

## Daphne Marlatt / Excerpt from TAKEN

### III

How i love mornings here — five first words written to connect with you. First words of the new month i was taught for luck in another country, hares and rabbits — rabbits anyway, squatting, ears alert, the run-away rabbits of North End Road perched very still in the mist. Echoes of childhood fabulae. I want to write you here, translate you, into this fabulous air so drenched with the syllables of birds. I want to pour you into this bowl of misty halfflight, everything merged, submerged — our island dawn, just beginning . . .

I still write *our*, just as i long to write *you* without separation.

Just as family, the idea of family with its unbroken bond, haunts our connection. A thread of magic litanies running back, uncut, like Ariadne's to a safe place.

When my mother first learned this particular charm (to alter the destiny-freight a whole month might bring) she hadn't thought of me yet, could never have imagined you . . .

Breaking the marriage script, we broke the familial ties we each were meant to perpetuate. And yet, so many strands of the old scripts that compose us wove the narrative, then unreadable, unread, that made me recognize you when you walked into that crowded cafe. Rain clothes giving up their wet in the coffee — warm, people warm, you leaning passionate over cups and saucers to connect. We told each other intimate stories and i watched you grow clear, you i'd been waiting for, over the cognac we ordered — luminous threads from that farm in the Midwest, where you are now, flaring towards other threads from across the Pacific, about to catch light and spill their difference into each other . . .

Like milkweed pods, the way they split, webs of intermingled hair, seed, shining threads blowing along the gravel road . . .

There's a Midwest image for you, Lori. An island one too. All that milky juice staining our hands. Now you find you have to break more strands, the ones i thought we were weaving new from the old break-age. I felt them tearing as you spoke. Telling me in that decisive tone of yours that you have had enough of islanding.

A rock in my throat, that impossible thing. I couldn't speak, not on the phone. All i could think is that now we must untangle the different strands of our story.

• • •

After steaming off-course into the Indian Ocean, evasive action, their commandeered boat arrived in Darwin, rationless and almost without water. He was sent on to Melbourne where he was claimed by the Australian Navy and posted to the "Cerberus, additional to Navy Office." What amounted to an office job in Cyphers made life together possible and he cabled Esme at once. The city, he wrote, was full of parks and gardens, people they knew. He would find them a flat, even a hospital if beds were to be had. Two months before her due date, she joined him.

Their child was born into a fragmented circle of refugee friends, Aunty this and Aunty that, and Grandparents duly settled in a Melbourne hotel. This was, after all, an experience Aylene would not miss, though she declared herself unready for the role and abhorred its name.

You can't be too careful with names, she announced, peering into the minute face presented to her. Names shape destinies. Look at *Esme*.

Holding up her dark-haired progeny for inspection, Esme wondered what destiny her mother had attached to *Esme* twenty-four years ago. Whatever it was, the bundle of rosy flesh, blanket-wrapped and adorably present, seemed to justify her existence.

*Sally* she thought a perfect name: small and unaffected, nothing a child would have difficulty living up to. Aylene was scandalized. How could you dream of giving your daughter a darky's name?

That was the first battle, with Suzanne the finally agreed-on compromise. A Gallic twist to an unpretentious garden variety. For heaven's sake darling, don't, whatever you do, let people call her Suzie. You know what Australians are like — calling your father Vik. Vik! As if he were some Bombay taxi-driver.

Naming the grandparents proved equally difficult. I simply cannot abide Gran or Granny — unbearably common. It makes me feel as old as the hills.

Gradually, after months of gurgles at the heavily powdered face with its up-and-down melodics, indistinguishable baby sounds were seized with triumph and turned to Giggi, later contracted in writing to Gigi with a Parisian flair.

Gigi and Grandpa, so be it. Peace was more important than honesty, Esme told herself, though once, pinching her nose at the smell of the nappy bucket, she hurled accusations into the offending air: your life hasn't changed one jot, Mother, though the world has. Paris, with all its bistros and can-can, is occupied. Do you know what that means?

Apart from the name, this new role required certain props. An ornate walking stick, for instance, which had nothing to do with medical support. And so the two Babas, as Esme first tried calling them, each with their stylish canes, grew larger and larger as they approached from the nearest tram, he in his homburg, she in her turban with its jewelled pin. Always she carried a large handbag that held seductive sweets and other lures to distraction — used tram tickets, a glass



swizzle stick (oh Mother, do be careful), two artificial violets, badly creased (just watch out she doesn't put them in her mouth).

(It's extraordinary, Charles said, your parents have no idea how to raise a child. How did they manage with you? They didn't, she replied. My ayah did.)

In this way the child, born in a would-be republic affirming its ties to the British throne, began her life with imperial words. No ayah but two babas who would relieve her hard-pressed mother on occasion. Baba, just a consonant shift off dada and mama. Could they escape hearing its Malay resonance from their Malacca and Penang days? Esme recalling with nostalgia her Nonya-Baba amah from a community generations-old speaking Hokkien- and English-sprinkled Malay, cooking dishes like curry capitan, shopping in sarong kebayas.

Baba grand-fathers spent hours sipping kopi and exchanging chakap. Suzanne's grandfather liked his chakap too, preferably with retired medical cronies in hotel lounges. He lived in an English wool suit and punctuated tea with the routine reminiscence: a whiskey sucoh, now that would hit the spot.

Nevertheless he grew into Grandpa (to go with Gigi) of the coughing chuckle, the waistcoat that smelled of medicine and old cigar smoke, the silver watch that disappeared in a pocket. Grandpa cursed Churchill and loved him, just as he sometimes smacked her bottom, then played "dickey-bird" and slid her a toffee. Grandpa talked about India, talked about Malaya, taught her "Rule, Britannia," to sing it standing up like Little Grey Rabbit: "Britons nevah nevah nevah will be slaves."

• • •

Oh Lori, this was never part of the story woven around you. A baby-boomer making your appearance in a demobilized USA busy sending war vets to college and working women back into the home, you inherited other clothing: Pollyanna dresses, yes, but also pint-sized dungarees, cowboy boots. You remember the plowed furrows stretching away from the house, shelves of preserves and your mother weeping in the basement. You remember Roy Rogers and your own pony in the barn. Angel food cake, chores with your brothers. A certain undertone at the dinnertable dissonant with words like "Commies" and "unions."

So recently we stood in our own kitchen hushed, listening to the news. Darkness outside and ourselves figured in the window like apparitions on a tv screen. The sound of bombs, an excited journalist's voice describing the street from his hotel window. Baghdad blowing up. We were appalled for different reasons, historically accountable and furious at a complicity neither of us wanted to recognize.

But it is not this war that divides us, with its lines of punishment and revenge. It's something further back in our own lives. Still unread.

• • •

Their "Melbourne days," as Esme referred to them later, lurched on in beleaguered domesticity framed by news from Europe, news from the Pacific, which alternately offered them hope (in 1943 peace seemed just around the corner) or depressed them with defeats and still more death tolls. By 1944 war seemed a permanent condition of life.

Charles sent regular letters to his father, writing sometimes during

quiet moments at night in the Navy Office, engaged in work he never described though he mentioned long hours, 8 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Nothing about the nature of his job, some general commentary on the progress of the war and concern for his father's own long hours as ARP Warden in southern Kent, well within reach of German rockets and bombs.

"Dear Dad," he begins the letter still encased in its almost square envelope, 3 *Opened by Censor* stamped in red ink down one end, "It is a wet depressing day & I have no letter from you to answer. The problem is what to write about. You probably face the same problem in writing to me. The usual daily round of life continues & its little interests seem so trifling against a background of world war that it seems futile to write of them . . . "

He comments on the crowds of Easter holidaymakers on the trams as he goes on and comes off duty each day of the long weekend, Anzac day extending free time, at least for civilians, into the week. "You would not think the maximum war effort were being made, as is so often proclaimed to the world, if you lived here." Luna Park is bright with arcade lights and music. Theatres are advertising Betty Grable in *Song of the Islands*, Lana Turner in *Slightly Dangerous*.

What does he think about at midnight as he tiptoes into the darkened bungalow, black shoes in hand, groping past kitchen chairs to the sink where he lets the tap run, breaking the noise of its fall by cupping his hand in its small torrent — waterfalls he has hiked to in Kedah? The Waterfall Road to the Botanical Gardens in Georgetown? The first grim news of POW camps in Malaya, atrocities in Burma? Clean water, clean and ordinary.

He is tired of what constantly leans in on them, the news from elsewhere, the good news, the bad news he can do nothing about, the wish for it all to be over, the worry about missing friends, a future, the old life that has fallen away when he felt he could make a difference, shape something of value.

Some nights there is no silence.

He arrives to find Suzanne fretting, fevered with yet another cold,

Esme desperate for sleep. He takes the child into the parlour and settles down on the sofa, talking to her in words she doesn't understand, and when the crying starts again, rocking her small hot body in his arms as he lets his attention wander and the brain that is full of letters and numbers unwinds in the dark, a spool of film cascading off its sprocket onto the floor.

• • •

He in his winter uniform, greatcoat wrapped around his legs, neatly creased trousers underneath. Seated on a park bench with a baby bundled in white on his lap, graphic in the disparity between the crisp lines of his naval cap, his dark uniform, and her round white form. Holding her awkwardly, firmly, as if she might slide from his grip, he has one shiny shoe upraised, caught in the jounce that will keep her smiling for the camera.

Toddler arranged on a blanket in wool leggings and jacket, only her mouth visible, its grin as she tips her father's naval cap over her face to hide in all that white dark.

Young mother in slacks leaning against a pillar the baby is perched on. Hair rolled above her face, right leg bent slightly against the pillar. Her pose is casual as she smiles, displaying the look of young women in coveralls handily filling the gap in shipyards and factories. The look of a modern mother freed from incessant contact through bottle-feeding and proud of keeping a regular regimen.

The place itself has disappeared into faded sepia, a flickering sequence of frames, of black-cornered stills, "snaps." To send home to



England or keep in a family album. Images in which they saw themselves contemporary, fluent in the idiom of adverts, news photos, film images that surrounded them. Their own unspeakable dreams translated into this language. Ghostly.

• • •

Esme pushed the pram to local shops, queued up with her ration coupons, smiled at shopkeepers. Exuding young matronhood like musk, she garnered compliments on her daughter's mass of Shirley Temple curls. A poppet, they said, a pretty tyke — she heard *take* and marvelled at their vowels.

Saving string, scrounging cardboard boxes for food parcels home to the father-in-law she had never seen, she enclosed brief, cheerful notes and daubed the whole with crimson sealing wax. He would not be disappointed, she promised. He would love her when, at the end of the war, they would finally meet — his grand-daughter she meant — constructing thus a niche for herself in a family to which she belonged in name only.

She was keenly aware of raising the initial grandchild on both sides and she met her new responsibility head-on. She would be an entirely different mother from Aylene, she promised herself, a mother who knew what mothering meant. After all, she was armed with information her mother had never had. She had Doctor Spock. And the papers were always talking about elimination or germs, and the requisite soap, "safe even for tiny tots."

In a wartime culture of experts, the domestic theatre had its share of bulletins, and Viktor offered his. At fifty-six he was forcibly retired but



still on active duty within his family. Advice on inoculations, knockknees, and a mysterious assortment of rashes was duly imparted. An early stint in India as Emigration M.O. had acquainted him with various exotic diseases but Suzanne's typical eighteen-month old body offered little in the way of medical diversion.

Nevertheless, a careful mother knew that disaster lurked around any corner, that germs infected the commonest things, money being easily the worst offender. Clean hankies were essential in the portable kit that Esme's handbag became. Hankies for bandages around scraped knees, hankies with twisted corners for lifting soot out of an eye, cologne-steeped hankies bunched with a little spit (and lipstick) for grubby cheeks. Spit and polish in the presentation of toddlers: evidence of one's professional mothering.

• • •

Bushed is what people call the feel of being immersed in the dark of trees, sky indeterminate from fog, and deer the only company for too long. They want to get back to the mainland, mainstream, the main thing, feeling as if they've been sidetracked. Is that what you feel?

As i walk the dog along North Beach Road — the cedar bend, the one we like, reeks of spring and soon wild currant will dangle its shocking pink — the sea drowns island reefs and then recedes, only to wrap itself around again. Amorous intent. Insistent rhythm even abandoned orchards feel.

To live here is to be invaded by such rhythms. Not invaded perhaps, but seduced, pore by pore.

This isn't enough, you say. This is what sidetracks us from a sense of direction in our lives, this losing ourselves in the surge and toss. Islanded, as if marooned. You return to the fatal idea of islands cut off from the main. Cut off from a larger narrative that builds and builds . . . towards what end?

Where can we be if we aren't where we are, inside so many levels of connection? Rooms afloat on a sea of electronic impulses, while fires rage unchecked and oil slick on a different gulf drifts toward a herd of breeding sea cows soon to be forgotten, immaterial finally in the human struggle for dominance.

I can't seduce you anymore, can't call you back, can't begin to say what loving is. This place permeated by old betrayals . . . this place where radiance shimmers daily . . . the call and response that birds are full of . . . Something urgent and feather light in the balance.

• • •

Slowly the news began to change. Allied efforts in the Pacific were surfacing into big print. By late April *The Age* reported STRIKE ON SUMATRA after British carriers successfully steamed across the Indian Ocean to launch Barracudas and American Dauntless Avengers in a sunrise attack: ". . . the beginning of the road back to Malaya and Singapore," the paper crowed.

• • •

once you thought you knew where you were on a hazy kind of inner map, now you know that what Sumatra meant, or Palembang if you had even heard of it, was nothing to what they mean now. and oddly enough, the map has faded further with each year as if the rest of the world had simply dropped away. sometimes you and your current "family," your kongsee as you call it, think back through the camps and moves but time is unreal. what you know is this camp now, your particular barrack, your own bali-bali where you sleep between B. and S., the "lav" below no more than a cement drain, the mud walkways, the padang in the middle with the cookhouse and guardhouse at either end. you know them by the steps you make, the effort they take. the half-mile walk to the hydrant where you go in the heat to carry water back in kerosene tins, balancing them on a bamboo pole on your bony shoulders like a coolie. you carry water for the garden, where the baked mud must be broken up with chungkals, their blades coming down in enforced unison in the sun. you are learning to know nothing beyond the camp, except the road just beyond the gates where you file out at five in the morning to clear grass with parangs, bending in the sickle rhythm as pre-dawn birds sing and the one stray dog that has not been killed comes sniffing round, almost as thin as you. and now that rice rations have been cut still further you are learning the jungle under the eyes of the guards, foraging for plants you never knew were edible, ferns, wild vines, dahlia-like leaves. you know where the graves are, patches of raw earth. you try not to think of this. you are thirsty all the time but there is only bad well water to drink, one Klim tinful per day. dust infiltrates your skin, dried-out dust from your own "manure" (the word BM, like modesty itself, belongs to another place), dust from the rain-flooded cesspools you've had to drain with coconut shells, singing the Captives' Hymn that M. has written, singing the words with all your heart so as not to smell the stench that invades your hair, your clothes, even the cracks in the hardened soles of your feet. but you don't smell this now or even see the sores on lips and legs, the ribby chests as you sing along with the others. you hear M's voice soliciting, encouraging yours, you see Sister C's bare legs scrambling up the atap roof to patch it in a storm, you hear B's coughing chuckle as she invents another extravagant recipe to dream over. so you stand there singing and your heart swells to hold this ragtag retinue lost somewhere in a mapless world.

## ADAM, YOU LITTLE DEVIL

He would have had a Hell of a job  
getting Eve to go first.  
Bite that Apple.  
Or was it an apricot?

The fang of his anger came when he knew  
he couldn't just infiltrate and slither away.  
He had to walk around in this naked disguise.  
There's nothing worse than a devil with goose bumps,  
a chill, the flu.  
He should have slipped into the snake.  
Not this.  
Not perfect human form.  
Not gardening,  
for Christ's sake.

"After you, my darling," he winds up wheedling,  
teeth green because vegetables don't agree with him.  
Neither do breadfruit, pomegranates,  
mandarins, pecans.  
He wants devil's food.  
Hot wings.  
Bats.



When he finally gets down to it,  
the Temptation In The Garden,  
Eve would rather have sex than pears,  
but all he can do is sneeze, search  
for the baser elements, for  
cayenne in the harvest,  
go careering up the local volcano  
to fling himself in.

He was a virgin, you know.

## THE POPES AS ADAM

1.

They lock the apple in a golden reliquary  
with the pubis of Saint Theresa of Avila,  
savaged by the Holy Ghost  
in the habit of her spirit.

They get off on a technicality,  
not eating the apple, just  
screwing it into a socket of earthly light.

2.

Little pink popes dancing in new dresses  
with satin skull caps and ballet slippers  
in the perpetual dew of Eden,

collecting artifacts.

Polaroids of breath whooping  
from their mouths in squalls  
of utopian mist,  
a vial filled with the  
blood of the circumcision of Christ.

On the shelf above the communal refrigerator  
is the curled rind of God's foreskin in a mayonnaise jar.

Love letters. Objects of passion.  
The stub of a candle, the pen from a  
hotel room, a ring. Cherished,  
most likely to be burned in  
times of awakening and illusion.

3.

Innocent and Pious were good little boys  
for Our Father Who Art In Heaven.  
Burn those Albigenses, Anabaptists,  
idols and witches and heretics.  
Burn that firewood beneath my concubine.  
Lock Galileo in his observatory.  
There are penalties for accuracy.

Tend my garden said the Lord,  
but the popes were never much  
into bending and sweating,  
never learned to eat their vegetables,  
preferred chicken,  
preferred soft trussed  
Italian mistresses to Eve,

who was only naked,  
had not the mystery of lingerie  
and plucked foreheads,  
oyster tongued  
women to slide down their throats.

This, they thought, must be paradise.



## COLIN AS ADAM

He'd much prefer to be naked.  
Who's to see him  
romping in ten acres  
of British Columbia  
snow, sun, rain forest?

But for the practical concerns.  
Six inch banana slugs squelching  
between his toes  
and the bullet leap of wood chips —  
    (he's a professor with a chain saw  
    you know,  
    ordinarily to be suspected)

Which branch is beauty?

Which blocks it?

Tending the garden  
acquires a new meaning  
with the invention of power tools.

But that was before  
god removed the rib of your youth  
and gave you Eve.  
She won't let you buzz  
beast trees into fire food.

Eve.

Adam.

How long you waited for God  
To scalpel out that  
broken rib of loneliness,  
stitch of bone in the heart.

You buy two lawn chairs from the Co-op,  
Make her a cup of tea  
to sip in the clearing.  
Above, a fresh jet trail.  
"That one's off to India," you say.  
"The London-Delhi Express,"

the white scratch of man's  
thumbnail on the firmament.