

I am running through empty streets. The sky is black and without stars. All my life I have been running, down the dark underside. Now I am exposed, and all doors are locked. The house fronts turn me away, blind cold stone. I try to conceal myself in a doorway, but it is too shallow, the shadow falls on my stark white body as the moon rises above the sloping
5 rooftops, the shadowed chimney stacks, and already bluish light falls on my curved breasts, thighs and crotch. A bush of dark hair grows between my legs, I put my hand across it, the other arm across my two heavy breasts, but the doorway is too narrow, I am clearly visible in the doorway, shivering as much with shame as the cold night air which touches my exposed shoulders, buttocks and shrinking belly. I know that my situation, for which I am not
10 responsible, since I do not know how I came to be here, is hopeless; also, that I am somehow to blame. Behind closed shutters, round the corners of these silent streets, dark and narrow, lurk the prowling night wolves whose one desire is to mock and frighten. Shuddering, I wait. Footsteps are heard, but fade into silence. Nobody comes. I would give my soul for a strip of cloth to wrap round myself.

15 I have been prowling these night cities for ages. Night after night I have been running, and will continue to run, into the future. As a child I was pursued by a witch who gave chase, will o' the wisps danced in the dark above us both until she had me, popped me into her conjuror's box and, after only a touch of her ebony wand, transformed me, one two hullabaloo, into a fluttering brown bird with panicky wings. Just as I knew she would. And then the night was a
20 jungle through which prowled an all-knowing tiger, he was coming for me, even if I stayed indoors, hid under the bedclothes, he would sniff me out through the cracks in the window, peer through a gap in the drawn blinds and find me out.

The night is my own. I walk barefoot to the window and draw back the curtains. I watch moonlight over the silent gardens, shadows sucked into the apple tree like ink into blotting
25 paper. Nobody watches me, nobody hears. A black cat slinks noiselessly over the roof of the garden shed and vanishes into the shadows. The moonlight throws shadows on the wall, the sloping bars of the window run across my body. I move to my body, dance to my moving shadow, I am a prima ballerina, Desdemona pleading for her life, see how she stretches out her arms, how the shadow of her long hair falls on her falling nightgown, I never did offend
30 you in my life. There are few words, but the images come crowding through the shadows thrown by the moon. Now it is a white horse and rider moving through the forest, the moon drifts upward on a bank of drifting luminous cloud, is shut out by the closing treetops through which the wind sighs as it runs through the leaves at the bottom of the garden now quite dark, his hooves find moss, small grey boulders, flowers bloom as in a medieval tapestry on the
35 forest floor. He is moving towards her, she knows it but he does not, though he weaves through trees tall as masts as a lodestone pulled towards its star, and for him to find her it is necessary for her to be rooted to the spot, arranged on a bank of moss, looking touchingly helpless in her thin white gown with the dark tresses falling about her graceful shoulders. Why? My ankle, she says, smiling weakly, I have been in this place for several hours. And
40 because I am almost insensible with fatigue and lack of food I am allowed to sink back, enjoy the delicious sensation of his strong arms round my body. I close my eyes. He lifts me up onto the front of his horse. And then what? I wait. Nothing happens. The film on the screen of my eyelids has stopped moving forward, and I am frowning into empty black.

45 The house is steeped in moonlight and sleep. No sound from beyond the wall. I am safe. Now is the time when neither of them can harm me. Now is the time when I come out of my disguise, tiptoe through the shadowed room and draw back the curtains, watch the luminous night outside. The moon drifts slowly through banks of cloud which drift, black with unspent

rage in the middle but otherwise bright with eerie light. All things have been changed. I am changed. Outside the ugly little gardens with their small-minded fences and petty lawns have become one huge mystery, dark and joyous. The dark bank of trees which, in daylight, hardly screens this house from its neighbours, is drenched in night, has sucked up shadows and now
5 whispers secrets to the cool night air. It is alive, it sighs with a sudden gust of wind and has become a wood. I hear an owl hoot. Now I am free, the road is swallowed in shadow, silent now, to affirm my freedom I dance round the centre of my room, take huge leaps, careful, however, to land quietly on the patterned carpet. I am an insect with unused wings just come out of a husk. I have to stretch them because they are crumpled. I feel myself move, such
10 freedom, how the air touches my bare skin under the loose gown, now I open a window to feel more, cold air blows on my throat, through my loose hair, now the nightmare has blown into the shadows, out of sight. My cocoon lies, folded neatly on a chair, underwear, stockings, hooks and elastic, but even without them she would see to it that I do not move freely. I have only to do something, lift, bend, reach for, and she will pull me up short. Not nice, unladylike,
15 or words to suggest my body has become indecent, to be strapped in, hidden from prying eyes. I do not know what I have done wrong, only that I must be ashamed, and that my body has odours which will turn milk sour.

What a child I was, in the old days. Lying in bed I pulled at my nipples, looked anxiously for signs of some small swelling. I was in such a hurry, to grow, begin the change. And now I
20 am strapped in, covered, I walk down the road in my school uniform stiff as a ramrod, my knees close together, conscious of the bloodstained pad rubbing the skin which is tender on the inside of my thighs, glancing fearfully behind in case tell-tale marks show on the back of my skirt.

But now, in the dark, I enter my secret world. Through the open window I see trees stand
25 deep in shadow, while the small fringed lawn gleams vacant under a rising moon. Now the deckchairs are all stacked out of sight, and the dreadful small talk heard above the tinkle of teaspoons and cups. Folded, stacked up for the night, those stupid chattering adults.

Now nobody can see me. They watch me, through each hour of the day. I have a torch, so I can read my books undisturbed, but I let it lie in the desk drawer. They do not want me to
30 escape, that is why they spy on me through each hour of the day, why I am not permitted to shut myself in my room, why I am told that reading is bad for my eyes, why they stand on the doorstep when I come back late, the reason why she always finds something for me to do, dishes to wash, dusting, some foolish ritual like place mats on the polished oak table, or I must sit stiffly on the end of the sofa, hair brushed, knees tight together, and say yes, no,
35 pretend to listen to their boring talk, smile politely for visitors while all I want to do through the tedious hours is to escape, shut myself up in this room, shut out the sound of their silly voices, drown the sound in a surge of music which sets my pulse racing, how the solo violin lifts upward, upward like a bird ascending, now it takes me with it, flying up, up, I did not know it was possible for pure sound to do so much, more than words, now I have escaped: I
40 am pure spirit, I follow the sound like a pattern embedded deep in my head, inevitable as my own blood moving, the sound is now my own blood flowing, my pulse throbbing, the sound of my own soul crying out. With rage, passion, but also a terrible joy.

Leaning out of the window, I feel how the cool night air touches my face and bare shoulders; how it gathers in the shadows of the trees, stirring the leaves which sigh as it
45 moves on; how it shakes perfume out of the ghostly bush of jasmine below me, and now drifts up; how it moves the moving shadows of clouds made luminous by a drifting moon. Standing like this, undisturbed, with nobody to see me, I know that I could be part of this whole thing,

music and words, the entire universe, if only they would let me be. Because the world which they have chosen to inhabit, and in which I stand awkwardly on the sidelines, sulky and self-conscious, is anyhow false. How stupid, I say aloud, laughing into the dark. They do not know, cannot hear, but meanwhile they hold me trapped in this unhappy house, sitting silent at the oak table as I have been told to do, back erect, hands on the table, but never elbows, I pass the gravy boat from him to her, potato bowl from her to him, the salt cellar to each in turn without an extra word having been spoken, because one word could cause an explosion, I sit between them, she is white-faced and tight-lipped, he frowning, sitting hunched over the plate, and all I want is to be allowed to leave the table, to shut myself in this room, out of range of their hatred which crackles ominously like an electric storm and could, probably will erupt round me, the lightning conductor. It is no use, it does not matter how often I stack the dishes, set place mats and cutlery, peel potatoes or wash up, the problem of my being in this house is unresolved, since it has nothing to do with my behaviour or the number of unwashed dishes but with them, their rage and resentment with what they feel for each other, with the stupid lives they have somehow constructed in and around each other. And since I am the focus, since all this goes on night and day in this stuffy little house which is like a prison, a house in which each word is audible through the walls, in which each person moves through furniture which must be dusted, eats without appetite through meals which have to be cooked, from plates which must be stacked, washed and put away yet again, speaks to someone who must be heard, deferred to, pecked on the cheek as though in love, since all this is endured in the name of family, duty, it follows that they resent me bitterly. Nothing I do is right, nothing can, nothing could ever be enough. I have been taught to say 'Can I do anything?' as a kind of apology for her domestic martyrdom, but I know there is nothing I can do. There could never be enough furniture to dust, silver to polish, or unnecessary chores to propitiate her rage. Worst of all, I am not conscious of gratitude for their wasted and tormented lives.

It is only at night, now, standing at the window with a calm moon drifting silently above the dark gardens, now so soothingly peaceful that I can feel the true freedom of growing, becoming, which makes life so exciting now that I can hear music, read words with new meanings, something so thrilling that my whole body is tense as a strung bow, I must find release in dance, movement, and I watch the shadow of my arm on the moonlit wall and admire its grace. That is the curious thing, even while in sleep my body turns to nightmare, while the clothes she forces me to wear are hideous and I cannot bend, stretch or lift without a reproof to remind me of my indecency, some secret vice which has somehow become inherent to me, like sweat in my armpits (she sews waterproof pads into cotton frocks) or the white stains in my underwear, even while this is so, in my secret room I exult in the way my breasts have grown like those of an adult, the curve of my hips gives me pleasure, I study the line of neck and shoulder as though it belonged to somebody else, and as though it was somebody else looking back at me from the mirror I appraise the line of her chin and the smooth white forehead above winged eyebrows and those remarkable eyes which look back at me so seriously. So this is she, I say, watching the apparition. And sometimes, standing under the apple tree in my pale blue dress, one hand resting lightly on the rough dark bark, I say to the world of the empty garden and the houses beyond: this is she, here I am. And once this spring, coming out of the woodshed the sun dazzled me, I had to bend down or the untrimmed pale boughs bright with yellow forsythia would have tangled in my dark hair as it grew above the woodshed door, and I stood blinking into the bright light and the voice inside me said: Here I am, here she is, the young woman with blossoms round her head, look how she stands. I am standing on the threshold of my life.

But how long must I wait for it to begin, how long before I escape from this house? I am trapped in it, the furniture that needs dusting, the sour twist of her mouth and the talk which is always small and increasingly bitter. I listen, but all is quiet through the wall. I wish I had a lock on my door. If only they would leave me alone, with these books, my journal and the sounds that come out of the radio. But a voice calls up the small staircase: What are you doing up there? Come down and say hello to the visitors, and I sit on a chair while they glance at me occasionally, the child who has grown suddenly, who does not seem to know what to do with herself, not saying a word but slouching forward in her chair, watching the faces move as they make small talk from under her long drooping hair. My mother smiles. Neither fish nor flesh she says, meaning me. I do not know what it signifies, but she likes to put a label, some sort of category on my behaviour and what it represents, she is oddly smug and confident as she brings out the words. What are you talking about? I asked, standing on the landing outside my door. It means, she told me, that you are neither one thing nor the other. I shrugged. I do not mind what she says, or thinks. It means nothing, if it makes her content I am glad. But when she went through my things and read my journal, told me so, laughing in my face, I could have throttled her on the spot to stop the words from coming out.

I listen, but all is quiet through the wall. Soon a new day will begin. The seasons have begun to follow each other with alarming speed. I remember last spring, when the first crocuses pushed through the meagre grass under the apple tree and I had my birthday. Another year of my life. Soon I will leave school, I can count the years on the fingers of one hand, and I know how quickly they will go by. Because I remember not only last winter, subdued mornings when thick white fog curled like an animal rubbing its back against the window glass, mornings when trees appeared like ghosts through a thin veil of mist on the walk to school, but the winter before which was hard, for weeks the garden lay under several feet of snow, its surface turned hard as glass with black specks visible amidst solidified footprints to the woodshed, we slid in the playground and outside in the road before men arrived in a lorry to scatter grit, and the footpath to the front door had to be attacked with a spade. One winter, two. Nights closing in, dark mornings. Followed by spring, crocuses breaking through under the apple tree, blossom breaking and falling, breaking to fall yet again the following year, blow in drifts along the road. I count the years now, each spring another birthday. I count the years of my life adding up. I have hardly begun to live, but soon I will be old.

But when I was small, only a few years ago, I would count the seconds, knowing the huge expanse of a single minute, and that this vastness had to be multiplied as many times for a single hour. As for tomorrow, it was inconceivable. Nobody could be expected to wait until tomorrow. And everything had colour, colour and light. I woke to the sound of the cock crowing in the house by the sea and the sun was already spilling into the room, making a bright pool on the bare wood floor. Each day was summer, hot, endless, nothing could stop the sun rising in the same slow arc through the same blue sky, travelling constant above my head, days like a string of clear glass beads, or the soap bubbles which I blew from my clay pipe, shining as they floated upward, holding the colour of all things, trees and grass and sky in a tenuous circle of light. And the two of them young, playful, on holiday, wearing loose white clothes and moving quickly, with ease, the sound of their voices murmuring, but also laughing through the thin wall. Shrieks, and the ringing sound of laughter from the far side of the garden in the sleepy shadow of afternoon.

Now they are changed. The moon has sunk below the line of trees. The sky begins to fade. Soon a fresh day will have begun, I will hear a groan through the wall, bedsprings and the sound of him clearing catarrh from his throat as he does each morning, clearing his nasal

passages over the washbasin in the bathroom before he gargles. How it disgusts me, his gross body making loud noises through the wall, the flabby paunch and white skin as he crosses the landing wearing only pyjama pants, the feel of his unshaved chin when he plants his morning kiss on my face, scratching bristle, bad breath smelling foul, her face mud-coloured, the eyes flat, still lifeless with unbrushed hair showing steaks of grey. I want to close my eyes and ears, so that I cannot see, hear or smell, thick walls to shut out all sounds and give me privacy. A world of my own, allowing in only what is beautiful: music, books, moonlight riding the dark shadows across ghostly lawns and the dying breath of high trees, my own haunting image in the murky mirror.

I confront the shadow which looks out at me from the oval mirror. Who are you, I whisper, coming forward so close to the surface that her dark solemn eyes gaze with alarming gravity at me. I study the fine line of her brows, which sweep upward, then taper down like the wings of a bird in flight. Pushing back the falling hair I study the shape of the smooth white brow and find it passable, but the nose disturbs me, for the hundredth time I push my forefinger against its fleshy base and press upward, turning my head to the side I reaffirm that such a minor change would remove my only grievance, but as yet long periods of pressure have only produced pain at the base without changing its shape. I find it ironic that such a minor alteration could mean so much and still remain out of reach. But time is on my side, I will keep trying. I step back and the dark hair falls to the shoulders, delicate curves, thin arms, how the small face gleams in the dark, ivory pale, those two dark eyes stare back. Who are you? I whisper, and the solemn eyes stare back without a word. Sometimes I have felt their strange power turned on others, adults, those in authority. Now I turn it on men. I do not know why I, or rather she, since I do not feel completely one and the same person on such occasions, should do this, or want to. But I have felt how her solemn dark eyes have stared into the back of men's heads until they turned, transfixed, how one man's eyes in particular will always find hers, across the crowded assembly hall during morning prayers, behind her desk in the schoolroom, even out of doors during sports day, I have only to watch and his eyes will find me, one among many he will find me out, as though such eyes could burn, transmit wordless messages of some sort. I am frightened of it, this curious magnetism, once I felt his eyes watching me during a sudden downpour, a group stood waiting under cover looking on as tall trees dripped water, nobody broke the silence as wind stirred the high branches and raindrops pattered drily on a brittle flood of old leaves on the ground, I knew he was watching me, for a long time I would not turn my head, pretending not to be aware I looked down at a patch of dark green moss near my foot, when at last I did turn my head to answer his black gaze it was with a kind of triumph. What do you want, I asked in my look. For once I was not frightened, quite cool, free of the hot burning flush rising in my body, the hammer under my ribcage was still. Now, just for a second, I was in control. Afterwards, when the sun had come through the branches and the group moves forward, forming new patterns, talking, I stayed behind, with him, staring down at the mound of soft moss close to my foot, though I chattered as gaily as the rest. Both of us did. I keep going over the scene in my mind, night after night. I close my eyes in the dark, rain falls through the cool wood. Standing with my back to the wall of the shelter I wait for the moment when I will turn my head.

She laughed at me, when I told her, but in spite of everything I am not a child. I hide my diary in the underwear drawer where she will not find it easily. I wish I had a lock on my door, since she does not regard me as somebody with a right to privacy. How dare she mock me, if I feel such pain. I know that it is absurd, since nothing can bridge the gap between us, he being old now, so old that I could never catch up. Last night I wrote in my diary, 'I do not

want to forget, ever, what it feels like to be me now.' That is why I keep writing things down. I am changing, I know that. I will continue to change, and some day I will be old, a woman like my mother. Except that I do not want to turn into somebody like her, that is why I write it down, to remind myself, how it was, how it is now, everything so intense, nothing absurd or
5 childlike, it hurts, but then again how wonderful the world is now, how sharply I see colours, the shapes of things, the sky now turning pink and gold above the dark line of trees, feel my body moving, hair lightly touching my shoulders, cool air running down smooth skin, a tingling sensation going through me as cold air comes in from the window, giving me goose
10 pimples, and I watch small hairs rising on my arm, hear birds singing sleepily now in the shadow of the apple tree. The brown skin of my arm smells of summer afternoons spent lying on the edge of a cricket field with a book. Discussing it: life. Chewing a grass stem for the sweet crunch between my teeth. Revising French verbs and thinking how life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, stains the white radiance. As we lie, books forgotten, grass tickling the
15 backs of our knees, squinting into the sunlight and feeling how the world revolves under our backs as the clouds move overhead, till everything is spinning and I close my eyes against the bright sunlight and feel how my lids become a burning membrane, the colour of my own blood, through which everything floods in, the sound of a high slow aeroplane droning overhead, the smell of dry grass and baked earth, of my baked forearm lying across my
20 mouth, and coming years spinning ahead, nebulous as clouds, drifting in curious shapes. How it is now.