They fear, they suffer, they strike, they are struck, they fall under the blows of the closest to them, each of them suffers in their place in the family scene, each man and each woman in their name and in the name of the parent.

Hélène Cixous,  
 ‘The Communion of Suffering’

1

# After

It would be easy not to notice him. Just a small thing. Dappled with dried bracken and dirt. One more item amidst the trash that appears where the water subsides. Unwanted things dumped in the night; the whole town joined in a collective labour to fill this central absence.

The haze is thick. It hides the moonset and hangs low as dawn threatens. The streetlamps are still on. Little yellow haloes. There are no cars now. No birds and no bird call.

He is silent, though he did scream. Screamed hard as hell until screamed out. His stretched lips purple and then blue.

His hands scrunch into fists, grip sticks and leaves so tight they cut the soft flesh. Crust forms at his nostrils. The skin around each knuckle pales. Fog dampens the bank, leaving beads of dirty moisture on his puckered mouth and eyelids.

When the sun rises it illuminates abandoned shopping trolleys, empty beer cans, silver wine bladders, the cartoon lions on his clothes. A soft breeze agitates tattered spike rush. A bleached-out chip packet blows across the path.

Dawn breaks brightly, the haze burns fast.

But still, it would be easy not to notice him: a small thing, alone, in the reeds by the lake.

2

# Before

From her salmon-coloured entertainer’s patio, Emma stared out across the dry lake bed. A group of figures in bright lycra bounced along the bordering track. They’d assumed an unconsciously balletic formation: the woman in the centre pushing a stroller, her four friends forming an arrow tip around her. Their arms bent and hinged as they pumped the air emphatically. The mother – Emma presumed the stroller woman took that title – had some sort of aerobic attachment on her pram, allowing her arms to pump too. The whole group marched in step, a satellite circumnavigating the dusty terrain. Emma eyed that orbit for some time. The lake was a sundial tracking her own malaise.

It should have been autumn but summer held the town under indefinite arrest. What used to be a glistening circle of water stretched out just across the road in acres of scrub that turned gradually to marsh. The lake, smaller since last spring, was dwindling to a slick disc on the horizon. Heat made the flat pan shimmery, unreal. Air had texture out there. Heavy, somehow. As though you could climb through it into another world.

Common wisdom insisted weather was temporary, subject to the wills of some petulant other. The phrase ‘pray for rain’ was used ubiquitously by Shorehaven residents – secular and denominational – particularly on those muggy summer days that promised to leak into something cleansing but by evening became only pink, placid.

Men in thongs strutted around Westlake Estate with open beer cans, tossed crushed empties into piles beside the overflowing bins. People left their air conditioners on all night, rendering the drought a theoretical space to pass through but never inhabit. Even last winter – brutally cold, with winds that struck out across the water – had yielded mostly sleet that melted into long, thin puddles for the odd remaining duck to shake its wings in. Never enough to make the lake lake again. The lake was field. No, too verdant. The lake was dried-up paddock.

Since childhood Emma had understood that all the best houses in town were around the lake. It might have been the only truly funny joke of the drought, at least to those in Westlake Estate. She could read the punchline from 127 Shoreline Drive; her own conspicuous five-bedder featured a still-undrained pool, a two-car garage, reverse living, and sweeping views of that dried-up paddock. Her polished windows and glass balcony shone aggressively, concentrating the heat of the sun on her extensive yet withered front lawn. After the category-four water restrictions came in, Emma watched the ladies of neighbouring houses hand-water their flowerbeds in the scant evening hours when such activity was sanctioned but the gardeners had all gone home. Her own garden was mostly dead, planted instead with forgotten scooters and mini basketballs. Her house fell out with the street. The neighbours muttered, asked how she was doing, their mouths tight with goodwill.

The lakeside businesses were still open. The coffee cart by the Olympic Commemoration Rings advertised iced lattes in big blue letters. The newsstands and kiosks that lined the Prime Minister’s Promenade traded in refreshments and grim aphorisms. Those who still walked the lake did so with an air of civic pride, even now.

Emma squinted to see the faces of the women walking in formation. She might have gone to school with them – the tall one could be Lisa Ames. She’d never spoken to Emma in school but had attended two baby showers and a birthday barbeque thrown at Pat’s farm.

Of course, it could be any horsey, enthusiastic Shorehaven woman. Emma recognised them as a type. Like playing a game of memory. Where’s the good woman? Cards scattered across the polished floors of her life. Robust ex-rowers and equestrians, unused law degrees and sparkling Audis.

This was her type, too, sort of. By marriage. Emma was not born to it, you could see that at a glance. Too awkward in her skin. Shrinking away from the sunlight rather than striding into it. And it was impossible to ignore her smallness. Every component of her was small. Little features. Twiggy limbs. Wispy pale hair that she scraped back from her face or let hang in a thin veil.

Emma had been too small to take up oars and sweep the perimeter of the lake, back when it was full and imposing. In school she’d become a coxswain because it seemed like the easiest option in the compulsory sports program. Her first season with the twelfths ended prematurely. Partly because of the gruelling training – why did she need to run and lift if she was just sitting there? – but also because on the water even her loudest shouts got lost in the wind and the slapping of paddles. High school was one long season of recusal. Recused from hockey after her ankle popped mid stride. Recused from Outward Bound after passing out under the weight of her pack. Everyone at Shorehaven Grammar School seemed to have a heft and gravity she lacked.

Still, she could be walking the lake now. Walking was non-competitive, low impact. A mummy drill. And despite a lifelong paucity in team spirit – ‘teamwork’ had been the answer to her training question, it turned out – she was now wearing the uniform. Her outfit was technologically advanced, ready for feats of physical accomplishment. A few tugs and her ponytail would bob jauntily enough. She wore trainers with purple soles like bruises on tropical fruit. Her own dusty Audi presided over the yard. Her life in tableau was accidentally perfect. She marvelled at how intricately it fitted together, each item showing the world who she had become. There she is! There’s the good woman.

On a slice of grass by the road, a black swan pecked violently at a deflated bicycle inner tube. Decades ago, Emma’s mother had methodically named all the birds they could see from the bench by the playground, where they sat each Saturday morning. Ducks, coots, cormorants. They saw swans in courtship, gliding through the water, their necks intertwined heart shapes. Her sister Izzy running giddy figure eights on the bank. ‘Love bird. Love bird. Bye bye, birds.’

Of these childhood birds, only the gulls and the Indian mynahs now thrived. Avian opportunists. Birds you would find anywhere. At the end of the world there’d be a gull to peck at the remains.

This swan was a hold-out. Most of its kind were gone, abandoning the last traces of artificial wetlands at least a season ago. It would be gone soon, too, she supposed. Or it would die. A week ago she’d seen a swan carcass behind a boatshed, its neck folded elegantly over its rib cage, one leg torn away. A dog maybe. Or a fox. Who knew what lived out there now.

Emma shook her head and paced a little. Morbid, and it was only nine a.m. This should be action hour, but she’d felt less and less alive as the morning progressed. Last night’s sleep was scavenged in intervals. Every time she lifted the glowing rectangle of her phone less than ten minutes had passed and Robbie’s tiny, berry-stained face beamed up at her from behind the cursed numbers.

At five she gave up, stood under a hot shower until her skin became a blushing canvas that could be branded with a cool finger. She dressed in her lycra uniform, not out of enthusiasm for exercise or to pass in her role as Shoreline Drive mother, but because of its spill-proof material. Already this morning she’d watched two white pools dissolve into its shiny surface, leaving only vague, salty rings. By nine, the morning was shot through, burned up with the fog, desperate and pecking at trash like the gulls. She considered turning the wall clock around and then remembered the clocks on the microwave, the Blu-ray, the laptop, Clem’s iPad, the morning TV show.

The swan edged behind a row of bins. The women kept walking, pumping their arms.

Emma thought about lying down.

If she fell back she would crack her head on the polished concrete. If she fell forward she would slice it open on the glass balcony railing. Then they’d have to get someone in to clean up all the blood.

A wasp landed on her wrist and she watched it, curious to see if it would sting. She remembered, briefly, the hysteria a wasp produced in the school playground. Screaming girls in chequered smocks and sports briefs, running, trailing bags and blazers. It was always, emphatically stated, a European wasp. The worst threats came from elsewhere. On her wrist, the wasp moved its antennae exactingly, its hairy legs stroking her skin as if to measure something. Its abdomen tilted. Was that stripy sack full of poison? She grew intent on the insect’s pointed end as if close scrutiny would allow her to see the stinger’s protuberance in exact detail.

On the baby monitor a video-Robbie started to wail, and Emma’s body came alive. The wasp flew off. Her milk let down; a strange phrase, like weather. Her body compelled her inside, to the other side of those huge glass sliding doors. She felt the full weight of her breasts, their tingle and ache.

Inside, her two older children waited as if paused. The TV on mute. The air conditioning on full. A toddler in a playpen. A four-year-old girl on the floor. A colouring book. Some dolls arranged in an elaborate scene of who knew what.

Clem. Arthur. She said their names in her head.

‘Clem. Arthur.’ Again, out loud, as if for a test.

They glanced at her. Two sets of tiny eyes. Arthur murmured, did something with his hands that could almost be a sign. She waved her fingers across her mouth.

‘Hello,’ she said.

He looked at her but did not move his hands again.

The tinny cry from the monitor had merged with the sound of real crying. She stared for a while longer at the video infant: trapped in the frame, unaware if anyone heard him. He screamed insistently, his face contorted. She waited another few seconds, chest burning, feet and heart leaden.

Robbie’s screaming was wholly different from Clem’s shrill keening or Arthur’s cries. This baby wanted her to feel the extent of his need, the affront of her failure. He was an insulted, important person and she a slack and useless waitress.

She trudged out of the lounge room, toward the sound. She picked him up without looking, held him, bounced a little. She freed one breast and surrendered it. He latched on and began to feed, grunting. She could feel the milk running through her, a sullen creek churning to the river mouth. She glanced out a window, caught a flash of dirty sky. Robbie snapped for a better grip. She inhaled sharply and, holding him against her, returned to her other children.

‘Mummy, Robbie is hungry because it’s snack time,’ Clem said, looking up from her doll work.

‘Robbie’s always hungry,’ Emma said. Then, catching herself, ‘What would you like for snack, Clem?’

‘I would like toast with peanut butter, honey and banana, thank you. I think that’s what Arthur would like also.’

Emma looked over at Arthur, harbouring hope that he would contradict his sister and choose some scentless, clean food that came straight out of a packet. Kraft singles. A roll-up. Yoghurt in a tube. Sustenance wrapped and neat and coloured by numbers. The kind of ‘artificial crap’ Patricia threw out whenever she came over to help. The food that made Emma feel safe and childlike too, right up until she had to dispose of all the plastic wrappers and the guilt came on shift.

Arthur turned the pages of his dinosaur book, thwacking a rhythm through his knees, his eyebrows furrowed with attention.

‘Just let me feed your brother first and then we can all eat something, okay?’

Robbie gulped and kicked. He demanded her full attention, needed it, when it was in shorter supply than ever. A dwindling resource, just like her strength, memory, enthusiasm.

Clem turned huffily from the dolls to the colouring book, flicking through pages as though checking a ledger. Emma slumped down, arranging the baby’s bulk across her. The breast seat in the house. That was Robert’s joke. She wished it wouldn’t pop into her head, but there it was.

Once drained, Emma removed the still sucking baby and returned him to his box. She dragged herself to the kitchen and began taking ingredients from the fridge. The congealed honey, streaked with butter and crumbs like flies caught in amber. The vitamin-enriched soft white bread. She hid the dark side of the overripe banana from Clem, who only liked pale yellow. The smell was nauseating but at least her daughter hadn’t asked for pancakes. The thought of cracking a cold egg made her retch. She had no resistance today. Could they tell when she was like this?

No, or Clem would have asked for the pancakes.

Correction: she would have insisted that Arthur wanted pancakes. An act of care, not a crass expression of personal desire. A lesson from Patricia on how to want.

The refrigerator beeped aggressively and Emma kicked it shut. The whiteboard calendar on the door hadn’t been updated in months. Its hurried scrawls reminded Emma of an afternoon with Pat three weeks previous, which had been, notionally, about giving Emma time to rest, blow dry your hair, maybe go out for a while. Predictably, it turned into an extended lecture, ill received by Emma, who began sobbing pathetically, setting off her kids and sending the house into a chaotic spiral of screams and tears. All of this demonstrated the point of Pat’s lecture. The point of so many lectures: You need to loosen up, find some way to relax.

Emma removed that afternoon from the fridge door calendar with the absorbent fibres of her shirt. It left a dirty smear on the shiny grey fabric but that would be gone soon. This small act of defiance felt like her biggest accomplishment of the day. She would have liked to run a cloth over more of the clutter, over the constant stream of negative slogans that stained her mind, leaving a fresh, non-stick surface. A bright background for affirmations in neat running writing.

There was a breakfast show on TV. A panel of people nodding, soundlessly discussing some grave topic. The studio was glassed in on all sides, pseudo public. Presenters backgrounded by a city street. Passers-by made faces and nudged each other. People in suits strode purposefully across the screen. Emma liked the show for this very reason, ever since she was a kid eating cereal and watching TV before school. She liked to look through the show into the world beyond.

Today, she could see a dishevelled older woman picking around a magazine stand. Her belongings dangled from her wrist in a plastic bag. Emma watched the woman’s shape in soft focus, a ghost behind the polished bodies of the panel. Absurd fragments of news scrolled across the bottom of the screen. ‘Scientists discover the thin hormone.’ ‘Leadership skirmish in full effect.’ ‘Woman found dead in amusement park.’ From the street, an anonymous little girl waved, awestruck, as her mother pointed into the studio.

Clem lifted her hand and waved back.

The toaster beeped.

Emma dressed the bread, put one slice on a plate for her daughter and cut another into pieces, dropping them in a plastic bowl. Robbie started to complain and she collected him, hefted him onto a hip, her body dropping comically like a toddler dragging a tom cat. He reached out for her hair, tangling his hands in the loose strands around her nape. He pulled experimentally.

‘Ouchy,’ she said.

He babbled and yanked again, harder.

‘Ouchy.’

Clem looked up, arching an eyebrow as she took her plate. It was a tic, an emotional reveal that she couldn’t control. Shane had teased her about it to distraction. ‘Just do it,’ he’d said, sending her through a range of facial contortions that climaxed with desperate tears.

Arthur’s attention remained on his book of dinosaurs. It was his favourite. He liked to trace his fingers around the raised, felted shapes of extinct beasts, humming monkishly, a habit which made Patricia tut and shake her head. But what was the harm? Arthur was a focused, introspective kid. Emma could feel him learning, though ‘feel’ was not enough for Dr Mansfield, who’d instructed her to watch closely and record any indications. And so, in the early evenings, when the rest of the family relaxed in front of the TV, she sat and monitored Arthur, trying to interpret meaning from his every gesture and movement. Any behaviour might require a remark in the ‘progress journal’. She did this until she had to remind herself that she was looking at someone she loved.

With Robbie balanced in one arm, she crouched to place the bowl of toast in Arthur’s pen and then drew an arc from her chin to her chest, the Auslan sign for thank you. She’d read that teaching speech-delayed kids to sign could do wonders, and quietly loved the idea of a private language just for the two of them.

As she hung over the side of Arthur’s pen, Robbie reached out and snatched at the dinosaur book, ripping a page.

‘Oh no!’ Emma yelled despite herself, jolting Robbie and causing him to scream. It was shrill, but nothing compared to the reply from his brother. Arthur’s cry came from the very heart of him. He smacked his palm on the ground over and over and Emma knelt down to him, balancing Robbie as she tried to soothe Arthur.

‘Shhhhhhh,’ she cooed. ‘Shhhhhhh, it’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay.’

Arthur wailed and howled and Robbie shrieked and yelled. Sweat pricked at Emma’s underarms, the underside of her eyelids. She cooed. Smoothed the book. Turned the page to hide the tear. Arthur bawled like he’d been hit.

Suddenly the room was filled with obnoxiously loud advertising music. An insurance ad with a terrible keyboard melody.

‘No, Clem! Turn it off!’ Emma yelled, then ducked her head into her shoulder as if she could muffle the sound.

Her voice could be shockingly loud when it was just her and the children. Yelling may be as harmful as hitting. That’s what the magazines said.

Arthur’s scream intensified. An unbroken, guttural sound.

‘It’s okay, Arthur.’ She rubbed his back. Got as close to him as she could with Robbie still in her arms and the play pen drawn around him. ‘Clem, turn it off,’ she hissed.

The TV snapped to black. Clem – protest registered – turned back to colouring.

Emma’s eyes felt wet. That was the sensation of crying now: wet eyes, wet face. She kept rubbing Arthur’s back, feeling the vertebrae through his ribbed singlet as he heaved and rocked. Eventually he became silent. Emma could hear the sound of Clem’s pencil scratching the grainy paper.

Emma tried to reclaim her balance, resting her back against the bottom of the couch. Robbie wanted to be comforted too. He pulled at her breast, grinding his gums painfully. She bit her lip to keep quiet. He still had the torn, plasticky piece of the dinosaur book in his hand, clutched tightly.

The huge windows were tinted so that their lives weren’t on display to the outside world at any time but twilight and dawn, when the scrim lifted and the inside and outside lights balanced. Beyond those windows the sky was still and the sun blazed.

Time passed.

Emma noticed movement out on the terrace. A darkness, shifting and agitating. Pinned under the weight of her baby it took a moment to recognise the black shape. A sick anxiety rose within her. The swan’s wings were tucked around its body. Its long, black neck twisted inward. It looked hopelessly tangled – a headless, broken thing.

Robbie, interested too, spat out her nipple and squealed with anticipation. The bird unfurled. Its neck was long, with most of the feathers stripped, revealing severed quills along its length like an exaggerated spine. Or was that its spine? The red beak met the skull in a terrible gnarled knot. And there was something in it, something brown and malformed.

The swan stood erect before its own reflection, its breath fogging the glass. Its chest rose and fell, the plumage there was thinned too. What had happened to it? Was it attacked like the one by the boatshed?

Arthur made a sound and pointed, rocking. She looked down at him and registered the expression on his broad face. His eyes were dry but his breath was coming in sharp heaves.

There was a thump. The bird dropped whatever was in its beak and spread its wings, bones showing through. It had a slash of red beneath each wing. Markings? Lacerations? Like the act of flying tore its body apart.

Emma held her breath. Would it fly now? The bird was seemingly transfixed by its reflection, all filthy feathers and bones, a beak that looked tied on with string. Behind it, the dried-up paddock, the boatsheds. Walkers like marionettes.

Emma closed her eyes. She willed this intruder to leave her family alone.

‘Go away,’ she whispered.

Then, the tapping.

She opened her eyes and watched in horror as the swan’s beak hit the glass.

Tap tap tap tap tap.

Its red eyes gleamed. Arthur shrieked, a piercing scream as though the pecking breached the glass, his skin, hit the bone.

‘Shhhhhhhhh,’ she said. ‘It’s alright.’

She closed her eyes again. The tapping measured out her son’s screams like a metronome. She began to count. To a hundred, she thought. No, a thousand.

Somewhere in between, the tapping stopped and she summoned the courage to go out and look.

The patio was quiet, drenched in the heat of the day. The glass was clean and flat, no visible cracks.

Robbie looked toward the window, his face curious and alive. He gurgled and clapped his hands, the torn dinosaur dropping to the floor.

‘Mum,’ said Clem, her back to the scene, using her Patricia voice to deliver the lesson from the morning. ‘I think Arthur needs to learn to share his toys.’