

The Claire Tree

By Stewart Sheargold

“...in the absence of women men have to discover the maleness and femaleness in themselves to keep a balance.”

David Cronenberg, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*

“It may be that to understand ourselves as fictions, is to understand ourselves as fully as we can.”

Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*

“What does a man see in his sister? The lost female part of his own soul?”

Patricia Duncker, *James Miranda Barry*

I
Wonderland

1.

The small plane described an arc inland.

James reached out to steady himself on the chair before him. His hand was shaking slightly. The fat man sitting beside him, who had been ringing his hands throughout the flight, smiled queasily in sympathy.

From up here he could see the tiny figures of people ambling along the beach, close to the airport. Black dots darted around them; dogs at play in the sea. He imagined for a moment that he was puppeting them, tweaking and teasing the strings. This high up he felt a vertiginous omnipotence.

The pilot dipped the plane, preparing for the touch of land, like the touch of the familiar when two hands meet.

The newspaper poking from the seat pocket meekly proclaimed its headline. Another win for the local champion axeman.

With every gentle accommodation to the air currents, the changing burr of the engine, he felt sicker. As though the cosmopolitan cities he had made a name in were shimmering into mirage in the backwash of the plane. Everything behind him was invisible.

He had a feeling as distinct as a glass edge, that all the drowsy sheep in the fields, the early morning motorists speeding along the mapline roads, were watching this plane. They were willing it down, anchoring it safely to the earth with the weight of their gaze.

He closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to watch the island rise to claim them.

After a moment it was all over; a shaky bump, the engines descended into murmur, and the plane glided over wet tarmac to the waiting groundsmen.

James peered out the porthole, at this green, fecund, tumble-down land; the mountains rising in the distance through the misty day. He was somewhere called home.

'Welcome to Devonport,' said the pilot's crackled voice, 'gateway to Tasmania. Local time is 8am and the temperature is a cool thirteen degrees, expecting sixteen. Inside the

terminal you will find various rent-a-car companies; there is a shuttle service to the city and taxis are available. Please remember that smoking is prohibited on the tarmac and in the terminal. We hope you enjoyed your flight and we thank you for flying Southern Australian airlines.'

James let the other passengers scuffle about the tiny cabin for their coats and bags.

The fat man smiled at him and said, in a tiny voice, 'Glad that's over.'

James smiled politely.

The fat man stopped up the line of eager passengers and gestured for James to go first. For a moment he couldn't move. He didn't want to pull himself out of the seat.

Already he'd had visions of apples and pears in his head.

A teenage girl, dressed vibrantly in orange leggings greeted the fat man. Probably his daughter. Her smile was nice. He caught James watching and waved a 'goodbye'.

James wondered if anyone had come to pick him up. He should have telephoned halfway.

The airport was the size of a short train platform, and large plaques hanging on the walls advertised the various industries of Tasmania; blowsy poppy fields, silos and granaries, snowed-over mountains, the weathered stone of historic towns.

James found a seat near the baggage claim shed, and sat down to wait. He hoped his father wouldn't be long.

Now that he was here he felt entirely indifferent to the place. As though it might be the start of another article. Some particular research. He felt utterly ambivalent. No. He wanted to feel utterly ambivalent.

The woman next to him was eating apple pie. They'd had it on the plane. He turned away quickly. The trees, laden with their heavy, lustrous bounty of apples and pears were swelling up like crystal ball visions in his head. He could smell the juice on his fingers. And hated it. Once, he had tried to convince his father that plucking apples from trees was the

gravest of sins. Eve had done so and learned nothing but punishment and regret. This, after a particularly pious and convincing argument from Henry Clark, the next-door neighbour's boy, fully ten years older than James had been; ten more years of experience and maturity and on-upmanship. James had mapped onto the wonder of Henry Clark, until there had been a scandal involving the boy's father and a girl (a land of small-town behind-the-barn lusts here) and they had moved away.

The pungent smell of ripe green juice brought everything careering back. Connections all along the vines and branches of memory. The family tree was an apple or pear in more ways than one. The orchard stretched out in a great fan across the landscape, the earth was soft, rich and brown. 'You could fork it up and eat it,' his father used to say. But it was always grave-earth to James. His fingers squirming like worms through the soil, becoming familiar. One day he would lie in it.

Then there was the walnut tree.

A hand on his shoulder, brown and thickly veined. James smiled and looked up into his father's craggy, ragged face. The creases and ridges of his skin seemed to lie perfectly when he did not smile. He gazed calmly down at his son with an expression of mild interest. 'How was the flight?'

'So so,' he replied. He didn't expect a hug. He noticed his father was growing a beard again. He looked unlike himself without it. Change was not his watchword. He liked the bristle of a beard to hide his careless features. Whatever had possessed him to shave it off?

James could never recall a time when he'd kissed his father. He shook hands.

They collected his one bag. 'Not much here,' said Charles.

'I like travelling light.' James slung the laptop over his shoulder.

They walked out into the car park, shuffled between cars. Charles's small dual-cab was rusted and dented and old. The door cringed as James opened it. When his father heaved himself in his arm hit the door lock.

James wound down the window and let the soft rain spill in.

*

A slow-drive, as the landscape dripped into him.

Past names of houses and hidden roads – *Sunnywood, The Moat, Bean's Hollow.*

Dainty violet-blue flowers nodding at the side of the road.

A man on a ladder, shearing away ivy from an upper window.

The cold sun behind a veil of mist, like a searching stage-light. The clouds frayed and torn, hanging tatters.

Hillocks of land as though the man at the centre of the earth had pushed them up with his thumbs. Then flat expanses, like green deserts, dissected with fences.

A raspberry farm and adjoining restaurant, the menus no doubt full of red.

Young boys in their cricket whites, crisp in the morning. The soft tick as the bat hits the ball. Then cheers.

The burnt-out frame of a pottery shed. He remembered that. From way back. An arsonist.

A woman struggling with the chairs and antique chest cabinets out the front of her store.

Early morning Sunday towns. The day rousing people from their sleep.

The road was a smooth black line, leading inwards, towards green and mountains. Forests thick with dark.

Container sheds – clean, pristine and colourful. Refrigeration plants incongruous in laybys.

Homes: desolate, dropped in the fields.

Petrol stop, car humming, coffee on the dashboard; dribbles and spills. Cheery attendants washing the windscreen, peering in.

A rough, archaic land; crumbled homes, sheep chomping slowly through the day, matted and tangled hedges. Fields, always fields, green as luxury or fallow with virgin soil.

This is what they drove through.

Charles spoke falteringly, and it was small. His eyes were hawk-trained on the twisting roads, hands capable on the wheel.

‘I read your article,’ said Charles. His voice was low and considered.

‘Oh,’ said James. ‘It wasn’t anything special.’

‘Your mother liked it. You know, the bit about the jewels.’

James glanced at his father’s pursed lips. ‘They were supposed to belong to an Austrian princess.’

Charles grunted a noise of polite interest.

Tyres bee-buzzed on the wet road.

A saloon overtook them on a curve and Charles tutted and frowned. ‘Idiot,’ he snapped.

The trees leaned in to eavesdrop, each leaf an ear.

‘Are you working on anything at the moment?’ It was a token effort.

‘Well, there’s the book, of course...I thought I might do some research while I’m here.’

‘Good,’ said Charles.

James glanced out the window, the rain spattering the glass. His trapped reflection gazed dolefully back at him. ‘How’s mum?’ he asked, without turning.

There was a slight pause. The soft parting of lips. ‘She’s better. She’ll be glad to see you.’

The car surged forward under Charles’s quick press of the accelerator.

They lived next to *Paradise*. Which was always a source of great amusement to James, who wondered how many people had looked and never found that elusive realm. And he could pop over and have tea there if he so desired. Of course, this was paradise of the broken-down,

barely-a-village sort, and he'd be hard-pressed to even find a teabag there. A bit of a mockery of the name. But surely better to live in *Paradise* than here, in the dire, desolate grip of *Nowhere Else*. Whoever had named it as such was surely not a philosopher, who would have realised that names are always ingrained with the spirit of places.

Charles stopped at the iron gate to the property. It took James a moment to realise that he should get out and open it. Its creaking hinges opened up all the tired dullness of home and family. He remembered wandering blankly through rooms blazing with mocking sunlight. He remembered the frosts of the fruit-picking mornings. All the soft, rotten fruit on the ground. How he'd dream each one was a dead part of him, fusty and used up. And all the dreams still ripening on the tree were being picked and sold off. Most of all he remembered his mother and her beautiful mellifluous voice, her white skin as fine as china, easily burnt, and her blue dresses. And her Hitler marches along the floorboards when she was angry. She could wield her hurt effortlessly, and it stabbed. A mother as cold as God. No matter how hard he tried to cut her off from his blood he could not do so. He loved her.

He could see her peering out the kitchen window.

As he got back in the car, his father said, 'It's changed a bit since you were last here. You won't recognise the place.'

He recognised the place. It jolted through him like electricity, a frisson of entrapment. This was his oubliette.

Behind the small timber house with its blue-framed windows, the orchard spread like spilling water. But where once the trees were green and clipped neatly, now they were gnarled and decrepit, jumping with grasshoppers. The smell of a much-maligned garden, tangled and lost.

And there. At the back of these wrinkled grave-markers to time, stood the walnut. Heavy and implacable as ever. Even now it flourished amid the gloom. The wood was strong and healthy.

'Have you been looking after her?' asked James.

Charles shook his head. His face was pale.

‘Mum?’

‘She has no time for that sort of thing these days, what with her knees.’

The walnut flourished as though it had hot blood pumping through its veins. As though it might be rooted in an entirely different world.

Charles pulled up at the door. ‘Hop out and say hi to your mother. I’ll take your bag inside.’

James gave his father a quizzical look.

Charles smiled. ‘We keep the car in the barn now, since we sold off the animals.’

The screen door opened with a rusty squeal, and his mother hobbled out onto the verandah. Her cane made a clomping sound on the timber, like a horse’s hoof. She looks so old, he thought. Her smile stretched the flesh at the corners of her mouth.

‘It’s so good to see you.’ When she folded herself around him her hands pressed onto his back as though she knew exactly how to cage him. But her withered state disarmed him. ‘So good to be home,’ he lied.

‘Oh, rubbish,’ she scolded. ‘You hate it here.’ Her tone was light but her eyes were ice blue, with a fearsome pit at the centre.

He had to smile.

‘Come inside,’ she said, ‘I’ve put the kettle on. And I’ve made some Anzacs. I know they’re your favourites. Or they were.’ She took him by the arm.

He glanced back at his father in the car. He watched them carefully, as though James might suddenly at any moment fly away and disappear.

The house was tinged with blue. Not just the walls or the furniture, but the air, as though it were filtered through the colour. If this is what his father meant by a change, then yes, he didn’t recognise the place. A blue gloom suffused the house, clung like static under the cornices.

The flocked wall print was still the familiar wildflower pattern. James found this oddly reassuring.

Margaret led him into the kitchen, where he was shocked to find a steel oven and even a microwave.

‘I thought you were never going to get one of those,’ he teased.

She tapped the floor with her stick. ‘It’s not so easy to get around these days.’

The kettle was whistling shrilly to itself. A bright chrome one that stopped all by itself. The lack of dinginess surprised him. The pots and pans that had hung over his mother each night as she cooked had been placed carefully in cupboards. The tiles, no longer brown and chipped, were a pristine white with a fancy fleur-de-lis pattern, all of blue.

Margaret beamed at his reaction. ‘We sold all the animals to build this,’ she said happily. ‘I don’t regret it for a second and I don’t think your father does either. You should have heard the plumber curse when he realised how far he’d have to come.’ She stopped quickly. ‘But you don’t want to hear me wittering on, do you?’ She took out a teapot. ‘How was the flight?’

‘Oh, you know. Fine.’

Margaret laid out four blue cups on the benchtop.

He’d have to bite his lip to blood in a minute to counter the overwhelming blue.

‘I read your article. Lovely. Nice pictures,’ she said.

‘Mum.’ He stopped her dithering. ‘How are you? Are you all right?’

She looked as scared as a rabbit in headlights at his questioning, and he was suddenly aware of the gulf spanning them. Was he really concerned for her?

She turned back to the tea, measuring precise scoops into the pot. ‘It was nothing really. Just a silly accident.’

‘Mum, please.’

‘I fell off a ladder. That was all.’ She gave him an exaggerated smile, rolled her eyes. ‘Could have happened to anyone.’

‘What were you doing up a ladder in the first place?’

‘Oh, you know, all sorts of jobs require a ladder.’ She poured a shot of water into the pot.

Charles slipped in like a lengthening shadow. James hadn’t heard the door, but from the guilty way he entered he must have been listening in the hall.

‘Oh there you are,’ she said unnecessarily. ‘Tea’s almost ready.’ She popped it all on a tray and brought it over to the scrubbed kitchen table.

Charles sat at the head.

Margaret poured the tea. The sound of water splashing gently into the cups was immensely soothing. They passed the sugar, stirred and sipped in silence, as though it were a ritual. James enjoyed the quiet after the bustle and bang of his journey. Outside, the wrens twittered and hopped about the garden. He caught flashes of tails. There was a sterile sheen to the light; if it touched him it might pierce him to the bone.

He looked closely at his parents. They sat and sipped politely. But their eyes flicked occasionally to each other, as though making sure they were each still there. They seemed so old. Their skin was like crumpled paper. James felt loss punch him as he watched. Something vital had leaked from them. He wondered if they had anything left to say to each other.

He wondered what they saw when they looked at him.

He had to break the beautiful silence. There was a place missing at the table. ‘When did you get this news of Claire?’

Charles shocked up. Margaret was immediately tight-lipped. They did not look at him. Margaret passed the Anzacs. ‘Don’t lets talk about it now. Not so soon.’

‘I suppose you’ve turned her room into a study or something, in all these refurbishments.’ He couldn’t help the bitter tone.

‘You can call the Police Station tomorrow,’ said Charles sternly. That was an end to it.

He wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. At least it was an acknowledgement.

His mother poured more tea. They crunched on biscuits; 'These are lovely,' he said, making her smile. Margaret began to talk about her ladies' circle, her sewing, the lovely blue sheets she discovered when she went shopping in Launceston. Her tea cooled by her arm as she prattled on.

Charles interrupted her. 'I'm going to the markets tomorrow.' He looked pointedly at James. 'Would you like to come?'

'I'll see,' he said, considering. He didn't want to tie himself to anything this early on.

His mother collected up the cups and placed them in the sink.

James went to settle himself in his bedroom.

Claire's room simply wasn't there anymore. No study, no generic third-bedroom-cum-guestroom. Where it had been was a blank wall, painted blue. Painting over her existence. Sealing her up as though she were dead.

He was angry about that. How petty, he thought. He couldn't comprehend the brokenness, the hurt that might turn someone into believing such a delusion. To him, it was unconscionable. He felt like yelling at them. *What are you doing?* He didn't expect an answer. He was sure they didn't know themselves.

He realised he hadn't saved a thing of Claire's. He'd taken for granted the fact that she would always be there, imprinted on the fabric and furnishings. Holding her teddy bear with its 'I love you' t-shirt was like holding her. Every footstep, each town or room or house she had walked in became ineluctably linked to her biology. He had been walking her for years now. Trying to map out her body, as though...as though it had been cut into separate pieces – like Osiris's – and he had to find them, puzzle-piece them together again. She'd be reborn. She'd come back through the looking glass. He'd be able to see clearly. Not ever have to look at the world through a dark-earth-gaze again.

He let the door swing open. His walls postered in childish things. A Dalek, the TARDIS, and then above the bed, the Doctor himself: Tom Baker – all mad eyes and frizzy hair, the scarf tangling around his boots. Twisting up James's dreams. That hideous swirling green wallpaper peeked through the gaps. The poster edges were frayed and sickly, faded by sunshine. It was a wonder they were still up.

He dumped his suitcase and laptop on the bed.

Just as he'd left it, years ago. Preserved in darkness, now hatching under new light. His mother had opened the window to freshen the air. Several layers of dust coated it all.

James pored over the posters, the matchbox cars lined up on the shelf, the raggedy fur toys, as though he were discovering something entirely new. He was fascinated by this person he had once been. And could never get back to. He wouldn't recognise this boy who loved so many things, who wished and dreamed of faraway possible places, if he passed him on the street.

He remembered the cupboard and pulled it open. There were still posters on the doors, and they still held their vibrant colours. Men of all types, soft focus flesh draped decoratively. His parents had not destroyed them. He was amazed and smiled, amused. They had always threatened to. But they lost shock and confrontation on the inside of a cupboard. He should never have allowed that. He'd still been a child, though his body had lengthened, broadened into an adult frame. By that time he was preparing to leave, though he did not know it. Out of the dark square of ignorance that squeezed him in here, into brilliant light. The city was Heaven to him with all its bright lights, forever seeming to be Christmas. The only thing he missed were those rare occasions when it snowed. The night would fall into hush and he knew the snow was softening the land, covering it with white. In the morning it was glorious, a perfect frosting of snow over every branch, each leaf. How it crackled in the fist and crunched like a sweet underfoot. A blank landscape, a topography he could create. From *Nowhere Else* to *Somewhere Else* entirely. That was the only thing he missed.

The coat hangers clicked together in the empty space of the wardrobe. He unpacked quickly, hung up only the shirts and jackets that needed to be de-creased. The rest he left in the suitcase. He rummaged some space in a drawer and swept all the Daleks and matchbox cars in, tidying memory away in boxes. He sat his laptop on the desk top and plugged it in to recharge.

Next, he found his small garbage bin and tore down all the posters, all of them, scraping at the bluetack with bitten-back fingernails. Soon, he had only the sickly green wallpaper. It was marked with light, rectangles patch-working the pattern where posters had been.

There, he thought. The room was androgynous, simple, a guest room.

The curtains breathed in and out on the cool breeze.

Outside, he could see the walnut clearly. The face on its trunk – a bundle of knots and ridges – seemed even more pronounced. Its twisted branches like a head full of tossed curls. So very beautiful.

Margaret called him for lunch.

Lunch was filled with idle banter and he choked on it. Afterwards, Charles cornered him in the bathroom. James was scrubbing his hands clean with pink soap.

Charles stood at the sink for a moment, then came forward, a suitable distance for a whispered conversation. ‘I think you should know...’ he started and his voice shook lightly, ‘about your mother’s accident.’

James straightened, twisted off the water flow.

‘She *was* on a ladder when she fell.’ He gulped. ‘She was climbing up the walnut.’

James frowned. ‘Why?’

Charles looked away. ‘I was out. I found her a few hours later, under the tree. There...there was a noose in her hand. She’d made it herself. I didn’t think she knew how.’

James’s heart scabbled in his chest. ‘Does the doctor know?’

‘No.’ Charles shook his head quickly. ‘She asked me not to tell.’

James gripped the sink. He could see her now, climbing all rickety up the tree, finding a branch. The ladder or her footing slipped before time. What was she thinking of? He was angry, too. He didn’t want the guilt that welled up inside him. He couldn’t face that false smile of hers that asked for him to take care, to rescue her. He knew what she wanted. She wanted to be able to say to friends, ‘He’s settled here. We’re so very happy.’

‘Was it about Claire, or was it about me?’ He threw the question out.

Charles looked at him sorrowfully and James was sure he was about to fall. But he only said, ‘She wouldn’t say.’

The photograph was crinkled with folds from when it travelled in pockets. It was an amber colour now, the colour of faded time. Worn by constant gazing, by the love invested in the image.

He could no longer tell what colour her hair was in the photograph. Of course he knew it was auburn, like autumn leaves. In this portrait her hair is shoulder length. It was one of her months for change, where she grew tired of her Rapunzel-locks and snipped them all off. Margaret had been irate and instantly taken her to a hairdresser. ‘No daughter of mine...’ Or something like that.

She’s half-smiling here, a cheeky smirk that’s more in her eyes. But he’s sure there’s something beyond them, the gleam of a thought that he just can’t reach. And if he did, would he be able to fathom it?

It was in the curl of her cheek, the tiny crinkles under her eyes, the slight tilt of the head. If he looked harder, he could see other meaning there that might let him delve into her, discover what she was thinking the exact moment of the click.

But it was only a photo and he deepened it with the only meaning he could place upon it – his own.

He could never imprint all the memories of her onto this single square of paper. It withered under his attempts.

He couldn't sleep. The bed was too small; his feet stuck out the end if he stretched out. Sheets and quilts that might have once kept him warm now felt thin as web; his bones were cold.

The window was open, curtains pulled back so the moon could clean out the day's fustiness. Its light poured into the room luxuriously, a gentle, soporific glow.

The walnut stared back at him in its field.

He crept out into the hall, tying the dressing gown cord tight, cursing the creaky floorboards.

In the lounge, his mother was asleep in front of the television, her mouth wide open to let the soul spider out. Her eyelids flickered with dreams.

The television mutely splashed African scenery.

Out the squeaky screendoor, out into the orchard where the crickets let the day out in their ratchetings...Through the ghastly forms of creaking, ghostly trees, apples and pears in grotesque clots along the branches. His father had been chopping some down; they lay twisted and forlorn.

The night was washed with blue.

He made his way through the trees, this funereal path, to the walnut, a grand mistake at the back of them all. Its leaves shone wetly in a gown of turning red.

James looked up into the face of knots, whorls like trumpets, like the intricacy of eyes and ears and cheekbones.

'Claire?' he said softly.

Wind whispered through her. Or was it her half-remembered voice, like a lantern spreading light into a room of shadow?

He sat at her feet, and talked to her under moonlight.