

HYDRAULIC ACTION

BY

AMELIA URRY

At dawn, I can hear the waves. They crash against the beach about a quarter mile out, but from here the sound is as measured and calm as the breath of the body lumped in the narrow twin bed next to mine. Lily is asleep. The other bodies in the crude wooden cabins arranged across the lawn are asleep, suspended in the interminable moment before the sun breaks over the horizon and plates the sea with silver. Then we will see the long lines of blinding whitewater unfolding matter-of-factly toward the beach, smashing boulders into pebbles in one sustained note of impact, drawing back with a hiss of release. Breathing endlessly in and out.

We are perched on the green point of Cape Breton Island in far north Nova Scotia, a few miles outside the closest town (pop. 48),

at the end of a rutted dirt road, right at the edge of the water. To the north is a large saltwater lagoon that feels the tides but not the surf. The Atlantic lies to the east and south, buffered by a strip of rocky beach that—except for two gaps where the sea pours back and forth—protects us from the waves.

Grandpa built this place when our parents were still surly teenagers, and kept building it the rest of his life. He designed the strange, octagonal cabins with their pleated roofs and enormous, un-openable windows, shingled them, painted them with whitewash and tar. The Main Cabin with its precarious water tower overlooking the whole point, the Boat House jutting on spindly struts over our little lakeside beach, the skeleton of Cove House-to-be rising from the long

grass at the edge of the lawn. He named it Limesean, the way old families used to name their grand houses and summer homes: Tara, Talland House. Our scruffy little piece of the earth.

The tiny handprints of grandchildren are pressed into the concrete foundations; traditions, also, set early. These sheets on that bed, this pillow. Norman comes by in the morning to drink his cup of coffee and talk over the headlines. When Grandpa makes jam, the kids stir.

We walk out to the Bench in the evening with Grandma, who smokes her cigarette and watches the sea. The sun sets behind us over a black line of pine trees and the bright reflection of the lake, but we stare out at the dark waves rippling out under the purpling sky. "One day this will be ocean-front property," she tells us, gesturing to the fringe of field sloping down to the Channel. "In a hundred years, it'll come all the way to our doorstep."

The landscapes I love were all made in collapse. The big red scarp by the beach on the long walk out to the Head was once a hill sloping smoothly down to the water. The Head itself, a grassy knob of stone

left jutting up from the sea, tethered to land only by a thin causeway that appears and disappears with the tide. Whole stands of pine trees canting down like broken bristles. The exposed roots like bleached bone, clutching at a retreating shoreline. The devastation of these things was perfect once; then it kept changing.

Year after year, the Gut is getting bigger. That vulnerable gap in the barrier beach slowly settles into a low, toothless grin where the waves come in now even at low tide, foam fizzling out among the pebbles where once the high humped back of the beach shuddered under the invisible pounding of the surf. On our side of the beach, the lake is filling in with sand. At low tide, the sand bar is so wide we can walk from the back door of the Boat House to within ten feet of the Island, where the Channel carves out the last thin line of resistance. Our feet don't even get wet.

When Grandpa was dying, we only have time to say "I love you" once, the last time we took him home from the hospital. The un-healable sore on his leg, the crooked joint of the finger reattached in childhood, the stump of a toe and a finger lost later, all these

merely gloss over a deeper degeneration as one by one his organs stopped. Afterward, Grandma sold their house but kept Limesean. The last time we were all up there together, we scattered his ashes over the berry fields with a soup spoon.

I invite Michael to Cape Breton our first summer. I am alone for two days before he arrives, the first time this place has ever felt lonely. So much has changed, but the insides stay largely the same: the white, porous bones scavenged from the high water line at the end of the harsh winters, arrayed along the walls of the Main Cabin, shoulder blades, jawbones, ribs, the wide-socketed skulls of birds. The whale vertebra rests by the back door, as large as a car tire. Old buoys and kites hang on the wall above the bookshelves, and in the corner an old babydoll spins lazily by her heel, wide-eyed and familiar as an old chandelier.

I take the kayak out onto the lake one afternoon, nervously. When I get far enough away from the house, it is just an empty box whose big windows flash, then disappear. I cannot tell which one of us has come unmoored. That night, I feel like the last person in the

world.

The next day I pick Michael up at the airport, and drive back too fast along the twisting roads. Our mailbox is long gone; now the turn-off for our driveway is marked by a large yellow sign advertising a German development company who last year plowed out a whole track of forest, built two houses on the opposite side of the spit, then seemed to vanish. I give it the *mal'occhio* my grandmother trained us to do when these signs first started appearing around here years ago.

Michael and I sleep in the Boat House, on the big bed my grandfather built. I leave the blinds open so that the sun will spill in when it comes up bright and unmediated over the Atlantic. He sleeps late and I read beside him until I grow bored, and wake him. In the light, I feel suddenly shy as I show him the small cabins, their splintered edges, the treasures laid along their shelves. We have spent the summer apart, but here it feels like more than that, like I have spent my entire life pacing this little corner of sea and land. "Is this where you used to sleep?" he asks me, leading me over to the little bed. "Did you used to look out this window?" I

watch the deep blue patch of sky in the window and hold him tightly as the story is rewritten in my head.

We stay naked whenever we can. It is an unusually hot summer, and anyway there is no one around to see us as we wave and dance behind the big windows. We read during the day, our feet up in my grandmother's chair or curled together on the daybeds, peeling clementines. I find myself following Michael and straightening the objects that he places askew, fitting each item into the slot memory has left for it. One day, Norman takes us jigging for mackerel in his boat, then shows us how to filet the small, jewel-like fish with a kitchen knife. Michael and I make dinner in the crooked kitchen, and cook too much for the two of us to eat. The wine is sharp as vinegar, but we drink it anyway from long-stemmed glasses and watch night creep in from the sea.

When I turn out the lights and lie in the familiar dark, I can feel the whole of Limesean still sprawled around me. It holds all of the old ghosts: Grandpa making pancakes with the wild blueberries we picked, checking his blood sugar in the morning. Pearl down the road with her maple cookies.

Jimmy's bucket of spit behind the couch. Eileen and Joanne stirring jellyfish soup under the jetty that washed away one winter. The now-toppled water tower making its crooked silhouette against the sky at sunset. The notch in the shoreline where a large whirlpool used to form, a wheel of foam spinning at the center.

We fall asleep listening to the waves.