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For a month now Esther had travelled on trains every day, a notebook in her lap, scribbling about what had happened before and after the night she and her husband had sex like it was a deluge—like it was the first time in their fifteen year relationship—and before and after she had mentally said goodbye to her closest friend of fourteen years. She had filled three fat notebooks, doing violence to the page to stop from doing violence to herself, and she was ready to read what she had written now that she could leave the house without crying and now that her child was safe from knives in the night, fine blades and hoarse, tense voices filling the dark as he slept. Killing herself with words might just bring her back to her life, she wrote to herself in the notebooks, but killing with knives could not do that. Words had both soothed and killed her at other times. She could choose such a time now, a moment from the past. It was a time shared with her sister, Ari, when letters had taken long days to pass between them, between their homes on different coasts. Ari had made paper in deep vats of cool water. And with their words the sisters had caressed one another, sometimes gentle, sometimes hard and harsh, and cajoled two drowned men to stay close for a while longer.

To begin, as Ari wrote in one of the letters, she would spend weeks collecting old paper to make her batch of new paper. She gathered great bags of wrappings, tissues, joss paper and napkins.

The evening before a papermaking day she sat down and took a few long, slow hours to tear the collected paper into pieces of about the size and shape of her smallest fingernails. She sat with a bowl of water in her lap and dunked the torn pieces into the water as she worked, trails of dye leaking out
who'd built the place climbed up separate ladders and installed brackets on the roof above the door. As they climbed back down again to get the plastic-covered sign, Alvis rose from the kitchen table, knocked his coffee over, and hurried to the front steps. His throat felt dry and he clenched his jaw nervously as he watched the men working. As they stripped away the heavy plastic, he could see parts of large neon letters on a sandy-coloured background. His heart beat faster and faster.

When the workmen finally went back up the ladders, carefully holding the sign between them, Alvis suddenly found himself running toward the road to get a better look. As one of the men climbed back down the ladder, he waved at Alvis, then leaned into the doorway and turned on a switch inside the building just as the other fellow pulled the last of the plastic off. A palm tree swayed in bright green neon and, above it, one pink letter at a time blinked: O--A--S--L--S.

Alvis scratched his head. The man who had waved at him asked, 'Hey, old-timer, what d'you think? Slot machines and a tavern right in your own backyard? When the missus starts nagging, you can get away quicksmart.' He winked knowingly at the other guy.

But Alvis didn't answer. He was standing under the swaying palm tree staring across the road to the trailer, which looked like a little rectangular box from this side of the road. He had always thought of it as bigger. The plants and shrubs looked like soldiers all in a row closing in on the house. He found himself searching for the azaleas but they were lost in the fortress of the rest of the garden. His eyes moved along the side of the trailer until they came to the small square shadow of the kitchen window. He thought if he looked hard enough, he'd see her there watching him. But from here, he couldn't see inside.

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to marlne the water. The bowls of water were left overnight to saturate, to
start turning back to pulp.

In the morning she whizzed her pulp with a hand-held blender and that
was when she could start to see the colours this batch would turn out to
be: the mix of the dyes from the paper fragments she had torn and swirled
together.

The two men had drowned on a hot afternoon. Ari was close by but it was too
far and too impossible to reach them, and Esther was much further away. She
learned the story through the gift of her sister’s words.

When she made pictures from the words and imagined seeing the two
men in the water, Esther saw their open eyes, the whites glittering in the
bright hot sunlight. The bodies bobbed in the currents, no longer moving of
their own accord. Ari was at the edge of the water and the edge of her sister’s
vision. Esther wanted to reach out her arms and embrace the scene, squeeze it
tight, squeeze the life into it.

And she could almost picture herself drawing the men out of the water,
using her will, making her will so strong she could hear the sound of it, a
humming sound. It reminded her of calming an animal in a way her father
had once taught her. He showed her how to talk softly to her pale grey pet
budgerigar, to not make any sudden movement, to concentrate hard, focus
on the bird, focus on being gentle and thinking of her love for the bird,
beguiling it to trust her. The bird, head cocked, blinking, let her stroke its
feathers, fine and softly textured as water, almost not there. Her father put his
hand into the cage, and the bird panicked and fluttered about, feathers flying.
Then she put her hand in through the tiny door again and the bird settled
on the perch, cocking its head once again, watching her fingers smooth its
fine patterns of grey and white as she concentrated hard on loving the bird.
She heard the concentration like a humming noise in her mind, a humming
passing between her and the bird.

Now, grown up, her father gone, she still tried the technique every once
in a while. She would be walking through the city, past the state library, along
the dark grey concrete, among the statues, and would see a flock of pigeons
massing on the ground, and she would walk a path through the middle of
them, calm, quiet, concentrating. The hum resonated through her and the birds seemed to barely notice her moving among them. And she tried the technique on the stem-legged waterbirds that picked their way through the dewy grass at work just before nightfall in winter. She moved from the path to the grass, calm, quiet, concentrating, walking close, too close, to the waterbirds. They did not startle. They kept up their picking, almost as though they expected that she too would lower a black, pointed beak and pick through her own patch of cold grass.

In her mind-pictures of the two men in the water, she was calm. She concentrated until she hummed. The humming passed over the bank and across the water and it encircled the two men and beguiled their dream-blind, drowned eyes to see again. The humming grew stronger, stronger. Maybe soon it would be strong enough to beguile the men from the water.

In the afternoon, Ari wrote, she would go outside and set up her materials, putting her deep plastic vat in the middle of the grass, overlooking the beach on one side and the estuary on the other, and filling the vat with a cool stream from the hose. She put a card table beside the vat and on that she put a wooden board.

Ari took a pile of freshly laundered and ironed couching cloths—calico cloths each the size of a tea towel—and dipped them in to the vat of water, letting them slowly sink to the bottom. When the fabric was soaked through she took out the cloths and hung them over the back of a chair she had placed beside the card table. Taking the first couching cloth from the top of the dripping pile, she spread it flat over the board on the table. The two pieces of her wooden papermaking mould lay on the grass next to the vat of water. She fetched her bowl of pulp, thick and lumpy like coloured porridge, from the kitchen and took a few handfuls of the pulp and put them into the water. Mixing the pulp, she swished the water about with her hands.

A couple of years after the drownings, Ari had gone to live far north, and was out of Esther's sight for another two years except for the briefest of visits. They each observed that now, especially late at night or just on waking in the morning, it was harder to tell the difference between absences: between who
was dead and who was merely out of sight. Both sisters moved into homes near the sea on their different coasts. Esther’s flat had no view of the beach but it had a balcony where she liked to sit at night among her glazed pots of lavender and jasmine, a semi-circle of candles around her and a book in her lap. Ari lived in her flat on the cliff between the beach and the estuary.

The sisters started their letter-writing. They shared a love of words and writing and books and letters and journals and diaries and paper and ink. And they shared their grief during a time when silence had smothered the words of many others around them. The letters arrived in alternate weeks in the letter-boxes of the sisters, each anxiously counting down days of the long, slow post.

To look at now, the letters tided in bundles with ribbon, or scattered across a table, appeared dainty and wispy. But when Esther picked up one, unwrapped it from its envelope, and read, she found the words of the letter still strong and sharp, laced with grief in its telling of dreams, visions, memories, truths.

Ari started to write about her papermaking. Every letter between the sisters still prickled with pointed messages of grief, but now Ari also described in detail the processes of her new hobby. Esther read the words, running her fingers over the nubby texture of her sister’s paper, picturing her high on her cliff overlooking her beach and her estuary, up to her elbows in deep, cool water, and drawing out her fresh new paper.

And then Ari knelt on the grass behind the vat and picked up her papermaking mould. She held the two layers, one a wooden frame with fine wire mesh stretched and tacked over it, and the other a hollow rectangle much like the outside of a picture frame. Ari clenched the two pieces together and with one swift, smooth movement, she slipped the mould deep in to the water and then drew it out, flat, the rectangle of mesh coated with a layer of pulp. Excess water showered through the holes in the mesh, back in to the vat below.

Ari’s handwriting was tiny and delicate, Esther had thought back then as she read the letters over and over and then placed them in bundles on her bookshelf by the glass-paned balcony doors. She chose the finest tipped black pens for making her fish-spine marks. Her handwriting had a Japanese look to it. A page of it had the appearance of an intricate work of art, ink on paper.
As paper and ink swirled between the sisters, it sometimes felt to Esther that the letters tried to lose themselves on the long days in transit: perhaps to mail themselves to the dead. Within the letters, the sisters cared for the dead, writing about them if not to them. The letters criss-crossed coast to coast in lines that Esther saw as glassy-green fishing line.

Carefully, Ari took away the top part of the mould, the part like a picture frame, and pressed the layer of pulp face down on to the spread-out couching cloth on the card table. The rectangle of coloured pulp lay like a perfectly formed but wet sheet of delicate, textured paper. She lay another couching cloth on top of the layer of pulp, careful, so careful, not to disturb it. She went back to her vat and put the pieces of the mould together and prepared to plunge again, to plunge the mould into the water and draw it out again, draw together the fragments of pulp, making them a whole and smooth layer, a single layer, across the mesh of the mould. The next layer of pulp was pressed on to the top couching cloth, and then a third, fresh, wet couching cloth was placed gently on top.

Esther had recurring dreams that had not left her since the time of the drownings even though long years had gone by now. In the dreams she walked down a cracked sunny path overgrown with straggling flowers and weeds, daisies and marigolds, jonquils and freesias, potato weed and dandelions, and she came to a white-painted tin letter-box. The hatch at the back opened with a creak. Mail spilled out over the ground. The letter-box overflowed with letters, postcards and packages.

All the mail falling out of the letter-box was from the dead. She sat down on the path and opened each piece of mail, but it never seemed to run out. The dead had written to her and sent her gifts from all kinds of places, every place they had ever been. But even though it was from the dead, the mail was never written or sent after death. The postmarks were old, years old. The mail had been held up somewhere, delayed, only arriving now, long after the drownings.

She woke from the dreams feeling warm and filled-up, but hurting through her chest and belly, understanding that she could only ever leave the
mail behind in the dream and that it could only be mail from the past. But
the dreams kept recurring. The mail kept arriving.

After every few plunges into the water, Ari needed to add more handfuls of
pulp. When all the pulp was used and all the cloths were pressed together in
a dripping tower on top of the card table, she put a second wooden board
on top and then used heavy metal clamps to squeeze the lot together and
remove all the excess water. She walked away for a few minutes, letting the
water drizzle away into the grass, gathering up her materials, rinsing the parts
of the mould under water from the hose, and tipping the vat on to its side and
listening to the water pour out of it into the grass, into the sandy dirt, running
in fast rivulets to seep between her toes, traces of the pulp sticking to her skin
and settling between the strands of grass. She stood the vat and the mould
against the back of the house to dry.

When most of the water had drained from between the clamped wooden
boards, Ari carried them to her clothesline and carefully removed the clamps.
Taking away the top board, she slowly, gently peeled the first couching cloth
away from the others. Its rectangle of coloured paper pulp stayed stuck to it
and she pegged the cloth to the line. She separated each layer of cloth and
paper pulp and pegged them out to dry, turning the clothesline around a
little at a time, looking out over her water views, watching the sun glint on
its surface. She put the wet boards beside the vat and mould and then tipped
up the card table to let the water sluice from its top and left it on its side in
the middle of the grass. Taking her bowl inside, she watched her paper drying
from a back window as the clothesline spun slowly in a breeze.

Hours later, dark outside, Ari switched on the back light and went to take
in her paper, the air light and warm on her skin, the lights of boats twinkling
out on the sea, frogs sounding from the estuary. She took in the cloths, each
feeling dry, warm and stiff. Inside, she sat cross-legged on a mat on the floor,
music playing, Coca-Cola and ice in a ruby-red goblet, and she peeled the
layer of new paper from each cloth like peeling away a fine layer of new skin.

Ari moved south again, the northern coast left behind and the letters packed
away, bound with ribbon, stored carefully. But the words never stopped
passing between the sisters, and nor did the paper and ink, gifts of emails, cards, shared fragments of poetry, novels swapped to read. Last Christmas, Esther bought Ari a new edition of Plath's journals that she covered, a sisterly message handwritten on the flyleaf. Ari bought Esther a set of Japanese writing journals. Four journals were bound in fabric with watery flowers printed on it, and they fitted into a case covered with the same fabric. Each of the journals was wrapped in waxed tissue paper that Esther had to tear away as she came to write in each of the journals in turn. Before her recent days of swift scribbling in plain spiral-bound notebooks on the train, these days of cutting words to herself into paper, so as to keep blade edges and knife points away from her skin and away from her husband and son, she had been up to the third journal in Ari's set. The background to the watery flowers was deep red. The first journal's background had been pink, and the second green. One unopened journal was left.

She got up now and picked up the set of journals from her desk. She drew out the last journal and lifted a corner of its waxed tissue paper wrapping. The last journal had a deep sea-blue background. Even looking at that sea-blue space around the pages waiting to be filled with her words, she thought, could soothe and kill, soothe and kill.

Author's Note: 'The Sea-Blue Background' grew from my collaboration with artist Annette Igulden, whose artwork Breath and Elegy (pp. 64-68) was inspired by the story. The story's framework existed in my mind before I began working with Annette, but I kept imagining it as a work of visual, tactile art as well as a piece of fiction. In between discussions with Annette about grief and art, the story grew into its current form. Viewing Breath and Elegy for the first time was an intoxicating moment for me, with the story's words and the images in the paintings being densely immersed within one another.

Gaylene Perry's book, Midnight Water: A Memoir (Picador 2004), was short-listed for the National Biography Award. She has just finished writing a novel. Gaylene is a lecturer in fiction and life-writing at Deakin University's Burwood campus.