

Evaporation

by Shelagh Plunkett

En état de choc, une mère dont l'enfant est morte pense au lac qui a englouti tous ses espoirs.

The snow thawed over night. It disappeared into the ground, into the air, and left nothing but bent grass and the drooping heads of snowdrops. Our yard was a mess. It seemed as though some strange tide had ebbed in the night, filling it with flotsam—Jessie's stroller, her sled, a mitten she had dropped, bones the dog had carefully buried in the snow. Suddenly abandoned, transfixed and left behind. They stood out sharply while all around time spun past.

The lake was raging, its surface finally broken after three months of inertia. Immense brown and gray slabs of ice ground against the breakwater in front of the house. Usually in the spring the ice would break up into hard, hollow slivers that sang, but that year the breakup was thick and pulpy. The sound was an underground howl.

If a leviathan had surfaced, had come up from the dark bottom, slow at first but gathering speed until it broke the hardened tegument, it would have left that sight behind it. It would have made that sound. But nothing so remarkable had happened. The air had warmed. A change so slight, so imperceptible, that my numb skin could tell no difference. An inaudible departure leaving chaos in its wake. Perhaps, I thought, that was the proper way of things. No ceremony, no warning in advance.

One night late in November, when the ice was new, a neighbour had come to the house.

"Let's go," he had said. "The ice is fresh and smooth. Let's be first out on the lake."

He had skated there for years. Knew the ice, took pride in leaving his blade marks when there were no others yet. One hun-

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dred acres of fresh ice, of solidified water. I had considered the molecules, their motion slowed, the bonds between so short, so tight that heavy human bodies could be supported. While underneath, isolated from the air, the hidden liquid moved. Water that had sunk a thousand ships, that had carried away houses, was silent, captured only by the coldness of the air.

I had stood on the breakwater that November night, watching the two men skate toward the city on the other side. Confident that they were safe. Knowing that the ice would not break, not that night. There was no wind, no sound of water. From the centre of the frozen lake their disembodied voices came, skidding on the smooth black surface. Sentences shattered into phrases and words broke down into sibilants. Gradually, even these faded into silence.

I had stood, trying to see them in the dark long after they disappeared and was just turning to go inside when I heard it. The stridulous wail of cold steel on thin

ice. It travelled out in all directions from the sharpened edges of their skates, radiating along intangible fracture lines deep in the frozen water. It concentrated in the ice, forming and condensing into sound only as it travelled away from the source.

Listening to the ice pile up against the breakwater, I thought of that earlier song. That soaring high-wire aria had left behind the earth-bound passage that I was hearing that morning. And, I wondered if there was another song forming in the soil beneath me, releasing its sound somewhere distant from my footsteps.

I saw the ice crushed by other ice against the steel wall on which I stood and I thought that it made sense. Made sense that it should howl once it was freed, that it should roar and bellow once it had broken through. And I knew the keening I had heard that night of skating had been the necessary preparation for that later depth of meaning.

It was when the police and firemen arrived that I left the house. They came without their siren. No cars to warn on that small island, too early for commuters on their bikes. Listening so carefully in case she made a sound, I missed their advent. I didn't hear them come. It seemed as though I only put the phone down, just finished that short monologue, when they came crashing through the door.

It was then I left the house to walk back and forth by the lake. I watched the water rise and fall, caught inside its cup of land, listened to it howl. I felt the ground reverberate. I was silent; an extraction of sound so pure, so dense, I made no noise at all.

Behind me, inside, I knew what they were doing. I didn't want to witness their attempts, but neither did I want to put them from my mind. Inside they were fumbling, racing in a small tight space to catch a whisper long since vanished. I had tried to catch that whisper, to call it back, to make it echo, but had only managed to

manipulate a tiny puff of air. Not a real breath. Just an expulsion.

They would hover over her and, despite her minuteness, she would defy their enormous attempts. With all their expertise, their speed, their tubes and pipes and all their training, even they would fail to catch her wind.

I paced up and down, up and down. I thought, "If I walk fast enough the heat produced through friction will liquefy my body, rendering me down to a puddle spreading out for a moment before evaporation. Nothing left to show where I have been." I walked like that in silence, waiting for it to happen. Faster and faster, I paced between our house and the lake.

Houses—solid, small and hunched that morning—lined the lake shore next to ours. Inside them, neighbours breathed. Some slept, some dressed for work. If I had looked past the glass of their windows I might have seen them, sleepy as they drank their coffee. I might have seen them gazing at the lake. But, like the ice that winter, the glass itself stopped me. I was outside and, pacing as I was, there seemed no way to break the vitreous barrier. The windows just reversed the light.

From across the water I could hear the faint staccato of morning rush hour; the noise of every morning, every night. The city was reflected in the windows of our house. Moving points of light, billboards along the elevated highway, cast syncopated messages against the glass. *The Real Thing. Have A Good Day.* I saw my face mirrored there, laid over with the wavy image of steam venting from high buildings. As if I had dissolved, as if I wasn't really there.

I saw a shape inside the house move against the glass. I watched that figure. Mesmerized like a child watching fish inside a tank travel round and round, searching for a way out of their glass box. Inside, they must have seen me, must have thought to bring me in. A man came out and stood in front of me. I had to shift my focus. I had to look at him and noticed that his boots were shiny with the melted snow. My feet were bare. He said, "Come inside. It's cold out. Your husband needs you." I turned and walked toward the house. Following, afraid I might not know the way back in. Outside the door and he said, "It's a shame." It broke my silence, made me laugh. The sound of a crystal

bowl dropped on rough concrete. I laughed and said, "It is a shame."

Inside the sound of their endeavors muffled any other noise. Stamping feet, voices, screeching radios hanging from their belts. Three men were huddled in the bedroom, two of them bent over staring at the third. He knelt, I could only see his back through the open doorway. A fourth man stood nearby, talking on his radio. Broken sounds invaded the room. The fireboat was coming, making progress through the floes of ice, to take her, to take us across the water.

They must have known that it was futile, but they continued. Their frustration mingled with their duty, it left a filmy dampness on their faces. The house shook as their compressed energy sought a way out.

The house was small and there were four big men in it. Four big men and then myself and him and her. The four of them moved like a team but us, the three that should have been that way, had drifted. As though her sudden exodus had left us scattered, encapsulated in our separate pain.

I looked at him but he seemed too far away to reach, as far as he had skated on that night. Farther. He looked at me across that gap. I think he was bewildered. I watched him stoop and pick up a pomegranate rolling on the floor. We had found it, rare and out of season, in the market earlier that week. He had photographed her eating one, the first time she'd eaten the ruby seeds.

We stood and watched each other. I was pressed against the windows, the city and water behind me. He was in the kitchen. Between us lay the books, the papers, the flute he played at night, my camera, all her toys. The dog had chewed a blanket while we slept. Now, confused, he slunk under the table.

Photographs had fallen off the table, scattered in the morning rush. There I was, grinning and pointing to where my coat swelled as if a pillow had been stuffed under it. There was his mother, her back bent as she pulled the sled away. There were my grandparents standing in a stiff row, the ruts of the stroller wheels cutting sharp lines in the snow before their feet. There was he and I, caught in a field of white flowers calling Jessie back into the view of the lens as the shutter clicked.

I began to pick them up, uncovering more beneath the ones I gathered. My grandmother, my father, his uncle, his brother, my aunt. Each one inside its separate piece of coated paper, each one surrounded by a sea of others.

When I had got them all, held them in my hands, I gave them to him. His face was blank. Beside him, on the counter was one more. In it the three of us were standing on the lake, held up by eighteen inches of thick, black ice.

I looked at that and all the other pictures and in her face I saw the faces of others. A mirage made up of unborn hundreds; children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. All the potential heirs her birth had brought. I looked again and saw them dissipating into ciphers.

Suddenly the firemen broke their huddle. The one who'd knelt rushed past me to the door. He held her in his arms, her shoulders flat across his palms. Her arms splayed out, her head was tilted back, her mouth open, mute. The image hardened in my memory like a snapshot. And through my sinews, muscles, veins I felt the squall begin.

Outside the windows I could see the sun had risen high enough to shine across the lake. The air was filled with fine gray mist; melted snow, thawing ice. It rose up in vapors, trails of wispy air-borne water vanished into nothing high above the fireboat on the lake.

I don't remember walking to the windows or standing there beside the glass. I don't remember picking up the camera. I didn't see it fracturing the thin transparent skin. But suddenly the air was filled with glinting shards. The wind howled through the opening, the frigid spray swept in.

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