracy of hush and clean bottles. Well, no. Motherhood is noise. Irregularity. Mad, mad; there is no real word for the love. Love, it will have to be love.

Later, I read to Flora, book after book. I would wonder sometimes if any of this would remain in her. The colours of the paintings, the smell of the roses, the piano music, the sound of my voice. She was so little; perhaps it would all dissolve within her. But I hoped that she would retain some small echo of my love. A voice in her dreams, a memory of being held; a flicker of something to steady her. And then I worried that it might be harder for her if she remembered.

Flora and I walk home at dusk, past the ruins of the Greyfriars Monastery high up on the cliffs above the shingle beach. Some sheep have escaped from a nearby field and they move slowly

through the abandoned buildings, grazing on the scrubby grass. A final shaft of light falls slantwise over the old stones and a wall of dark cloud has risen up from the horizon. Flora was fascinated by the ruins when we first came up here two weeks ago; the ceremonial gate that led to nowhere, the stone arches and fallen walls. There is a grotesque carved head above one of the arches and by the entry gate an empty niche where a statue of a saint once stood. It's in the town museum now, carried away by the villagers to safety. 'Whose house was this?' Flora asked me. You told me once, Max – whispered it almost as if it were a confession – that as a child growing up in a post-war Germany devastated by the Allied bombing, you believed that all cities were ruins. That it was not until you were in your teens that you understood this was not the natural condition of cities. But you carried those ruined cities in your heart. All those bombed-out houses and mountains of rubble, those doorways opening into emptiness. How much we simply accept as children until we learn that things should be otherwise.

On the way back to the village Flora walks on the other side of the road to me, one hand clutching her skirt full of stones. If I cross over to walk beside her, she slows her step so that she falls behind me and then slips across the road again when she thinks I am not watching her. Soon after we have left the beach a van careens around the corner, filling the narrow road, and I seize Flora's hand and draw her to my side. She looks startled, but for a moment she stands there beside me with her hand in mine before she pulls away and walks on ahead of me. Her fine hair is a tangle of knots, a blurry pale halo around her small head. She refuses to let me brush it or plait it, or to wipe her face, or tie up her shoelaces or help her with the buttons of her dress. The only

thing she will submit to is a bath, and only if I run the water for her and leave the room. She will not undress until she is alone; she stands silently and waits for me to hang her towel over the chair and close the door. She does not sing or splash in her bath, does not make any sound at all. Last night, disconcerted by the long silence, I opened the door a crack and called out to her. She flailed around in alarm, water slipping over the edge of tub, and then she cowered from me. Drew her bony knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them and buried her face so that I could not see her. When I spoke her name, she began to cry, and she did not stop crying until I left the room and closed the door behind me.

On the drive here from London last week she rested her forehead against the window, staring out at the unfurling fields, the vast flat swathes of barley, the barren scrubland. The light seeped faintly through the lowering clouds. I watched her face palely reflected in the glass, the sharp curve of her turned cheek. 'Malnourished'. I saw the word written in her medical file.

'Is it morning or night?' she asked me, her face still turned away towards the window. I could see how she might have been confused. The hazy disc of the sun could have been a rising moon, the pale shadows those of dawn or dusk.

'It's morning. Early morning. Are you tired?'

But she didn't answer me. So often she simply ignores my questions. It is not sullenness or petulance; nothing as reassuringly childlike as that. No, it is as if my words make no impression on her.

The dusk is thickening as we approach the priory. Sunday evening and the streets of the village are empty, the lamps shivering faintly against the stone walls of the buildings. Soon it will be full night. The rain begins when we are still some way from

home; a fine misty drizzle that turns quickly into a downpour. By the time I have wrestled the old iron key into the awkward lock of the door, Flora and I are both drenched, our hair plastered to our skulls. She makes no complaint; in fact, she barely seems to register the rain though her teeth are chattering.

Upstairs she lets me towel her hair dry and make her a cup of hot chocolate. Sitting cross-legged in the old velvet armchair, the mug between her hands, a pink flush to her cheeks, she looks like an ordinary child. Undamaged, unhaunted. How desperately I need for her to be an ordinary child. Her eyes close slowly and she rests her head against the side of the chair. I take the mug gently from her hands and place the crocheted blanket from the end of my bed over her.

The night seems much denser here. We should have a fire flickering in the grate, a place to warm our hands. In the room below us, our landlord, Nicholas, is playing the piano. He favours Chopin. All this week he has made his way methodically through the nocturnes, though tonight he is playing late Beethoven. Prickly, those piano sonatas, and full of dissonance and rifts. My father loved the late pieces, they sounded through the rooms of my childhood in India whenever he was there. Playing them is beyond most people; even listening to them is difficult sometimes. My mother hated them. But Nicholas makes a very good job of it.

We would be the only lodgers, he said when I telephoned from London to inquire about accommodation; there wasn't much call for rooms this late in the season, and the weather would be turning soon, the village very quiet. That would suit us perfectly, I told him. Nicholas seems to have accepted our strange afflicted presence in his midst. He hasn't asked why we have come to this

tiny stretch of Suffolk coast, nor how long we plan to stay. It is not incuriosity that restrains him, for I have seen him watching Flora and me. It's a careful, benevolent kind of watching, as if he were standing guard from a distance.

When we first arrived he gave us a tour of the priory, showing us the medicinal garden that the monks had first planted, the niches in the walls where they had placed their candles. He could almost be a monk himself, the last of the order left guarding the ancient abbey. Though the priory itself is cosily furnished with all manner of antiques, decorative plates and water pitchers, rag rugs and framed tapestries, lace-edged tablecloths and embroidered cushions. Surely these are not the leavings of the monks. They speak much more of the influence of a wife, or a mother, though I have seen no evidence of either. He lived alone, Nicholas told me when we first arrived. Though not unhappily, he added swiftly, as if to ward off any unwelcome feelings of pity. You must have known him; this town is too small for everyone not to be known to each other. Perhaps you even visited him here to talk about music, or met him at the Southwold Sailors' Reading Room. Sometimes I think I might ask Nicholas but I'm not sure I could bear to hear someone else's memories of you. I want you to stay mine.

A few days ago Flora and I met Nicholas when we were out walking on the cliff path above the beach and he showed us the last solitary grave of the All Saints churchyard. Hidden away in a little thicket and hemmed in by a low wooden fence, the grave seemed perilously close to the cliff's edge.

'Will it fall?' Flora asked as we stood together on the path, our eyes watering in the wind.

'No,' Nicholas told her. 'It's safe and sound.'

'I don't think it's safe,' she said sceptically. 'It could fall. Why did they put the grave garden so close to the edge?'

The grave garden indeed; a better name than a boneyard, I suppose. Flora looked perturbed. There was a vein pulsing at her temple; it looked like a bruise against her almost translucent skin. By her sides her hands were curled into tight fists.

'I think it's quite secure, Flora,' I said. 'There's a fence there.'

She turned a scornful face to me. How little I know, the look on her face seemed to say. How very little. She glared at me for a moment, her fists still clenched, and then turned and ran off ahead of us along the path, her thin legs kicking up behind her. Once again I was left feeling that I had disappointed her in some small but searing way; that I had failed to understand her or to respond to her correctly. It's a feeling I frequently had with you – not so much that I missed the meaning behind your words, but that I had not absorbed the things that lay hidden in your silences.

In her sleep Flora's eyes skitter rapidly under her eyelids and her tiny body startles then relaxes, then startles again. I stare at the sharp point of her chin, the dark hollows of her eyes and cheeks. Does Flora dream of escape? Is she imagining her way back to another life? There are so many legends of children lost or abandoned and raised by wolves or bears, stolen or rescued. Peril and deliverance, loss and return. The child emerges from the mouth of the cave clad in bearskins or is spied by hunters running through the forest, scarred and scratched, hair matted and face blackened, her frock in rags. The human face among the animal ones, the baby suckling at a bear's teat. All the stories end with the rescue, the child carried triumphantly back to the village, borne aloft and rejoiced over, delivered into the arms of her tearful parents. Bathed and fed and restored; the new dress and the shining hair, the village parade and the gifts of welcome all part of the anxious

and impossible wish for her to forget. But what the rescued child has been returned to is a life she barely remembers, faces she no longer knows. The cheering crowds and the outstretched arms fill her with terror and alone in her bedroom she stares at her face in the mirror for hours on end. She cannot meet their eyes or remember their words. She must learn not only to eat with a fork, to wear shoes and button her dress, but also to choke back the language she knows, to forget the ways of the forest and the musky smell of the bear den. To forget what she is and reassemble herself into a girl.

It is late and the music has stopped now. There is no sound but the ragged pull and surge of the waves and the whistling of the wind in the chimney. I pick Flora up from the armchair and carry her to the tiny bedroom adjoining mine. She is warm and pliable, her head flopping onto my shoulder, her breath soft against my neck. She murmurs something but I cannot make out the words. I kiss her forehead and smooth her hair. Who knows what goes on in the caverns of her mind.

Atalanta. That was the name given to the girl raised by bears. Abandoned by her father as a baby in the forest and suckled by a she-bear. Later, she became a formidable huntress, declaring that the only man she would consent to marry was the one who could outrun her. I think of Flora tearing along the cliff path ahead of us the other day, running into the lambent haze of the late afternoon light until she could barely be made out. Her white dress and her long hair streaming out behind her until she too looked like a streak of light, a pale blur. When Nicholas and I reached the Greyfriars ruins at the end of the path, there was no sign of her at all; it was as if she had simply vanished. The road was empty. Could she have run all the way back to the priory? Or down

to the sea? Then, suddenly, a flit of silvery movement. Nicholas pointed towards the grey stones and there was Flora, walking along the high ruined wall of the old monastery. How she had scrambled up there I do not know; the wall seemed to have no foothold in it, no step to help her. When she saw us she stood still for a moment, then stretched out her arms and launched herself off the wall. I could feel the fear spinning in me – surely she would break a leg or snap a wrist. But she landed like a tiny gymnast, knees bent and arms reaching forward, wavering a little and then righting herself. She gave me a look of triumph as she walked back across the field towards us. Little minx, my mother would have said. God knows, she said it to me enough times. She thinks I am mad, my mother, coming here to Suffolk with Flora. Perhaps I am.

I lay a long time awake in the high iron bed, listening to the waves. Oh, Atalanta, you will need to be brave and wild, fleet of foot and ferocious, I wanted to tell her. You will need to outrun those who would do you harm, to cast off the men who will want so much from you, to be ready to fight for yourself. But she knows this, of course she knows this. In the middle of the night I started from my sleep and walked to the door of Flora's bedroom and stared in at her small body under the covers.

I hoped to hear her wake and say my name.

Did you speak my name under your breath, Max? Did you feel it as I felt yours, like a charm, a spell, a prayer on your lips? On those solitary walks here that brought you, always, back to the doorstep of your own house, did you ever once speak my name?