

HELEN GILDFIND

THE WISHED FOR

Enter from the gate. A weatherboard house. Hard red borders slashed everywhere: the window frames, the eaves, the doors and the door frames. The smell of fresh paint, even from the gate. This smell of fresh paint from the crusting, darkening red and from the brightening cream glaring between blood borders. The late day summer sun: a blinding reflection, flashing about the eye with each footstep and stumble over the loose rubble of the drive. Pass through the drying garden whose edges blur into the forest. Notice the pot plants: geraniums, succulents, paper-petalled daisies. Tough plants, the type that find it easier to live than to die. Approach the wooden wheel propped against the wall facing the gate. Anyone would notice it straight away: huge and old, as tall as a person. It is just propped there, between the wall and the weather, neither beginning nor ending, just existing as it does and has always done. Next to the wheel, the door. Not quite a front door, not quite a back door: like the house itself, it is oriented to nowhere and everywhere at once. From the outside, look in: the kitchen. The wooden benches, the wooden floor, the wooden everything. A kitchen patterned with the rough checks of bits and pieces thrust together, dove-tailed, mitred, routed into shape: a patchwork of ancient wood, wood that took hundreds of years to grow, days to chop down and months to twist into this house where whole lifetimes have been lived out.

She stands at the sink, peeling potatoes. Arms and legs and feet bare, hair pulled back roughly, unflattering, unflattering like the loose cotton dress she is wearing. Her forearms gather starch freckles with each vicious flick of her wrist. With each burst from her peeler's stroke her toes and the hairs on her legs also begin to gather the stray blood-dots of the potato. But all she can see is the action of her hand. How well peeler and wrist burst skin off potato, cell off cell, insides from outsides. Oblivious to the starch patterning all over her, she is fixated on the peels piling up before her. Notes how useful a thing it is, this peeler of skin. Wonders who and when and how it was invented. Wonders why she wonders such things at all and, wondering this, stops. She looks out the window to quieten herself. The bits and pieces of her just-

begun garden dwindle into the forest. The forest spreads thickly into the distance, subsuming the mountains under its canopy. In places, the canopy thins and disappears. Through these keyholes she can see the lawns of ferns: the forest under the forest. This scene lulls her, calms the random assaults of her mind. This scene, plus the quiet transition from the wet sounds of her peeling, to her pause, to the birds out there: the kookaburras, the magpies and the parrots fighting it out. Then, the rough music of the wind as it picks bits and pieces of things up, shakes them about and casts them back down to the ground.

She peels four potatoes. She walks across the kitchen and from a hook hanging above her she gets a pot. Dashes salt into its base. Fills it with water, puts it on the stove. Gets the potatoes from the sink. Carries them over to the pot and puts them in. She stands next to the stove for a while, till the water steams, till a white froth builds up on its surface. She takes a fork, rushes it across the foaming liquid. The froth drifts to the edges of the pot and she can see the potatoes, naked and stupid, on the steel base. She puts on the lid.

Back at the sink she cleans out the peels: one sopping handful. She slides open the screen door next to her, steps outside, closes the door behind her. She holds her dripping hand away from her dress, as if her dress is something special. She walks to the compost bin, puts the scraps in. The stench hits her like a spray of muck in the face. As it disperses, the smell of eucalyptus, sharp and constant, moves in from the forest that grows and rots all around. Then, competing, and winning, is the dull headache of fumes from the hot paint, crying itself dry on the walls.

This smell, she thinks, this smell of paint. She looks at the shine of it on the weatherboards. Is that all it takes to string a life together across time? This reek from the compost. Are these the only constant things, the only things that do not change? She stares at the bin, fat and powerful with its common stench, stinking the past right here into the present. A whack of nausea hurls up from her gut, distracts her. She clutches her stomach. She steps up to the door, memories skirting the edges of her mind like words lost on the tip of a tongue. She slides the door open.

She stops. Suddenly stops.

Does not move.

Her ears, momentarily deaf, try to pick out the problem: a crackling somewhere in the scrub near by. Something there. She listens, looks. But the sound is gone. She walks into the scrub to see. But there is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

She returns to the kitchen. Slides the screen behind her, halts a moment,

her back half-turned to the outside.

She wanders towards the track that leads to the main road. She passes the stuck and rusting gate: permanently half open, permanently half shut. She walks with the lowering sun shining onto her bare neck. By the time she sits to eat her dinner, the light will be yellow, and everything else will follow suit, morphing into those warmer shades and softer textures that she'd always imagined. Strange, how she has always known this place. Strange, that all her life she has looked, literally looked forward to this point: the abstract daydreams of her childhood; the painful wishing-aways of pubescence and the more recent, distinctly purposeful imaginings of her supposed womanhood. Yet her presence here must look to the world like chance, an accident, a mere reaction to circumstance.

Of course, her daydreams could tell her only so much. She had never counted on the daytime, this pregnant glare off everything, the heat immovable and dangerous, pressing into the drying earth and the crisping plants. Never understood the stretching quality of time. Never predicted the exposure and growth of the small sore wounds that have itched and irritated themselves into acknowledgement, these sore little absences that she unwittingly created in her final act of leaving, absences other than those for which she planned. These past months have seen the inscription of details onto an image of the heart. But she won't dwell on that. She can't dwell on such things now.

Ferns take ten years to grow each foot of their height. The ferns that line each side of the track, like a guard of honour, are twice her size. In their presence, she feels the roughness of her look, the fadedness of her dress like a defiant but ill-judged statement against the rich opacity of green around her. The sticky mess of her hair plastered to the sweat on her forehead and neck. The sweat trickling behind her knees, as she wanders along, trickling warmly like an accident. She can't feel much under her bare feet, their brittle and cracking heels too thick now to notice such things as the rough-cut rubble. As she walks further from the house, the ferns on either side of her move a little closer together till they stand right over her, creating a cool, shadowed corridor for her walking. As she goes, she puts one hand out, so that her fingers trail over the black thatched fur of the ancient plants' bodies. She stops before one, pauses, then pushes her fingers deeply into the bristles. She feels like a pervert, a desecrator. Through her skin, the thrill of fear, of not knowing what she might find. Is this what men feel when they cross such boundaries, with permission, without permission? How different it is to be the one who enters, who intrudes. Her mind flutters back but is stopped

short as her fingers reach the fern's body. There, just roughness and hardness. Just roughness, and hardness. No explanation of how it is that these plants so persistently, so elegantly, so competently succeed in their project of living.

She continues down the track. Her home is in this rainforest, but around her house, that place where people have lived, is a circle of yellowing dryness. A fire hazard. A spotlight on her home alerting the elements to its presence. But the forest doesn't need to be alerted, the same way a person doesn't need to be shown that they are missing a finger, a leg, a chunk of their heart. Like skin smothering a scab, the forest is trying to reclaim this turf, her turf, its turf. She can see its reaction, even here, on the track, how the edges are fatly overgrown with creepers and runners and weeds that have picked out soil in the sand and the rubble. As she walks, she scuffs dead any plant that encroaches upon the path. With her toes, she uproots these broken bodies and flicks them back into the scrub: a warning. She doesn't do this for spite alone. This is a tactic. She knows the forest, how it waits. Waits for the gone-wild, homesick orchards around her home to die. Waits for the crumbling of these tracks and roads obscenely cut into its belly. Waits for the buildings and the old, left-about machinery to break down or burn up. Waits for all that people and time have left here to dissolve. Then it can win back its loss. But the forest's loss is her gain and she has painted and planted her battle cry. As she tends to her home, as she treads and retreads, treads and retreads time and this path, she is picking the land's scab. It will stay open and fresh and hers. Theirs is a battle of the wounded: a fight between two forces hell-bent on healing.

She walks on. She can smell the road before she can see it: the strong, comforting weight of oil and tar released like steam from cooking asphalt. Her fern canopy recedes as she approaches, standing back as if conceding defeat to the immutability of the road ahead. As she rounds the bend, a snap.

A sudden snap to her left.

Another snap and a shuffle.

Something rustles.

She stops, her breath a pain, caught like a hiccup in her throat.

The fear clenches her muscles and throws her heart beat up into her head. She can't look. But she must look. She slowly turns her head, body still, to the direction from which the sound came. And from that direction, like a magnet, she feels a tension resisting and reacting to hers. It can see me, she thinks. It can see me. Her dress feels like a big, blank billboard advertising her fear like a white flag. She can only see dark, dense scrub. She stares at this, at the scrub.

All at once, a branch hurls itself into her vision.

It doesn't fall from above her. It flies right at her like an arrow shot from the tense poise of a bow hidden in the ferns and bushes in front of her. An entire tree branch, heavy enough to crack her skull, lies at her feet, its splintered butt-end aligned with the edge of the track. Its foliage streams away from her, into the fernery.

She stares at it. The impossibility of it.

Slowly, her breath returns with the normal sounds of the forest. She stares into the scrub, trying to work it out. But there is nothing there. She stands still, stretching her minutes, waiting for clues in the ear or the eye. But there is nothing to hear. There is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

The kitchen: steam filled and clattering. She rushes to the pot. It is boiling over. Volcanic white blotches spew around its lid and down its steel sides. A puddle grows on the stovetop. She pushes the pot off the gas flames and within seconds it calms down. The kitchen fills with quiet. The sounds of the outside slowly creep in. She stands before the stove, looking at the white-stained pot. She must have taken longer than she thought. She tries to recall what it was that she did, what it was that took so long. But she can think of nothing. She sees the letter, fat and inevitable, placed by the side of the sink. Must have dumped it there, rushing to save the pot. Yes. It is the letter that she got from the letterbox, the letterbox that she walked to after the scare in the scrub, the scare that happened after touching the fern. It all happened today. She looks down at her arms, crossed against her chest. She remembers remembering her dress in the confrontation. Yes, all of these things happened today.

She looks again vaguely, at the stovetop. She realises that the gas is set to its highest setting. She sits by the kitchen table. Hadn't she left it set on low, like she always does? She can't remember. Every day she peels four potatoes and sets them to boil slowly while she checks the letterbox. Everyday she does this and so she cannot distinguish one day from another. Did she turn the heat down, today, as she should have? She laughs. Of course she didn't: Who would have turned it up? She shakes her head. Shakes it harder than a gesture. Shakes it as if she is trying to rattle something out of it, as if she needs to exaggerate to herself her foolishness. She laughs, at herself, to herself, till she realizes she is laughing out loud, right out loud. She registers with a shock the strangeness of the sound. For as long as she has been here, she has not laughed aloud. Has not a single word been spoken? No sound other than her breathing? Can this be right? It must be right, she can barely recognize her laugh. And now, when she tries to say something to see if she recognises her voice, she can think of nothing to say and so says nothing, just

sits there, stupidly shy.

She stands, not remembering how or why or when she sat down. She gets a dishcloth and picks up the pot of potatoes. She skewers the lid to one side and tips the water into the sink. The steam rushes up, threatening to burn her hands. She puts the pot back on the gas, gets some milk, butter and cheese out of the fridge. With her own careful measures, she places these ingredients into the pot. She inhales the sudden flush of steam as the milk recoils from the pot's hot base. Salt. Pepper. She roughly mashes everything together. Puts on the lid. Turns off the gas, and leaves the food to melt into itself. She stands there, her hand and her weight against the stovetop. She stares at the starch-streaked pot. Remembers, again, the letter by the sink.

The writing on it is blurred in places, splashed from the water she poured out of the pot. She picks it up, looks at her address written carefully on the front. Notes the postage stuck in the corner: twice as many stamps as needed. She turns the envelope over. On the back, the sender's address carefully printed, even the country underlined and written in capitals beneath the state, as if the letter had been sent from a different country, from a different state. A phone number and an email address under the sender's details. So many details. The familiar writing spews an excess of details that she can feel the weight of, in her hand, on the enclosed pages.

Not her details.

The man the house the car the job. Etcetera. Etcetera. Etcetera. These are the details she has left. Domestic details. Details of the familiar, born from the comfortable repetitions of a life insistently, competently, lovingly knitted by someone else. By someone with a reliable pattern, 'tried and true,' the pattern everyone seems to admire: the man the house the car the job etcetera etcetera etcetera. So comfortable was this life that she hardly realised she was wrapping herself right up in it, like a blanket. Hardly noticed that it was comforting her to sleep. Hardly noticed that she was going to sleep herself to death as if repetition and comfort, the repetition of comfort, were drugs: the stupor of having all needs met, a future full of certain certainties, a big fat life directed by the crushingly concrete details of another person's plans.

A paper-perfect life. All the right details: she weighs them, again, in her hand.

Not her details.

She puts the letter back down onto the edge of the sink. Returns to her pot. Opens it, inhales the buttery hot steam. She gets a plate and a fork. She piles the mash onto her plate and goes to the sliding door. She opens the door and sits down on the few splintery steps that connect the house to the yard.

Warm on her knees, the plate. The sun, absurdly sweet, stupidly golden. The kind of light she came here for. Everything around her is flushed and distinct. The patchy grass that grows and dies in clumps leading to the forest's edge is lit up. She can see each blade with surreal clarity. Through each blade she can see the shadowed outlines of the blades behind as they compete for the last and the best of the sun's rays. This is her favourite part of the day. The purposefulness of cooking: the guarantee of being able to make something from beginning to end, to control its making, to see and enjoy its result. The sheer privilege she feels, still, of eating her dinner here with the entire forest around and before her, the trees and the birds shifting themselves into their evening poses. Everyday works up to this point. Then, with reluctance, with a small and immediately suppressed panic, she finishes her meal.

The pinnacle passed, she notices the mosquitoes and the cold shadows of the dusk. All that was warm and solid a moment ago is now pallid and translucent. She takes her plate and her cutlery inside. As she slides the screen door behind her, her thumb pauses over the door lock. After all of this time, she still hesitates. She looks out into the shadowing garden. How flat it looks, as if all perspective goes with the light. She scans the garden's familiar form. She is looking for shapes and movements that she does not recognize. But there is nothing to see. There is nothing there.

The kettle squeals. She moves around the letter. She ignores it. Makes her tea. Then she settles, as she does every night, to read at the big kitchen table. Against the windows the moths, the dragonflies, the spiders and the spray of tiny bugs that throw themselves against the glass. She has learned the patterns of their sounds and now their presence reassures her. Keeps her company. Every night, when she sits to read, the rest of the day pushes and shoves into her mind, begging her attention. Begging for the same sort of analysis that she is about to apply to the pages in front of her. Tonight, unwelcomed, the memory of her dinner carelessly and dangerously boiling over in an empty house. Tonight, unwelcomed, the image of the letter on the sink. Tonight, and every night, unwelcomed, the image of herself reading, taking pages and pages of notes that she has, and will, carefully file away in one of her big old cupboards. What else is she to do with them? Her daydreams dreamt of the reading of books, of the recording of reading, but she never wondered what this reading would, or could, be applied to. Just as she couldn't predict the harshness of the daytime, she could never have contemplated the seeming futility of her nights. She looks and listens to the bugs, pattering like confetti on the pane. Their presence brings her back to the space in the room, to the tables and chairs, to the wooden floors, to the

page open and waiting before her.

For two hours she reads. She notes onto lined paper what she notices in the words, what she understands, what she needs to understand better. Once or twice she gets up, wanders the wooden house. Goes to the toilet, washes her face, looks closely at her skin in the mirror. She drifts into her bedroom, turns on the lamp by her bed and makes up the sheets so that the room is waiting for her. She returns to the book. Sits, continues to read. Then, as so surprisingly often happens, something leaps up from the pages. Something hits her in the face. She traces the words with the tip of her finger, mouths the phrase to herself. In big, pressed-in capitals she copies down the quote that has knocked her awake. She carefully copies the words that are kicking and slapping and shocking her mind into working again. She sits back, looks at the truth on the page. Circles it again. Highlights it as if it matters, as if one day she might need reminding that these things mattered to her, once.

Eventually she realises that she is reading and rereading the same words. Her mind is wandering. Her eyes are tired. She puts down her pen. She looks over at the swarms blurring the corners of her windows. She walks over for a closer look. She is never sure whether or not to leave the lights on for the insects. Never sure if turning them off will spoil their fun. Never sure if darkness will instead relieve them of the object of their mindless pursuit, destroying the cruel and invisible wall they keep bashing themselves into. Tonight, she turns the lights off. She stands, listening, as the dusty sounds of their feet and wings slowly diminish. She moves back into the darkened room. She picks up her tea and her teapot and returns them to the sink. She won't clean them now, she will leave them for tomorrow morning: her way of connecting one day to another.

She turns to leave. She notices the letter. She is pleased at how well, for a while, she had forgotten it. She picks it up. She looks again at the familiar writing all over it. Thinks of the promise of pages inside that are written to her. Just to her.

Of course she will not open it.

The moment that she does their eyes will roll out into her palm. They will stare at her from the pages with their wet, confused goodwill. They will look at her. They will ask her to explain, to share, to justify. To be a part of their life. To be their wife. To be their daughter-in-law, their sister-in-law. To be the mother of their children, their grandchildren. To be the source of their futures. To be the mechanism through which meaning can be born, literally born from her, and stolen back into their lives. She looks out into the night-cast garden. She sees nothing in the pitch-black density of the scrub, just silhouettes against the sky. The spaces that she has cut back and emptied

make catchments for the light. She can see the starlit details of objects that she has carefully placed in these lit up hollows. She is her parent's daughter. She is her sibling's sister. She can only be these things, for she has always been these things, and these things are herself. She cannot bear to have their children, yet she cannot have children on her own, and of her own. She looks out into the garden, at the only solution she could find.

Of course she will not open the letter. This place is for the anonymous: the unnamed and the unnamings; the unspeaking and the unspeakable. Opening the letter, seeing her name written in his hand, would be like letting the weeds encroach onto her dirt track. The forest, watching, watching, will take the moment.

She opens the sliding door. A few disconcerted moths dust about her face and her hair as she passes through them. She goes to the compost bin and takes off its lid. She rips the letter up and throws into the bin's warm, dark guts. She goes to the water tank and fills up a bucket, the sound of the water obnoxious and loud in the private quiet of the forest. She tips the water into the bin. She refills the bucket and, again, tips the water in. She read somewhere that water helps compost to rot, helps it to disappear into itself like invisible ink. She stares into the bin. She looks down, staring into its dark insides.

But there is nothing to see.

There is nothing there.

Watch from the gate. Look at the cream and blood house, colourless in the starlight, blank in the moonlight. Watch as the house turns out its last light. Watch as it rests in its own quiet, as it sits in the blue, spot-lit space it has forced around itself.

The forest is turgid with black. It isn't asleep.

A branch snaps outside her window.

Wait. Feel the change. How the house tenses. How the forest braces.

Watch. One by one, as each room in the house is lit. See her jump, each time, as her reflection flashes up at her in the night-mirrored windows. She wears no clothes. She walks, room to room, checking behind doors, in cupboards and under beds.

When she cannot sleep, when her mind begins to assault her, when a strange sound teases her, this is what she does. When her day-dreams fail her or her nightmares shake her awake, this is what she does.

Rattle her bedroom window.

Splinter wood in the middle of the still, summer's night.

Watch her as she rises. Watch as the house pulses, slow and defiant, a silk-worm spinning itself a home that will glow, and continue to glow, in the forest's dark gut. Watch as she passes through the house, lighting it up, searching for nothing, making sure that nothing is there.