

FRACTALS

Dawn Paul

Ross Bailey was waiting for what would change him. He wanted his time in this rental cottage by the salt marsh to be the beginning of a new way of living. Here he would take his loneliness, his divorce, his shrinking life, and make of it something expansive. An adventure, even.

The first night he woke stiff with cold. 2 AM. How many hours until sunrise would relieve him of this godforsaken night? The house was freezing. He swung his legs out of bed and gasped when his feet touched the floor. How could it be so cold inside a building? He pulled on yesterday's socks and padded out to the little front room. The propane heater's light was on. It purred and gave off a faint warmth like a cat. But it would take more than a cat's worth of heat to warm this place.

He went to the bathroom and thought to check if the water in the toilet was frozen before he used it. He pulled the chain for the light above the sink.

In its greenish glare he saw a roiling mass of ladybugs on the shelf below the mirror. They were only ladybugs, cute little insects if taken singularly. But moving without purpose in a huge mass, they were hideous. He used the toilet, turned on the faucet and gave his hands a quick rinse taking care not to contact the seething boil of ladybugs. He made a mental note to mention the bugs, and the feeble heater, to the woman who looked after the cottages. He hoped to get some work done here, finish a paper, think about new research. There was no way he could work in this savage little place.

He worked on fractals. Like the branching of tree roots or river deltas, he liked to explain to the rare people who asked. Or the way the circulatory system worked its way from the solid lump of the heart to the gauzy capillaries. A strange field of prediction and random meanderings. That's what Ross enjoyed. The sense that there is predictability in chance, that small accretions of sand or cells will nudge along to create rivulets or veins. Or the way small shifts of emotion will nudge two people further and further apart. Like the dissolution of his marriage.

He was aware that he should have seen it. He was a mathematician, but metaphor was not lost on him. He should have noted the trend, maybe even created a mathematical model. The gaps in conversation, the ever-widening

elapse of time between phone calls when Andrea was away. The way their political views began to diverge, then their bedtimes, their bedrooms, their vacations, their friends, their lives.

Ross trudged back to his cold bed and resolved to get things fixed in the morning.

§

“You’re staying on for the whole winter? These places are crackerboxes.” That said, after her name and a quick, dry handshake. Jeta Malcolm spoke in the belligerent way of one accustomed to being contradicted. Ross found that he wanted to soothe her, disarm her with agreement.

“You’re probably right.” Magic words, he’d learned that early.

She didn’t look gratified. She lifted the sheet metal door off the front of the heater and looked inside. “I’ll get somebody to come look at this.”

“I hope they’ll do more than look.” He meant it as a joke. He had looked, she had looked. She didn’t laugh. “You’re probably right. It needs a professional.”

“You’d better check your propane, too,” she said.

Jeta was shorter than Andrea and thinner, though her constant flow of motion made her seem bigger. She squatted easily in front of the heater, then

leapt up to twist a dead light bulb, moved on to bob and weave in front of the bathroom sink looking for the ladybugs that now seemed to Ross like a vanished nightmare. Ross wished he would stop comparing all women—and even some men—to Andrea. As though he hadn't seen another human being—like Friday to her Robinson Crusoe—for the duration of their marriage. But he was noticing how remarkably different everyone was from Andrea.

Jeta finally stood still. She stopped in front of the window and squinted into the light.

“Quite a view, isn't it?” he offered.

She nodded, reached for the doorknob. He felt a panicked dismay.

“Would you like a sandwich?” he said. To his surprise, she said yes. He had no sandwich meats, only a chunk of provolone cheese. He sliced it, brick-like in the cold room, sprinkled it with dill and toasted it on bread in a frying pan. Then he cut it into triangles and garnished it with red grapes. He thought of offering wine, though it was early in the day. What did he have for dessert? He realized he was trying to seduce her. To entice her to stay. To talk with him. To rub the back of his neck with her chapped, blunt fingers. They would feel like sandpaper, working their way down the long tight

muscles across his shoulders. The trapezius. He almost groaned, imagining, then laughed instead. Seduction with toasted cheese sandwiches in this freezing cottage.

Jeta was eating methodically, her head bent over her plate. He saw wiry gray hairs mixed with the brown. She looked up.

“I was only laughing at myself,” he said.

“Why?”

“Well. I think I am wooing you with a sandwich and grapes.” It didn’t hit the swashbuckling note he intended. He waited.

She popped the last quarter-sandwich into her mouth, whole. After a long time of chewing and swallowing, she said again, “Why?”

“I lost a woman,” no, it sounded like he’d misplaced her, “my wife left me. In part, I think, because I was not bold enough.”

“Are you sure that was the reason?” She looked at him as though a galaxy of other possibilities was running through her mind. “Don’t practice on me.” She brushed crumbs from her hands, brisk-brisk. She put her plate in the sink, which was at once intimate yet dismissive. “I’ll check your propane and order another tank if you need it.”

Then she was gone.

§

Jeta sent him a guy named Jim. Ross knew he would never be a guy named Jim. Guys named Jim had pick-up trucks, big boxes of tools that they knew how to use. They could take something apart and reassemble it in an afternoon. They took charge—"don't turn that on until I hook up the ground, watch and see that doesn't start leaking again." They were content with their lives. They talked about their wives with satisfaction—"my wife says...my wife always..." Ross could no longer say "my wife." My ex-wife, yes. My former wife. But never again to say "my wife" with the quiet pride of guys like Jim.

The first week went by with a parade of guys in sagging jeans and sweatshirts, with three-letter names—Jim, Tim, Tom—who fiddled with the heater, filled the propane tank, sprayed the ladybugs and treated him, he felt, with mild contempt. Then the kitchen drain clogged and he put on his own jeans and a ragged green sweatshirt that had belonged to Andrea. He would fix this himself. He found a pair of pliers and an adjustable wrench in a drawer. He would take apart the drain, remove the blockage and put it back together. He opened the cabinet door under the sink and knelt there, trying to figure out how to take the drain apart. It had no obvious screws or bolts.

There was a knock on the door and he yelled come in, wanting to be caught being handy. It was Jeta Malcolm.

“You fixing something?” He was annoyed at her incredulity. He had a strong desire to gather her and the guys named Jim and tell them, “Look, I am not an idiot. There are things I’m good at. I am actually considered something of an expert in my field.” It was hard sometimes to be good at something very few people understood or cared about. And to be so inept in large, visible ways. The sink, she showed him, only needed a plunger. Then she was off to buy shingles.

The front window of his cottage looked out on the marsh. It was shades of brown now, flecked with white patches of hard-packed snow. He liked to stand and watch the huge flock of dark birds that moved across the marsh like a tornado, rising then touching down. There must be thousands of them, Ross thought. The weak winter sun shone on their backs. Starlings. He had never seen them in such numbers. Ross wondered how they managed to lift off without knocking into each other, without a tangle of wings and tails. What signal flashed among them, what prompted their group decision—
Now! Away!

He knew nothing about birds. Andrea had kept a birdfeeder on their deck. When she was his wife and they had a deck. It was starlings, he remembered, that she despised. She tried various means to keep them away from the feeder—certain mixtures of seeds, that sort of thing, nothing drastic. She didn't wait with a pea-shooter to nick them off. He did not know why she disliked them. It bothered him that he did not know. He remembered her stepping out to the deck and clapping her hands above her head to scare them off. He could see her, the sleeves of her bathrobe slipping back, her arms bare in the cold, clapping her hands and the birds flapping wildly away. He had thought it a mean thing to do but assumed it was necessary. She would run out in the midst of brunch on weekends, then return to the table, irritated, watching for the starlings' inevitable return.

He stepped outside and swept the porch. It was coated with a thin layer of sand that gritted beneath his feet. He noticed things like that now—gritty floors, balky heaters—and felt compelled to do something about them. It had something to do with living alone.

In some way, he realized, Andrea had shielded him from the world. Now things came at him unfiltered, undiluted. He never thought he'd live alone. He expected to die first, he was eight years older and had a family history of

sudden heart attacks. Though she smoked. Never in the house, she smoked on the deck, kept a small metal bucket of sand for the butts. She stood with her shoulders hunched, like a teenager, and scuffed her feet as she smoked. He could picture her in his old corduroy jacket, standing by the potted tomato plants and the birdfeeder. Thinking, perhaps, of ways to get rid of starlings, and him. He always liked the way she smelled afterwards, the smoke in her hair and on her skin, sexy and dangerous. But he never told her that. It would have seemed an encouragement of her smoking.

She always kept her back to him while she smoked, as though ashamed of it. But he had only assumed that. Maybe she just couldn't face him as she stood smoking and thinking of how she'd be rid of him someday. While he stood at the kitchen counter, making coffee or chopping endive for a dinner salad, smiling and thinking only that he could see in the self-conscious hunch of her shoulders the hellion teenager she claimed to have been.

The broom slid from his hands and hit the porch with a gunshot like crack. "I want another chance," he said out loud. His voice broke. He scrubbed tears from his eyes with his sleeve. He gave the broom a vicious kick and it clattered down the stairs.

Across the marsh, the starlings rose in a swirling cloud. Common. That is what she had said of starlings. He remembered now. For being common she had driven them from the feeder. If only she could see them in their thousands, moving as one across the frost-blasted marsh, she would change her mind, see their beauty.

He retrieved the broom. What if he had stepped outside, just once, and slipped his arms around her, nuzzled his face in her smoky hair and whispered, you smell terrific?

§

Jeta stopped by the next day and checked the heater. Ross showed her the new, complicated coffee maker he had ordered online. He flipped spigots and pushed buttons, hoping she would notice his mastery over this machine. Instead, she stood by the window and watched the starlings. But she said the coffee was good. They sat in the tiny kitchen, and Ross found himself talking about his marriage and divorce.

“I was happy,” he said. He poured her another cup of good coffee. He said he remembered running up the stairs, glad to be home, glad to see Andrea’s car in the driveway. It was what he loved about marriage—sharing the events of the day over a glass of wine. It made even the most ordinary

time precious, as though his days—the morning walk across campus, the hours in his office, a sandwich at his desk—were dusted with gold.

Andrea was standing at the sink when he came in, leaning with her back against it, one foot resting against the door of the cabinet underneath, as though she was standing against a building waiting for a bus. She looked at him and said I'm leaving.

Of course, he explained, it hadn't happened exactly like that. Other things were said first. Ross had put on slippers, rinsed two wine glasses. Andrea had actually been upstairs when he came in and had leaned against the kitchen counter later. The words I'm leaving had been said in a rush of other words, none of which Ross remembered now.

"But when did it begin?" he asked Jeta. She just shrugged.

"Tell me about you," Ross said. "Where did you live before you moved here?"

She laughed. "That will take some time to tell you."

"I have time," he said. But she drained her coffee cup and left.

§

When had it begun, Ross wondered, over and over. He remembered the last time he touched Andrea. They had walked out of the lawyer's office

together. She looked bewildered and sad, as though the divorce had not been her idea. He was moved to comfort her, to tell her it would turn out fine, though he had no idea what fine could possibly look like. Before they walked to their separate cars, he put his hand on her shoulder, a tender yet respectful gesture. The touch of a minister, or a general before battle, not a lover. She moved out from under his hand, twitched it away. In that small definite motion, he felt her entire body react, every molecule gathering momentum away from him, a wave of something close to revulsion. He pulled his hand back, turned from her and ran to his car, bent over in a shambling, blind gait. Inside the car, he started crying. It came on suddenly, like hiccups or sneezing. He sat with his hands on the steering wheel waiting for it to stop. People passed by on the sidewalk, heads down and alone, or with companions, talking and gesturing. No one noticed him and he felt freedom in his invisibility. He hoped the one lengthy cry would be the end of it. But when had it started? What had been the first small movement away from him that culminated in that final, almost instinctive convulsion under his tentative hand?

The last time Ross had seen Andrea—carefully not touching—was the weekend after that day at the lawyer’s office. He had driven to their house—

it was still legally theirs, it hadn't sold yet—to pick up his belongings. At that point, he still thought she might change her mind. She would come to her senses. An old-fashioned term for, he realized, an outdated notion. She did not return to her senses or to him.

He did not have much to take away. Mostly books and files. He had not played the divorce for keeps, had given up point after point. He had agreed to sell their house. He agreed that the furniture was hers, that she had done the selecting, the purchasing, the coordinating of colors and fabrics. She got the floor sander, the two Manx cats and the sound system. These things had always been hers; he would not have known what to do with them. The one thing he wanted, he had realized as he watched Andrea rack up point after point, was for it all to stop.

At the end of the semester, he had requested a sabbatical. He realized that, like a person after an accident, he needed time to check for damage. And there had been the crying problem. It happened without provocation, at the deli counter or while talking with a colleague, horribly embarrassing. Through the fall, he had explained it as allergies, claiming ragweed, sometimes maple leaves. It was interesting how little notice people took of his crying attacks, how easily they nodded at his explanations and moved on

to other topics or simply moved on. He discovered it was very easy to be truly miserable yet go about each day without that misery being discovered. It was as though he walked around with a dead goat slung across his shoulders yet no one noticed or remarked on it. Then winter arrived, all allergens shriveled after frost, and the attacks did not abate.

So he took what he publicly announced was a sabbatical but what he secretly worried was a nervous breakdown. He didn't actually know what a nervous breakdown consisted of, if it was a specific activity—like uncontrolled weeping?—or a catch-all phrase for the point reached when people decided they could no longer frog-march themselves through their days.

All he knew was that one evening he had walked into his ugly little apartment, the apartment he had assumed would be temporary, and began re-packing. Like a film being rewound, his books poured off the shelves and back into boxes he had never thrown away, plates and coffee mugs leapt from cabinets, rolled themselves in newspapers and tucked into crates. Clothes poured off hangers and back into suitcases.

When he finished packing he sat on a suitcase and poured himself a paper cup full of brandy. He wished for something stronger like bourbon or

gin. But he was never much of a drinker, so all he had was brandy and he was not even sure how he had come into possession of that. He sipped, then tossed it all down and waited for the effect to spread through his body. But he felt only slightly clumsy as he stood up and headed into the bedroom that now contained only a stripped bed. He lay down on the bare mattress, fully clothed and fully convinced he was sober. He fell instantly asleep. The next morning, he requested a sabbatical and looked for a quiet place where he could write up his research and stop crying for God's sake.

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Ross and Jeta began something that might be called a routine. She came by at noon. He made lunch. They ate without talking, talked afterwards over coffee. After his first stupid, ill-planned attempt at seduction, he didn't try again. But he thought about it when she was not around. He allowed himself to consider if her body under her clothes was white and smooth or if it was as brown and weathered as her face, neck and hands. He once had a vivid dream of walking with her across the marsh, searching for a place to lie down and make love, cursing the rising tide and the birders with their damn spotting scopes.

But when she arrived at noon and they sat together at the table, her matter-of-fact physical presence cancelled out all sexual imaginings. When he was with her it did not seem possible that he could enter her easily and happily, the way he had made love with Andrea a thousand times.

Lately he did not think constantly of Andrea. When he did picture her, it was of one moment from all their years together. She had worn her hair twisted in a knot and pinned to the nape of her neck. He remembered her long back to him, mornings as she got ready for work. Facing the mirror, she'd pull her hair back, twist and pin it in one swift motion. He always tried to catch the exact moment when her long loose hair became a tight roll against her neck. But all he ever saw was that single smooth motion, morning after morning.

Lately he felt he had missed something. Some long part of his life had slid by like a view from a train. The years with Andrea. He could not afford to let that happen again. He had a much keener sense now that his time on earth seemed so much more finite. It would not keep branching ever outward, it would stop.

He had never been inside Jeta Malcolm's house. If he leaned closely against the wall, he could see it from the window over his desk. He could only glimpse it, just enough to see if her small pick-up truck was parked in the yard. He spread his notes on his desk, determined to work. But he was distracted, thinking of her, and he found himself standing up to press himself against the wall and check her house, his ear cocked for the sound of her truck. His vigilance was tiring and distracting. It was not the way to get work done. He wished he hadn't met Jeta Malcolm and resented how she had taken over his days. He had come here to be alone. But maybe his very aloneness caused him to think of her, the only human on his horizon these days. His colleagues did not keep in touch. He had a sense of them out there pulling mightily on the oars while he dawdled on shore.

The truly aggravating thing was that Jeta did not seem to need him at all. She was content in her aloneness, complete in some way he was not. She did not seek him out. When she arrived at his door each day to eat lunch, he had the sense that he had lured her. His neck became stiff from pressing the side of his face against the wall to look up the road. He twisted his head from side to side, feeling the joints in his neck crackle then settle into place like an old dog on a rug.

His hands ached. There was always a chill in the cottage and the salt-damp absorbed into everything. He bundled himself into a sweater and an old woolen sports jacket. But his hands had to remain bare for him to work, to sort his notes, enter them on his laptop. Then the laptop failed – too much salt? It seemed everything in his life had become thin and frayed, ready to tear at the slightest tug. Maybe he shouldn't tug.

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He found he could not stop thinking of Jeta Malcolm and wondered if this was love. So quickly? Had he fallen in love with Andrea with this same wallop? No, there had been a clear progression there, from meeting her for coffee, then dinner dates, the exchange of their life stories, rather brief at the time, for they'd spent most of their lives in schools. They had the same friends, the same goals. Their courtship was like being swept along a wide boulevard lined with well-wishers, waving and winking. You two look good together. They did. Masculine and feminine bookends, slim, sandy-haired, the same height, equally well-educated. Had they been drawn to that familiarity?

After some time, he had asked Andrea to marry him. He had literally sweated over the decision, waking in the night, his pajama top wet and cold.

He had been burdened by the finality of the decision, not knowing it wasn't all that final. And anyway, hadn't he been in similar agony over his choice of grad schools?

He had a sickening vision of their years together as a sham. They had lived in pale beige tones, their talk always casual, his assumption always that there would be more time together. He had never questioned their marriage, had never chafed within it. What he felt now was not regret, but rather a strong wish that he'd paid more attention.

§

One day after lunch, Jeta took his hand and led him across the marsh to the dunes. Sand got into his shoes and scraped against his tender heels. He was aware of the ocean beyond the dunes, cold and vast. She stopped and faced him. He bent slightly and kissed her before he had time to think. She smelled like the marsh, sweetly salty, something of mud, something of burned wood long after the smoke has diffused. She kissed him back. Took her time with it. He held her, sensed her looking over his shoulder. He took off her jacket. It was cold in his hands, slightly damp from the wind off the ocean. But inside, the flannel lining held her body's heat and her scent, of the

salt marsh and wood smoke. He rubbed his cheek against the soft flannel and breathed consciously and deeply, five breaths.

They lay down together in a hollow out of the wind, the sand soft but cold. He felt the sun's warmth in the still air. He wondered if he had passed some sort of test. This had not been inevitable.

He was very aware of everything, as though time had slowed. The way the sun glinted on a small patch of snow. The nodding heads of dry beach grass. The cold, sharp air on his bare chest as Jeta unbuttoned his shirt. He heard the muffled seethe and roar of the waves on the beach beyond the dunes. He ran a finger across Jeta's freckled shoulders and down her arm. The sun gleamed on her skin, threw all its tiny cracks and furrows into relief and refracted into thousands of tiny rainbows. He opened his mouth to say I love you, then closed his lips. He was not sure yet, and wanted to be sure, wanted to speak only the truth. He pressed his lips instead against her neck and her skin was rough and salty as he had known it would be.

Afterwards she lay with her back curled against his chest and belly and he was glad that they did not talk. They faced the water. Clouds piled on the horizon, building up like a new mountain range. She turned and looked at him. Moments ago she had called his name, twice. Now she said his name a

third time, and he murmured an answer. They stood and dressed quickly in the cold, tripping on pant legs, falling and laughing. They ran across the dunes and where the path split, Jeta waved to him and ran to her house and he stood catching his breath, watching her run.

He was exhilarated. He had done something unexpected. His heart pounded, his face was hot, flushed in the cold air. He was not himself anymore. No, this was a different man, one who stepped outside the familiar, the predictable. So this, too, could be growing older. Not only the slow diminishment, watching his expertise shrink in relation to the burgeoning knowledge out there. The gradual dissolution of his body, the cells oxidizing, a kind of warm, wet rust. "Well," Ross said. "Well, well."

When he got back to the cottage, he stood at the window, watched the starlings swirl. "I'm happy," he whispered, and in naming it knew it was true. Happiness had drained from his life so gradually that he had not noticed. Now its return lodged in his chest, about the weight and heft of a bean bag and warm as blood.

Andrea was far away. He pictured her as he had last seen her, in their stripped house, every noise banging off the bare walls. He did not feel the familiar tug. Out on the marsh, the starlings rose in a wild fury, startled by

something—a child running with a stick. They flew on a horizontal plane, away from him, becoming a black line across the bright gray sky.

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In the morning, Jeta knocked on his door. She stood, hands deep in her jacket pockets and said, “I’ll be leaving this morning. The truck’s all packed.”

“What? Where?” Ross waved his hand toward the dunes. “But. Yesterday.” Her eyes didn’t follow his hand. “Take me with you.” The words flew out into the cold air.

Jeta pointed at the truck. “There’s no room. The cab is full, too.”

“Do you want coffee?” It had worked before, might work again. But this time she shook her head no. “Why are you going?”

“So many reasons. None of them yours. Dear Ross.” She drove away, leaving him standing in his slippers, waving. He realized he was not surprised, after all.

§

At first, he believes that they will stay in touch. He hopes and waits. He gets a postcard from a sculpture garden in upstate New York, a photo of a long stone wall winding among trees. She says she is staying near there, has found a job teaching rock climbing. But there is no return address. He feels

the familiar urge to wind back the thread, remembers her standing at his door, her rough hands on his skin. He tapes the postcard to the refrigerator, but the room is so cold that the tape does not hold to the metal. He laughs and shakes his head. He will need to find another place to stay, it is too cold here, he will never get his work done. He steps out on the porch and watches the starlings, the beautiful, common starlings.

Dawn Paul is the author of the novels *The Country of Loneliness* (Marick Press) and *Still River* (Corvid Press). She recently published stories and poems in the *Naugatuck River Review*, *Apple Valley Review* and *Valparaiso Fiction Review*. She is an organizer of the Massachusetts Poetry Festival in Salem, Massachusetts, and she performs on the Improbable Places Poetry Tour, a project of the Montserrat Writing Studio. Her work has been performed by Kelley Donovan & Dancers and was part of a video installation by artist Ben Johnson. She teaches writing at Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, Massachusetts.