

Where I begin and air stops is my motherland.

Alice Birch



At age fifteen, I take an inventory. My fingers are pudgy. My thigh rolls onto my calf without the hollow that I see on other girls' legs. My bellybutton isn't taut. When I sit, I hate the way my stomach bundles up on my lap like white linen. Stretch marks are freshly torn in across my hips and breasts; mystery boils carve silver craters into my inner thighs. The skin on my arms is rough and bumpy. Tegin, my best friend, takes a photo and zooms in.

'Ew, it looks like the surface of Mars,' she says.

My mouth simpers. My chin is weak. I research my lack of jawline, come up with names to describe it: Pope chin, slope jaw. Another, more colourful, is given to me by Tegin. She whispers it at the side of my face after careful, callous consideration. *Cane toad*. I change my Myspace username to Cane Toad, to show that I don't care. To try to take away its power.

It doesn't.

A group of us mill around Hyde Park with the grass wet against our ankles. Our bodies are awkward, thick or thin, our mouths bigger than what our hearts can handle. Tegin has brought us there, drawn by Ross, a boy she's been talking about for weeks. He is tall and milk-pale and knows where to get drugs. Ross has a hole beneath his ribs so deep he can hold liquid in it. At first I thought it

was a stab wound. He says it's something he was born with. He lifts his shirt to show Tegin, and she puts her fingers inside it.

Museum Station stands with its back to us, wearing a coat of cold lamplight. The others grip goon sacks over their mouths; UDL cans lie crumpled on the ground. I hold a Double Black between two fingers and dribble it into the bushes. Tegin cuts her eyes at me. I shrug: a challenge. She turns back to Ross with a deep sigh, as if to say, *Well, I tried.*

'That's a waste.'

The voice comes from a mouth wet with wine. The boy's eyes are bloodshot-blue. I know his name already – Tegin had mentioned it, like, 'You should talk to Jake, he's totally a chubby-chaser.' Chubby is not a cute word. Not here. It's a word that says, *I hate fat people but I like you.*

Jake steps closer. He indicates the Double Black. 'You know how much those things cost?'

Heat rises in my cheeks. 'I didn't buy it.'

He nudges my arm with his elbow. 'Drink it!'

'Later, maybe.'

His body is very close to mine. I focus on the lower half of his face, the ginger stubble and pointed jaw.

'Tegin says you've never been drunk before.'

I hesitate. To tell the truth seems like an invitation but I do it anyway. 'Nope, not yet.'

He shows me a mouthful of teeth. 'Drink! Get drunk!'

Giggling in defence, I lift the empty can to my mouth. 'There.'

'You think I'm stupid? Wait a second.'

He turns and jogs toward Ross, whose shirt has fallen back down. I can still imagine the place where the hole is. Tegin pops a hip and looks back at me, a laugh within her lips but not her eyes. I want desperately for her to come and stand beside me. Jake

returns with a goon sack. It bulges silver. I look at it and he looks at me and with an accidental swerve, my eyes crash into his and my brain is burned blue.

He grins. 'C'mon. Let's do this properly.'

The others drift over, Tegin snug at Ross's waist.

'Aren't you drinking, Em?' she asks, coy.

'Aw, drink! You'll have more fun,' says one of the other girls, her eyes wide and well-meaning.

'She just hasn't had any goon yet,' Jake says, brandishing the sack like a scalp.

'Goon!' Ross cheers.

'Goon!' the others chorus.

Tegin nods at me with her eyebrows raised, like, *Isn't this what you came here for?*

I think of turning on my heel, rounding the corner and disappearing down the green-and-white tiled Museum Station tunnel, through train doors, running, running, running home. But it's too late, that moment is gone. I got myself here and the light has left. There is a roiling in my gut and I don't know if it's dread or excitement or pleasure that everyone is clustered around me, looking at me, caring if I do or do not do something. A hundred pimples, piercings and metal-caged teeth point in my direction. We are all just children, really. Fifteen, barely. Just children, pricking and sticking ourselves into adult shapes.

Jake and Ross, of course, are older.

'Fine,' I announce.

They cheer; I glow.

'Scull! Scull! Scull!'

Jake approaches, holding the goon sack above my head. An errant drip lands in my hair and slides down the back of my neck – cold, like a warning. I let my head fall back on my shoulders and

open my mouth. Jake draws his finger on the trigger of the goon nozzle. Thin, sour liquid shoots into my mouth and with adolescent baying in my ears, I swallow and swallow until I choke.

Jake seems pleased. He pulls his arm back and I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand, our eyes fixed together. Some threshold has been crossed. I've shown him what I'm made of – something as pale and yellow as the cask wine he'd poured down my throat.

Later that night, the girls crouch behind a bench while Jake and Ross and another boy stalk through the dark in a predatory lope. The train station glows behind us. The boys have spotted a man hurrying through the park with his hands jammed into his pockets. They push him to the ground, kick him in the stomach. I see his feet flailing. The boys crouch over him like vultures picking through a carcass. Jake straightens, holding a wallet. This is a signal. Tegin pulls at my arm and then I am running, running, running with her.

In the small Laos town of Vang Vieng, nestled among mountains and swarming with backpackers, the alcohol was served in buckets. For six dollars, you could get a drink to hang off your arm. I swigged my vodka Red Bull; nineteen years old now, the days of pouring drinks in bushes a whole lifetime away. That girl looked at me through the funnel of time and I narrowed my eyes back at her and hated her. Hated her for her fear. Hated her for her submission. Hated her for a lot of things.

Tegin winked at me by the bar, waiting for her own bucket to be handed over by a local bartender with bags under her eyes. The river ran alongside us, brown and dotted with inflated neon tubes. Tegin's boyfriend, Zack, had his head in a book at the hotel room because he was, *Quite frankly, above the whole sordid business and who would want to get drunk when you could walk ten metres from the hotel and pick up a perfectly good hash brownie*, but that was alright because Tegin was going to dump him as soon as we got back to Sydney and the de facto Centrelink payments were set up, so bring on the cute man from Melbourne who looked exactly like Chris Evans with his blond buzz cut and red lips. Koi swam in geometric swirls around his upper forearm. Struggling for a good way to introduce myself, I asked him how much the tattoo had cost. He furrowed his brow, disapproving.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ Tegin murmured, stroking it. Warmth spread over Chris Evans’s features. I buried my face in my bucket. We jumped in the river, the three of us, and Chris Evans’s hands shimmied over my body but the expression on his face when she looked at him was already imprinted on my mind, and there was no rubbing it out.

Later that night, when Tegin had gone back to the room to check on Zack, a boyish Swede with beach-blond hair sidled too close and told me, ‘For a woman to be good in bed, she has to arch her back.’ I laughed loudly. ‘She cannot be a starfish, that is no good,’ he continued, and I crossed my arms under my breasts, pushing them upward. ‘These are the rules,’ he said, and I pretended that I was interested despite myself; could tell he didn’t want me interested any other way. When he told me that if he were a dictator, he would operate on all women and remove their gag reflexes, anger flickered in my chest. My response, though, was to tell him that my own gag reflex had never seemed to work. He was intrigued.

We stumbled back to the triple-bed room I was sharing with Tegin and Zack. Tegin gave me a knowing grin, already getting to her feet, but Zack scowled where he sat. I looked to Tegin, pleading, and she raised an eyebrow, like, *You’ll owe me*. She turned and tugged at Zack’s arm. He resisted.

‘We’ll just go for a walk around the block,’ she said to him. Giving me a time limit. Zack reluctantly pulled on his shoes. In the doorway he stopped and, without looking at me, asked the Swede not to fuck me in the double bed. The Swede gave a deferent nod. Behind them, ignored, I rolled my eyes.

Still, once I got the Swede between my legs, it felt like I had wrested some power back. *I* had brought *him* here – surely the rules were mine to set. For now, this room was my dominion. I stood and danced my way to the double bed, trying to get the

Swede to break his word – part curiosity, part spite – but he tugged me back. ‘No, let’s not.’

The spark went out. The Swede stripped and I looked at the stubble on his groin with disdain. *You and your rules.*

Boyfriend-girlfriend came back early, an almost visible resentment stewing over their heads. Zack wasn’t speaking and Tegin glared at me: *This is your fault.* The Swede took me to the shower to finish off. Under the water, fingers splayed on the coin-sized tiles, I tried arching my back but it didn’t make any difference. He was just like the others. I couldn’t feel a goddamn thing.

With my toes gripping the steps, I peered down into seething flesh and leather. I'd never been confronted by a sea of men like this. Most had scratched helmets strapped over their heads, teeth browned in their gums. Their voices clanged in my ears, spruiking a ride. I hesitated. Their bodies broached no gap; nowhere I could fit myself through untouched. I shrank back against the bus door but someone was pushing me forward. The driver sat and stared out the front window, his face blank. The world was bathed in orange. With a deep breath, I wriggled my feet back into my shoes and stepped outside.

Fingers pinched at the meat of my arms, pulling at my shoulders. The men dragged my body back and forth, shoving their hands across my chest. Lingering. With their palms heavy on my flesh I said, 'Sorry.' With my fat pinched between their fingers I said, 'Thank you.' I said, 'Sorry, I'm sorry, thank you, I'm sorry,' the words spewed up from that vacuum at my core where my spine should have been. A lesson taught in high school: what bends cannot break. Beyond the shifting wall of male bodies, I spotted a bright-yellow taxi.

The driver locked my bags in his trunk and I slipped into the back seat. Disembodied arms lay lank through the open window. One man, cheeks flushed, pointed to the driver, then gestured to

his mouth. Laughed. Knuckles pushed up white, I looked to the driver. He was busy fiddling with the meter. Finally, he glanced back at me, an afterthought, and asked, 'Where are you going?'

I had no idea. My mind scrabbled back three months, the day I'd first wandered into the husky pre-dawn light of Việt Nam's capital city, Hà Nội. My feet had traced the uneven circumference of a lake green as olives, past trees strung with lights and painted white. What was the lake called? The lake, the lake, the lake—

'Hoàn Kiếm Lake!'

At the lake, motorbikes swirling around the taxi, I hauled my backpack out of the trunk. There was a fountain up ahead, shops filled with suitcases and grinning water puppets. With my memory glowing like a thread, I trod the same path I had three months earlier, when I'd made my way to meet Tegin and Zack. They'd left Australia two weeks after me, waiting for Zack to finish his exams. I'd landed in Sài Gòn, made my way by train from south to north. A man in my carriage had watched me as I pretended to sleep and in a hotel with thin wooden walls I listened to a couple fucking each other in French. I'd met Tegin and Zack at the Meracus hotel, nestled among shoe sellers and key cutters.

Suddenly, there was the Meracus on the right, both bigger and smaller than I remembered: granite façade, cream-collared bellboy beaming from atop a set of polished stairs. Seeing me pause, he pushed open the door – I started up the stairs, thinking already of the familiar. They asked me if I had a booking; I did not.

Beyond the Meracus, the two closest hotels were Hanoi Amanda and the Orchid. They faced each other, motorbikes streaming between them. I considered them both, exhaustion whirling in my body. The sign out front of the Orchid was a little more faded: I thought it might be cheaper. A man sitting by the sign leapt to his feet, hastily stubbing out his cigarette. He wore a dark-blue sweater

and flashed his smile like a business card. His eyes were round and dark as litchi seeds.

‘Come inside, come inside,’ he said, opening the door and pulling me in.

The reception was long and narrow, tiled in glossy marble – or something made to look like marble. Wicker chairs and glass-topped tables were lined up on one side, empty except for a middle-aged American couple arguing over a plate of stringy vegetables. To the left of the glass doors was the reception desk – arranged across its surface like a still life were a bag of chopped pineapple, stack of brochures, small vase with large flowers and striped motorbike helmet.

The man, lean and muscled in his blue sweater, showed me the price chart. Expensive. I glanced at the door, somehow rooted to the spot. Hadn’t I agreed to something by coming in here? The man followed my eyes and told me he’d make me a deal.

‘Can I see the room?’ I asked, looking back, glad for the excuse not to have to leave.

‘Sure,’ he said with a grin and for the first time I saw something of the fox in his white teeth. Upstairs, at the very top floor, the room was tucked to the side of a hallway with a single thin window. The room itself had no natural light, washed yellow from a yellow bulb. There was a bed and a small bathroom and a bedside table. It was a cell but as of then it was mine.

The man’s teeth were the last thing I registered in his face as he bowed out of the room I hadn’t really wanted, that I couldn’t really afford. But it didn’t matter, because I’d pay anything for a man like that to smile at a girl like me.