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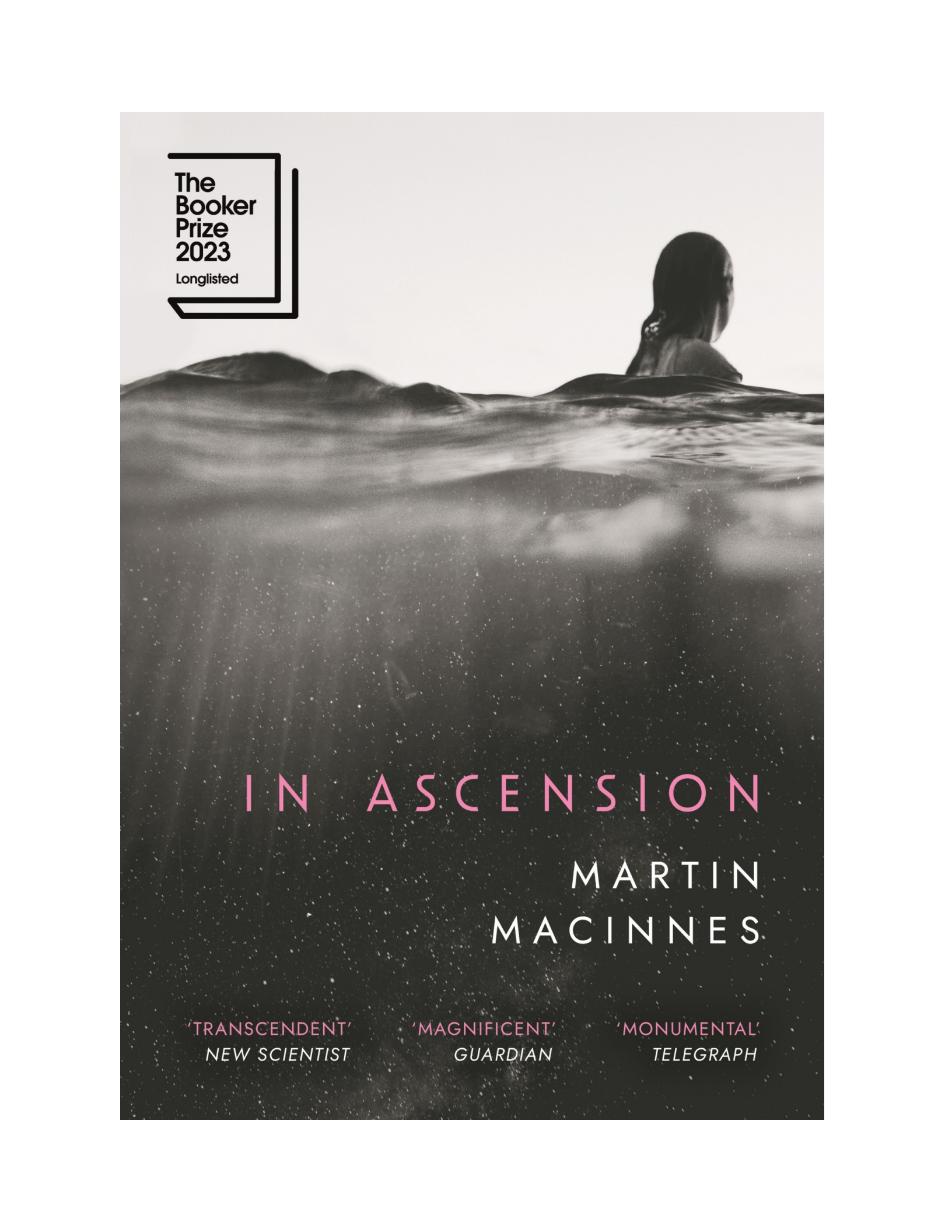
IN ASCENSION

MARTIN
MACINNES

'TRANSCENDENT'
NEW SCIENTIST

'MAGNIFICENT'
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I N A S C E N S I O N

Also by Martin MacInnes

Gathering Evidence

Infinite Ground

IN ASCENSION

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

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PART ONE

Endeavour

ONE

I was born in the lowest part of the country, 22 feet beneath the sea. When my sister arrived three years later we moved south into the city proper, Rotterdam's northern district. The land was newly excavated, freshly claimed from the seafloor, dredged by ships and reinforced by concrete. Parts of the street came loose, the ground underneath still soft. I remember burning incense, a brackish smell indoors, as if every moment were a spell, a scene that had to be called into being.

The river beach was artificial, and when we walked over it I imagined underneath us was a hollow area, a huge chasm. We went there on weekends and on holidays, my father paying careful attention to the tides, never settling in one place but marching from one direction to another. I poured sand into my plastic bucket, compacted it, upturned it, did it again and again. 'Don't dig too deep,' my father warned, before turning his vigilance back to the water.

In the Second World War, the centre of Rotterdam – the historic old town – was entirely destroyed. My parents' memories, growing up, were of wide spaces, broad avenues, wind that whipped in from the ports. They could see further because so many fixtures had been levelled. They showed me photographs printed on small sheets of white card with large black borders. The scenes were cloudy, dirt filled, and everything – from the remaining buildings to the figures caught walking between them – seemed smaller, lower. This reassured me, indicating that the world was growing, still in a state of creation. Maybe one day it would be finished. Rotterdam's skyline – powered by glowing refineries lining the huge port – now resembled Manhattan, a forest of steel, chrome and glass. One Sunday afternoon when I was five years old my spade sliced through the sand and clanged against the concrete underneath. The impact fizzed across my nerves, leaving me light-headed. It wasn't real. I will never forget the look of horror my father directed at me. I'd ruined something, the look said. I'd pierced the illusion and now I had to pay.

My mother, Fenna, came from the north, the only child of a nurse and a factory worker, both of whom died – her mother of cancer, her father of an unspecified illness shortly after – when she was starting university. It was tempting to see mathematics – her passion, her life's work – as a consolation, an escape from reality that could hide under the guise of a confrontation, but as Erika, Fenna's first cousin, said, that just wasn't true. Fenna had always been interested. Not just interested –

captivated, obsessed. She was a shy, withdrawn child, who rarely spoke unprompted and who was so accustomed to positioning herself around a book – hands gripping it, eyes gazing at it, knees raised in support of it – that she seemed incomplete without one.

She never attempted to describe what she did, an unhelpful habit I'd perhaps picked up myself. Though she spent most of her life at the university, she was never a teacher, an explainer. Mathematics wasn't about communicating, passing something between people; it was purer, closer to music, an act of revelation. The titles I glimpsed on her shelves – *Philosophy of Cusp Forms*; *Projectile Transformations*; *Hyperbolic Motion*; *Ultraparallel Theorem* – were like convex surfaces; I ran my hands over them without getting any closer to the substance underneath. On one spine was an infinity symbol, two loops running into each other endlessly, with no accompanying title. I couldn't see what she did all day, couldn't imagine what she thought of all her life. If Fenna could speak the language that she thought in, the sound would be like nothing in the world.

She frequently suffered migraines, lying in a room of her own, eyes closed, wet white handkerchief spread over her brow. During these episodes, the tension inside her spilled throughout the house. Our father, Geert, patrolled the building, ensuring we never raised our voices, never opened or closed a door, never turned on our computer. He would glare at me for even thinking too loudly. He liked this, taking care of Fenna as a form of discipline. It gave him purpose and occupation. If anything, it was more awkward after she recovered, in those brief periods where, having lost the roles we were trained in, none of us knew what to do. I'm certain Fenna exaggerated her symptoms, or at least prolonged them sometimes. Her episodes put a barrier around her, gave her space, time alone. No more questions, no explanations necessary. But mainly it would be for Geert, making him feel useful, giving him a role, distracting him, and thus protecting us, from the more volatile parts of his personality.

There were two sources of violence in my childhood, and one of them was growth itself. My bones lengthened in sudden, dramatic spurts. Nights could be agony, unbearable pain throbbing through my legs. I'd go months without a full sleep. I had nightmares of a miniature industry working beneath my skin, rebuilding me, leaving me outside as a stranded and helpless observer. I sweated, sometimes vomited, from the sheer strangeness of the experience. And yet through all this Fenna was there for me, able to put aside her own suffering. I didn't have to call for her, didn't have to make a sound, she somehow sensed when I needed her, and she

came. She soothed me, pushing the damp hair from my forehead, pressing her hands onto my thighs and calves, gripping them, digging into the flesh, then rhythmically massaging up and down, grappling with the pain and trying to shape it into something manageable. I remember looking up and seeing her standing by the foot of the bed, and at first failing to recognise who she was. There was a wildness in her as she pushed into my limbs with force. She pushed again and again, with rhythm and discipline, while I tried to remain quiet, tears appearing not from the pain but in gratitude for the first startling signs of its relief. As she stood above me, in the dark, she almost seemed a part of me. I wonder if she enjoyed this – the fact that I needed her, the sense that we were joined. We had never been this close. We never spoke on these occasions – I wouldn't have been able to, had I tried. She made strange, soft, bird-like fluttering sounds, trying to soothe me, the last sounds I heard before falling asleep.

I measured myself by tape every evening – wary of marking the walls – and noted the discrepancies in the morning. It used to frighten me, the knowledge that this power came from within, that there was something inherent in my body furling out like this. It was like my full adult shape had been prepared, condensed, knotted into a fine ball at birth and left to slowly open out. I was daunted – I wasn't sure I could do this on my own, but with my mother there, in the night, not just overseeing me but directing me as I grew, and changed, I knew I didn't have to, knew I wasn't really alone at all. When I took my first slow and unsteady steps in the morning, setting myself down on the kitchen bench with the table before me and the wall at my back, Fenna looked at me with simple gratitude and pleasure. It meant something to me – the evidence that my appearance had made her happy, the proof that she really wanted me, after everything.

Geert had only ever wanted one thing – to be an architect. He was intent on this as a child, and studied towards it. But something went wrong, and his entrance exams were a disaster. His performance in those exams was so woeful, he had forgone the possibility of ever repeating them. He had blown his one chance, and he never got over this. It was only long after I left home that I heard about these ambitions, and how they'd been thwarted; he never said anything to me. It was Erika who filled me in again. She didn't know the full story herself, but hinted that nerves were a problem, that Geert had suffered from crippling anxiety.

And so Geert, who had only ever wanted to be an architect, to build things on the land and to see accumulation, had ended up doing the one thing he expressly didn't want to do, the same work his forebears had done: he went to sea. Initially, like his father and grandfather, he worked on Atlantic trawlers, away for months at a stretch. He made this decision, if I've worked out the timeline correctly, almost as soon as he failed the entrance exams, as if he'd wanted to punish himself, feel the sting of the freezing salt air on skin sliced raw from the thick ropes. He did this for years, lasting longer than many, and saved a considerable amount of money. Somehow, then, inexplicably, he met Fenna.

They collided on the street, at night, falling into one another. He was intoxicated, he had come from a bar, and he was aghast, mortified at his clumsiness. They spent the next twenty-four hours together. Afterwards, he was changed. He was obsessed, he couldn't think about anything else. Overnight he became a different person. He was filled with purpose, potency. He couldn't bear to be away from Fenna. Going to sea was a desertion, a disaster. Jealousy and paranoia ate at him on the ship. He was as surprised as anyone that Fenna – dark, sophisticated, beautiful – had shown an interest in him, and he taunted himself – it had all been some dream, surely. Coming ashore, he made a rash, emotional decision, something completely unlike him: he vowed never to go back to the ship. Though Fenna was sure to come to her senses soon, and to want nothing more to do with him, he had to leave open the slim possibility they might continue to see each other, might even – he almost couldn't bear to think it – build a future together. That day, he made two phone calls, one to his port agent and the other to the woman he would spend the rest of his life with.

It's all there – the sea, the mysterious woman, the chance encounter that transforms two lives. The fact that cliché is the only way I have found to talk about it is, I think, proof of just how inexplicable and unjustifiable – and how much of a mistake – their union was.

As it turned out, Geert hadn't actually left the sea entirely. He would continue working there, indirectly, for almost four decades, until finally, in some anonymous, sparse water board office, his lungs gave out for good, and he died.

Geert's great-grandfather, on his father's side, had worked for the Dutch East India Company, the VOC, in its dying throes. His father in turn had also worked for the VOC, as had his father – or so the story goes. Johannes, Geert's father, liked to tell stories about the adventures of our forebears. I remember Fenna's blank smile as the old man went on – she didn't believe a word of it. The VOC, Johannes said, was the beginning of the modern age, the invention that made all this – he gestured

through the windows at the Rotterdam skyline – possible. Launched in 1602, it was the world's first publicly listed company. It had all the powers of the state. Its fleet of ships travelled the world, signing treaties, making enemies and allies, executing prisoners, colonising whole countries. The VOC even minted its own coins. Johannes told us great adventure stories set in distant Indian Ocean islands, of castaways and buried treasure and amazing discoveries, and my sister and I were captivated. These stories, which were so exciting and dramatic, made our own lives seem dull and unremarkable. But Johannes said none of these adventures would have been possible had the Netherlands been even slightly different. It was precisely because of the lowness of the territory and the difficulty of farming here that the VOC had been created. The Netherlands had had to reinvent itself, and became a country of the imagination. While the original Netherlands had stayed in one place, its shadow country, the VOC, travelled the world. The original country was in peril, threatened by the water all around it, always at risk of flooding, while the VOC exploited the world's oceans; as if the constant threat of drowning had inspired the country to know the oceans like no one else did.

Geert didn't like these stories; this was one of the reasons Johannes enjoyed telling them. Johannes was big, loud, a red-faced man who seemed to overflow from his armchair. To us, he was nothing like our father – Geert was wiry, exhausted, reluctant and uncommunicative. But I see things differently when I look back now. All his life Geert was afraid of his father, whose attention and approval he craved, even as he hated himself for this weakness. Little things Johannes said – jokes, comments that made us laugh – had an effect on him. You could see Geert biting his tongue, then leaving the room, Fenna's look of mild concern underneath her smile. But the last thing I ever would have suspected, back then, was that Geert feared Johannes in the same way my sister and I feared Geert himself.

It's obvious now that he didn't just suspect he'd disappointed his father, he had it proved to him again and again. First of all, there was his work. In his father's eyes Geert was weak, unable to stomach the sea. For the rest of his working life, right up until he died in one of their city offices, Geert worked for the regional water board, the *Waterschappen*, as a hydraulic engineer and advisor. As I found out later, when in a fit of predictable remorse I began researching his life, trying to piece everything together, the *Waterschappen* went all the way back to the thirteenth century, when it formed a set of semi-autonomous government bodies, holding elections and taking taxes. Johannes never said this in his stories – it would be giving Geert too much credit – but there was a clear link between the innovations of the *Waterschappen* and

the establishing of the VOC. The work it did, and continued to do, was vital. I wish I had understood this at the time, when Geert was alive.

Without the *Waterschappen*, the Netherlands couldn't exist. The country would immediately be inundated, overwhelmed by water; more than two-thirds of the land would disappear. The *Waterschappen*, with their armies of engineers, were constantly adapting and designing new ways to dam the rivers, remove excess water, and build up artificial coastlines such as the thin beach we visited regularly in my youth. The work was never finished; water management was an unlimited project. This was what I failed to understand at the time, and what I can see now was the pressure Geert carried on his shoulders every day of his long service. So when he came home in the evenings it was not in relief, but in resignation. It didn't stop. Weekends and vacations were only temporary reprieves from the task of understanding, predicting, negotiating and dispersing the water that would otherwise flood the wider Rotterdam region, an area containing more than 2 million people.

Once he had committed to this life, there was no way he could get out of it. He was angry at us, his daughters, because the financial demands of our existence bound him to it. But his temperament was also affected by what he saw at work, a world that was perilously balanced, an environment hostile to humans, with catastrophe deferred only through the surgical intervention of specialist teams. Not that he wanted gratitude for it, just some recognition of the existence of the threat.

He saw complacency everywhere, and he hated it. Last thing every evening he set our plates out at the table for the next morning's meal, like a summoning, a small prayer, as if this preparation and investment would make the new day more likely to come into being. He rose early, even on days off, insisting that we did too, typically no later than 7 a.m. I remember him standing in the garden at dawn, directly outside my room, feet crunching on the stones, and with excessive, vigorous energy, beginning to loudly clean my window. It was with surprise that, later, I wondered whether his actions, which I had always interpreted as sadistic, were really more about wanting us to enjoy ourselves, to go out and do things and experience the world. Our freedom was an affront to his confinement but work had also taught him that life could not be lived passively, it had to be seized and fought for. If he worked as hard as he did – sometimes he came in so stiff he could barely sit down, preferring to stand in doorways or with his back against the wall – then the least we could do was relish what he had given us, not waste away our days in bed.

As children, my sister and I never tried to understand his formidable temper, we simply feared it, tried as much as possible to hide from it. Perhaps the most

frightening thing of all was that it was completely unpredictable. Because we didn't know him, we didn't know what he might do. Anything we said or did, no matter how innocuous, might unleash this torrent inside him. I have never once heard anyone roar like my father did. These great blasts of noise seemed to echo in the chambers of the house for hours, for days afterwards. He would smash objects, flinging them against the wall. His energy, the vigour of his anger, was astonishing. He moved with unbelievable swiftness, bounding across the room to grab me and lift me by the collar of my shirt. These outbursts of course only happened while Fenna was at work. It was as if all throughout her silences his resentment and anger were gathering, and he waited, brooding, for the chance to let it out.

Helena, being three years younger than me, was spared the worst of it. Geert frequently hit both of us, hard slaps that we tried to cower from and palm away, protecting our heads, inadvertently frustrating and so provoking him even more. But worst of all were the sustained beatings that lasted several minutes. As far as I know, Helena was never subjected to these. I don't know why; perhaps Geert satisfied his appetite with the violence he committed on me. Perhaps Helena simply didn't provoke him in the way I did. Or perhaps something in the way that I reacted to my father's beatings inhibited him from carrying out the same attacks on his youngest daughter.

I never spoke about this to Fenna, but she must have been aware of it. The migraines, as well as forcing a general silence in the house, a silence that prohibited all forms of communication, and thus ruling out the possibility of me telling her the story, may also have been a symptom of her own fear and sense of helplessness when faced with Geert's rage. Though he never laid a finger on our mother, the threat was implicit, clear in the bruises on my arms, neck and face. I had been thrown repeatedly against a wall. The worse the beatings got, the more withdrawn Fenna became. She spent less time at home, working longer and longer hours at the university, retreating into a purer world of symbols, logic, timeless truth. Ironically, given what would happen later, I never understood this, and I blamed Fenna for not helping us. For all I know, maybe she did try to intervene, and Geert's response was so explosive that it immediately ruled out further efforts. The long nights where she wordlessly, but not silently, nursed me, soothing my stirring limbs, were her way of caring for me, protecting me, retrieving me.

One of the few things I remember our mother saying about Geert's qualities was the same thing that to Helena and me was a source of such terror: he was impossible to predict. She smiled as she said this, her voice softening, her eyes straining

towards some memory from the deep past: ‘Whatever he does, it is always a surprise.’

It seemed particularly tragic, though probably not all that unusual, that what had once defined him positively had gone on to be the essence of all that was worst in him. Like all children, I’ve never been able to convincingly imagine the lives of my parents before me, a period of innocence, with fewer obligations and commitments, and I’ve certainly never believed that Geert’s nature could ever have been a source of delight, of enchantment. Geert forever showering our mother with kindnesses, surprise gifts, impromptu weekends away. Geert, put into a novel situation – meeting Fenna’s extended family, say, or her work colleagues; difficult circumstances for anyone, and certainly for a quiet and withdrawn man like him – and surprising her, astonishing her, showing further reserves of his personality, new sides to his character, so that she can fall in love with him all over again. Could that really be true? His total unpredictability, in this early stage, veered close to a kind of endlessness, an unlimited, uncontainable personality. He could do anything at all. The potential for violence may have been there all along, ready to be triggered by a special set of circumstances – fatherhood – but otherwise not only lying dormant, but actually driving the happiness he created and the good things that he did. Maybe that explained why Fenna could never confront him, could never challenge him about the violence: if she condemned him then she also condemned all the happiness they’d enjoyed, and however much she regretted the pain he caused us – a pain she clearly experienced herself, in her migraines – she just couldn’t bring herself in all conscience to do this.

One of the harder things, for Geert, in his later decades at the *Waterschappen*, was how much everything had changed, particularly in the level of automation introduced into the work, something he never fully trusted. Prediction was fundamental – forecasting annual water levels, gauging the severity of an upcoming storm, deciding in advance whether to call for the evacuation of an area – but the further we moved into the twenty-first century, the harder this became. Temperature fluctuated abnormally, the seasons overlapped dramatically, and flooding became an issue throughout the year. Months’ worth of rain fell in a single day. Enormous breakers hurled themselves against the sea walls and the bulwarks and the artificial coastal barriers that Geert and his colleagues had erected. What had always been a difficult job quickly became impossible. The rising temperatures led to a series of river spills, creating a permanent marshland. Mosquitoes arrived, thriving in the new

wetlands and introducing the first strains of malaria in the region in more than seventy years. Geert, at this stage, was close to breaking, completely overwhelmed, at a loss either to explain or to keep up with the changes. Reality had defeated him, completely outstripping the limits of his imagination. When he arrived home in the evening he was slow, ponderous, almost shocked. He had no idea what the next day would bring; he could no longer picture what would happen. It must have terrified him. The whole ecosystem was changing and he couldn't keep up. The smallest detail could effect the wildest change. Mosquitoes would colonise the landscape. Excess salt inland would ruin agriculture. But this was only the beginning. When he looked outside, I thought, he could see only the end of the world.

Against his wishes, new automated storm barriers were installed, an artificially intelligent system that communicated with satellite data and erected defences whenever flooding threatened. The lives of over 2 million people depended on this inscrutable intelligence, and at this, Geert finally broke. He had been left behind. His retirement was coming up and there was no question of him continuing, even before the illness. His whole life was an effort to keep the sea at bay, and when he relapsed, and his lungs gave out, I imagined – or hoped – that there was the tiniest, briefest moment of calm and acceptance at the end, his last conscious moments, as he knew he didn't have to struggle any longer.

As a frustrated architect, he always considered himself and his achievements a disappointment, but the irony – and I wish he could have seen this – was that through his work he constantly built and rebuilt the country, hour after hour, day after day. Without the passion, ingenuity, and courage of people like Geert, our country couldn't have existed. He was architect and archaeologist, planning and excavating, implementing systems to dredge and divert water, digging up the country, bringing it out into the open. There were vast, highly elaborate artificial coastlines, peninsulas built from imported sand, tall embankments that would be naturally dispersed as the water shifted, disseminating the sand evenly across the land edge. There were concrete and steel megastructures embedded in the coast, shifting it and raising it as necessary, new superficial landscapes that were printed from factories.

I expressed none of this while Geert was alive. Perhaps I didn't feel he deserved to hear it from me. But sometimes I still wonder whether I could have said something, maybe not in so many words, but still something, a gesture, a signal of my appreciation for what he'd achieved, telling him, as if he needed to hear it, that it had been worth it, the forty-year battle; that it hadn't been for nothing.

On the morning of the funeral, Fenna dug out a photo of me aged six or seven, standing with Geert, both of us grinning and wearing waders. She said that when I was young, before I started school, I followed him everywhere, and frequently went with him to work. I had forgotten all about it. I had always been fascinated by islands, and I recalled now Geert telling me how the Netherlands, as a military tactic, when the country was at risk of invasion, would release the gates and barriers, flooding the country and transforming it into an archipelago, the water level too high to wade through but too low to sail in, making it impervious to attack – using the country's vulnerability as defensive strategy, as strength.

At the funeral, I was the only member of our immediate family who helped carry the casket. I was the only one tall enough. I had always been ashamed of my height; I wanted to be more petite, more like my sister, not long and angular like this. I could carry my father because I was more like him than I realised; I had been carrying a part of him all along.

TWO

Our mother wasn't expressive when Geert died. She seemed more surprised than upset, intrigued almost by this changed world, the suddenly more spacious house and garden, the smaller meals, the softer scents and flavours, the new feel of the mattress, the absence of sounds she had become accustomed to, such as the almost permanent flow of folk music from the radio into the kitchen and garden. Helena and I stayed with her for as long as we could, but she neither wanted nor needed us around. The morning after the funeral she appeared in the kitchen with her work things and left on her bicycle just as she would on any other day. We lay around the house redundantly, drinking, sorting through Geert's things, Helena seeing to the practicalities, contacting the lawyers, while I veered from appalling, cheap nostalgia – picking up Geert's boots, seeing if they fitted me, lifting up his sweaters and being drawn to the loop of the neck – and blind fury, remembering the worst of it. Helena didn't engage with my excesses, and after three days, after Fenna insisted she was OK, and only after Erika promised to come round regularly and check on her, we left our mother alone in the house.

Helena left as quickly as she could, first to New York then to Jakarta, while I stayed closer to home, studying marine ecology and microbiology in Rotterdam and at the Max Planck Institute in Bremen. Inheriting our mother's talent for mathematics, Helena ended up in financial law, working for a series of banks and insurance adjustment companies. It was Helena herself who pointed out something I couldn't see: if she followed Fenna, then my work followed Geert. This shocked me – both the evidence of inheritance and the fact I hadn't seen it.

Much of my childhood remains blank, my earliest memories beginning around five or six years old. It always alarms me to hear others recalling details from infancy; I can't imagine a memory and a language so close to non-existence. I learned to speak late, as I neared school age, something that drew concern from Fenna at the time. I've never asked Helena about her first memories, but I wouldn't be surprised if her experience was completely different to mine. Helena and I are very different people, three years and two oceans being the least of what separates us. The first thing that comes to mind when I picture her is the expression: mouth open in a small 'o', stoic yet innocent. I see her like a cartoon fawn – small, meek, in need of protection. It's an idealised picture, typical of my lack of understanding