

A Stone Woman  
By A. S. Byatt

At first she did not think of stones. Grief made her insubstantial to herself; she felt as if she were flitting lightly from room to room like a moth. The apartment seemed constantly twilit, although it must, she knew, have gone through the usual sequences of sun and shadow over the days and weeks since her mother had died. Her mother—a strong, bright woman—had liked to live among shades of mole and dove. Her mother’s hair had shone silver and ivory. Her eyes had faded from cornflower to forget-me-not. Ines had found her dead one morning, her bloodless fingers resting on an open book, her parchment eyelids down, as though she dozed, a wry grimace on her fine lips, as though she had tasted something not quite nice. She quickly lost this lifelikeness, and became waxy and peaked. Ines, who had been the younger woman, became the old woman in an instant.

She busied herself with her work as a researcher for a major etymological dictionary, and she tidied love away. She packed it into plastic sacks—creamy silks and floating lawns, velvet and muslin, lavender crêpe de chine, beads of pearl and garnet. People had thought she was a dutiful daughter. They could not imagine two intelligent women who simply understood and loved each other. She drew the blinds because the light hurt her eyes. Her inner eye observed the final things over and over. White face on white pillow among white hair. Colorless skin on lifeless fingers. Flesh of my flesh, flesh of her flesh. The efficient rage of consuming fire, the handfuls of fawn ash, which she had scattered, as she had promised, in the hurrying foam of a Yorkshire beck.

She went through the motions, hoping to become accustomed to solitude and silence. Then one morning pain struck her like a sudden beak, tearing at her gut. She caught her breath and sat down, waiting for it to pass. It did not pass. It strengthened, blow on blow. She rolled on her bed, dishevelled and sweating. She heard the creature moaning. She tried to telephone the doctor, but the thing shrieked raucously into the mouthpiece, and this saved her, for they sent an ambulance, which took the screaming thing to a hospital, as it would not have taken a polite old woman. Later, they told her she had had at most four hours to live. Her gut had been twisted and gangrenous. She lay quietly in a hospital bed in a curtained room. Numb and bandaged, she drifted in and out of blessed sleep.

The surgeon came and went, lifting her dressings, studying the sutures, prodding the walls of her belly with strong fingers. Ines was a courteous and shamefast woman. She did not want to see her own sliced skin and muscle. She thanked him for her life, unable to summon much warmth in her voice. What was her life now, to thank anyone for?

The anesthetist came in to discuss what palliatives she might be allowed to take home with her. He said, “I expect you’ve noticed that there’s no sensation around the incision. That’s quite normal. The nerves take time to join again, and some may not do so.” He, too, touched the sewed-up lips of the hole, and she felt that she did not feel, and then felt the ghost of a thrill, like fine wires shooting out across her skin. The anesthetist said, “I see he managed to construct some sort of navel. People feel odd, we’ve found, if they haven’t got a navel.” She murmured something. “Look,” he said, “it’s a work of art.”

So she looked, since she would be going home and would now have to attend to the thing herself.

The wound was livid and ridged and ran the length of her white front, from the ribs to the hidden places below. Where she had been soft and flat, she was all plumpings and hollows, like an old cushion. And where her navel had been, like a button caught in a seam at an angle, was an asymmetric whorl with a

little sill of skin. Ines thought of her lost navel, of the umbilical cord that had been a part of her and of her mother. Her face creased into sorrow; her eyes were hot with tears. The anesthetist misinterpreted them, and assured her that it would look much less angry and lumpy after a month or two, and if it did not it could easily be dealt with by a good plastic surgeon. Ines thanked him, and closed her eyes. There was no one to see her, she said, it didn't matter what she looked like. The anesthetist, who had chosen his profession because he didn't like people's feelings and preferred silence to speech, offered her what she wanted, a painkiller. She drifted into cloud as he closed the door.

Their flat, now her flat, was on the second floor of a nineteenth-century house in a narrow city square. The stairs were steep. The taxi-driver who brought her home left her, with her bag, on the doorstep. She toiled slowly upward. There was no need to hurry. She had time, and more time.

She had been a good cook—she thought of herself now in the past tense—and had made delicious little meals for her mother and herself, light pea soups, sole with mushrooms, vanilla soufflés. Now she nibbled at cheese and crusts like a frugal mouse. The life had gone out of the furnishings. The polish was dulled and she left it like that: she made her bed with one crumpled pull.

She stared out of the window, for minutes that seemed like hours, and hours that seemed like minutes. She liked to see the dark spread through the square, because it meant that bedtime was not far away.

The day came when the dressings could, should, be dispensed with. She had been avoiding her body, simply wiping her face and under her arms with a damp facecloth. She decided to have a bath. Their bathtub was old and deep and narrow, with imposing brass taps and a heavy coil of shower-hosing. There was a wide wooden bath rack across it, which still held, she saw now, her mother's private things—a loofah, a sponge, a pumice stone.

The warmth of the water was nice. A few tense sinews relaxed. Time went into one of its slow phases. She sat and stared at the things on the rack. Loofah, sponge, pumice. A fibrous tube, a soft mess of holes, a shaped gray stone. She considered the differences between the three, all essentially solids with holes in them. The loofah was stringy and matted, the sponge was branching and vacuous, the pumice was riddled with needle holes. Biscuit-colored, bleached khaki, shadow gray. Colorless colors, shapeless shapes. The loofah and the sponge were the dried-out bodies, the skeletons, of living things. She picked up the pumice, a light stone teardrop, shaped to the palm of a hand. She felt its paradoxical lightness, then dropped it into the water, where it floated. She did not know how long she sat there. The water cooled. When she lifted herself, awkwardly, through the surface film, the pumice chinked against her flesh. It was an odd little sound, like a knock on metal. She put the pumice back on the rack, and touched her puckered wound with nervy fingers. Supposing something had been left in there? A clamp, a forceps, a needle? Not exactly looking, she explored her reconstructed navel with a fingertip. She felt a certain glossy hardness where the healing was going on.

The next thing she noticed was a spangling of what seemed like glinting red dust, or ground glass, in the folds of her dressing gown and her discarded underwear. It was a dull red, like dried blood. At the same time, she noticed that the threads of her underwear appeared to be catching, here and there, on the healing scars. As the phenomenon grew more pronounced, she touched the area tentatively, over the cotton of her knickers. Her fingers felt whorls and ridges, even sharp edges. Each day the bumps and sharpness, far from receding, grew bulkier. One evening, in the unlit twilight, she finally found the nerve to undress and tuck in her chin to stare down at herself. What she saw was a raised shape, like a starfish, like the whirling arms of a nebula. It was the color—or a color—of raw flesh, like an open whip wound or a knife slash. It trembled, because she was trembling, but it was cold to the touch, as

cold and hard as glass or stone. From the star-arms, red dust wafted like glamour. She covered herself hastily, as though what was not seen might disappear.

The next day, it felt bigger. The day after, she looked again, in the half-light, and saw that the mark was spreading. It had pushed out ruddy veins into the tired white flesh, threading sponge with crystal. It winked. It was many reds, from ochre to scarlet, from garnet to cinnabar. She was half tempted to insert a fingernail under the veins and chip them off.

She thought of it as “the blemish.” It extended itself—not evenly, but in fits and starts, around her waist, like a shingly girdle pushing long fibrous fingers down toward her groin, thrusting out cysts and gritty coruscations above her pubic hair. There were puckered weals where flesh met what appeared to be stone. What was stone—what else was it?

One day, she found a cluster of greenish-white crystals sprouting in her armpit. These she tried to prize away, and failed. They were attached deep within; she felt their stony roots stirring under the skin surface, pulling at her muscles. Jagged flakes of silica and nodes of basalt pushed her breasts upward and flourished under the fall of flesh, making her clothes crackle and rustle. Slowly, slowly, day by quick day, her torso was wrapped in a stony encrustation, like a corselet. She could feel that under the stones her compressed inwards were still fluid and soft, responsive to pain and pressure.

She was surprised at the fatalism with which she had resigned herself to her transformation. It was as though her thoughts and feelings, too, had slowed to stone-speed, nerveless and stolid. There were, increasingly, days when curiosity jostled her horror. One day, one of the blue veins on her inner thigh erupted into a line of rubious spinels, and she thought of jewels before she thought of pustules.

Her legs now chinked together when she moved. The first apparition of the stony crust outside her clothing was strange and beautiful. She observed its beginnings in the mirror one morning, while brushing her hair: a necklace of veiled swellings above her collarbone, which broke slowly through the skin like eyes from closed lids, and became opal—fire opal, black opal, geyselite, and hydrophane, full of watery light. She found herself preening in the mirror.

She dismissed, with no real hesitation, the idea of consulting the surgeon, or any other doctor. It was, of course, theoretically possible that she was deluded, that the winking gemstones and heaped flakes of her new crust were feverish sparks of her anesthetized brain and grieving spirit. But she didn't think so—she refuted herself, as Dr. Johnson had refuted Bishop Berkeley, by tapping on stone and hearing the scrape and chink of stone responding. No, what was happening was, it appeared, a unique transformation. She assumed that it would end with the petrification of her vital functions. A time would come when she wouldn't be able to see, or move, or feed herself (which might not matter). But, for the moment, she had grown no more than a carapace. Her joints obeyed her, light went from retina to brain, her budded tongue tasted the food that she still ate.

In her mother's bedroom there was a cheval glass, the only full-length mirror in the house. At the end of a day's staring she would suddenly catch sight of a new shimmer of labradorite, six inches long and diamond-shaped, arrived imperceptibly almost, beneath her buttocks where her gaze had not rested.

She saw dikes of dolerites, in graduated sills, now invading her inner arms. But it took weeks of patient watching before, by dint of glancing in rapid saccades, she surprised a bubble of rosy barite crystals breaking through a vein of fluorspar, and opening into the form known as a desert rose, bunched with the ore flowers of blue john. Her metamorphosis obeyed no known laws of physics or chemistry:

ultramafic black rocks and ghostly Iceland spar formed in succession and clung together.

One dark Sunday, when the midday sky was thick and gray as granite, when sullen thunder rumbled and the odd flash of lightning made human stomachs queasy, Ines was overcome with a need to be out in the weather. She put on wide trousers and a tunic, and over them a shapeless hooded raincoat. She pushed her knobby feet into fur boots, and her clay-pale hands, with their veins of azurmalachite, into sheepskin mittens, and set off down the stairs and into the street.

She had wondered how her tendons and musculature would function. She thought she could feel the roll of polished stone in stony cup as she moved her pelvis and hips, raised her knees, and swung her rigid arms. There was a delicious smoothness to these motions, a surprise after the accommodations she was used to making for the crumbling calcium of arthritic joints. She strode along, aimlessly at first, trying to get away from people. She noticed that her sense of smell had grown sharper. She could smell the rain in the thick cloud blanket. She could smell the sulfur dioxide in the car exhausts and the rainbow-colored minerals in puddles of petrol. These scents were pleasurable. She came to the remains of a street market, and was assailed by the stink of organic decay, deliquescent fruit mush, rotting cabbage, old burned oil on greasy newspapers. She strode past all this, retching a little, feeling acid bile churning in a stomach sac made by now of what?

She came to a park—a tamed, urban park, with rose beds and rubbish bins, doggy lavatories and a concrete fountain. The water fell on the cement with a new, intricate music. The smell of a rain squall blew away the wafting warmth of dog shit. She pulled off her hood. Her cheeks were beginning to sprout silica flakes and dendrite fibres, but from a distance she just looked, she thought, like a lumpy old woman. There were droplets of alabaster and peridot clustering in her gray hair like the eggs of some mythic stony louse. She shook her hair free and turned her face up to the branches and the clouds as the rain began. Big drops splashed on her sharp nose; she licked them from stiffening lips between crystalline teeth, with a still-flexible tongue tip, and tasted skywater, mineral and delicious. The lightning came in sheets of metal sheen. The thunder crashed in the sky, and the surface of the woman crackled and creaked in sympathy.

She thought, I need to find a place where I can stand when I am completely solid. I should find a place outside, in the weather.

When would she be, so to speak, dead? When her plump flesh heart stopped pumping the blue blood along the veins of her shifting shape? When the gray and clammy matter of her brain became limestone or graphite? When her brain stem became a column of rutiled quartz? When her eyes became—what? She was inclined to believe that her watching eyes would be the last thing. The phrase came into her head: Those are pearls that were his eyes. A song of grief made fantastic by a sea change. Would her eyes cloud over and become pearls? Pearls were interesting. They were a substance in which the organic met the inorganic, like moss agate.

She had had the idea that the mineral world was one of perfect, inanimate forms, with an unchanging mathematical order of crystals and molecules beneath its sprouts and flows and branches. In the beginning, she had thought of her own transfiguration as something profoundly unnatural, a move from a world of warm change and decay to a world of cold permanence. But as she became mineral, and looked into the idea of minerals, she saw that there were reciprocities, both physical and figurative.

The minds of stone-lovers had colonized stones with organic metaphors, like lichens clinging to them with golden or gray-green florid stains. Words came from flesh and hair and plants. Reniform,

mammillated, botryoidal, dendrite, hematite. Carnelian is from “carnal.” Serpentine and lizardite are stone reptiles; phyllite is leafy green. The earth itself is made in part of bones, shells, and diatoms. Ines was returning to it in a form quite different from her mother’s fiery ash. She preferred the parts of her body that were now volcanic glasses, not bony chalk: chabazite, from the Greek for hailstone; obsidian, which, like analcime and garnet, has the perfect icositetrahedral shape.

She visited city squares, and stood experimentally by the rims of fountains and in the entrances of grottoes. She had read of the hidden wildernesses of nineteenth-century graveyards, and it came to her that there, among weeping angels and grieving cherubs, she might find a quiet resting place. So, on a gray day in late winter, she set out on foot, hooded and booted, with her new, indefatigable rolling pace, marble joint in marble socket. As specks of half rain and half snow spat in the fitful wind, she strode in through a wrought-iron gate in a high wall.

What she saw was a flat stony city, house after house under humped ripples of earth, marked by flat stones, standing stones, canted stones, fallen stones, soot-stained, dropping-stained, scum-stained, crumbled, carved, repeating, repeating. She walked along the silent pathways, past dripping yews and leafless birches and speckled laurels, looking for stone women. They stood there—or, occasionally, lay fallen there—on the rich earth. There were many of them, but they resembled one another with more than a family resemblance. There were the sweetly regretful lady angels, one arm pointing upward, one turned down to scatter an arrested fall of stony flowers. There were the child angels, wearing simple embroidered stone tunics over chubby stone knees, also holding drooping flowers. Some busy mason had turned them out to order, one after the other, their sweetly arched lips and apple cheeks well-practiced tricks of the trade. There was no other living person in that place, though there was a great deal of energetic organic life—long, snaking brambles thrust between the stones for a place in the light; tombstones and angels alike wore bushy coats of gripping ivy.

Ines looked at the stone people. Several had lost their hands, and lifted blind stumps to the gray air. These were less upsetting than those who were returning to formlessness, whose fists seemed rotted by leprosy. Someone had come and sliced the heads from the necks of several cherubs—it had been done recently; the severed edges were still an even white. The stony representations of floating things—feathered wings, blossoms, and petals—made Ines feel queasy, for they were inert and weighed down; they were pulled toward the earth and what was under it.

Around the edges of the vast field of stones, within the spiky confines of the wall, was a shrubbery, with narrow paths and a few stone benches and compost bins. As she went into the bushes, she heard a sound, the chink of hammer on stone. She stood still. She heard it again. Thinking to surprise a vandal, she turned a corner and came upon a rough group of huts and a stack of stony rubble.

One of the huts was a long open shelter, wooden-walled and tile-roofed. It contained a trestle table, behind which a man was working with a stonemason’s hammer and chisel. He was a big muscular man, with a curly golden beard, tanned skin, and huge hands. Behind him stood a gaggle of stone women, in various states of disrepair—lipless, fingerless, green-stained, soot-streaked. He made a gesture as if to cover up what he was doing, which appeared, from the milky sheen of the marble, to be new work, rather than restoration.

Ines sidled up. She had almost given up speech, for her voice scratched and whistled oddly in her petrifying larynx. She shopped with gestures, as though she were an Eastern woman, robed and veiled, too timid, or linguistically inept, to ask about things. The stonecutter looked up at her, then down at his work, and made one or two intent little chips at it. Ines felt the sharp blows in her own body. He looked

across at her. She whispered—whispering was still possible and normal—that she would like to see what he was making. He shrugged, and then stood aside, so that she could look. What she saw was a loose-limbed child lying on a large carved cushion, its arms flung out, its legs at unexpected angles, its hair dragged across its smooth forehead, its eyes closed in sleep. No, Ines saw, not sleep. This child was a dead child; its limbs were relaxed in death. Because it was dead, its form intimated painfully that it had once been alive. Ines said what came into her stone head.

“No one will want that on any kind of monument. It’s dead.”

The stonecutter did not speak.

“They write on their stones,” Ines said. “ ‘He fell asleep on such a day,’ ‘She is sleeping.’ It’s not sleep.”

“I am making this for myself,” he said. “I do repair work here—it is a living. But I do my own work also.” His voice was large and warm. He said, “Are you looking for any person’s grave here? Or perhaps visiting—”

Ines laughed. The sound was pebbly. She said, “No, I am thinking about my own resting place. I have problems.”

He offered her a seat, which she refused, and a plastic cup of coffee from a thermos, which she accepted, though she was not thirsty, to oil her voice and to make an excuse for lingering. She whispered that she would like to see more of his work, of his own work.

“I am interested in stonework,” she said. “Maybe you can make me a monument.”

As if in answer to this, he brought out from under his bench various wrapped objects: a heavy sphere, a pyramid, a bag of small rattling things. He moved slowly and deliberately, laying out before her a stone angel head, a collection of hands and feet, large and small. All had originally been the typical funereal carvings of the place. But he had pierced and fretted and embellished them with forms of life that were alien and contradictory yet part of them. Fingers became prisms and serpents; minuscule faces peered between toes; and the tiny bodies of mice or marmosets gripped ankles or lay around wrists like Celtic dragons. He said, “I am not supposed to appropriate things that belong here. But I take the lost ones—I look for the life in them.”

“Pygmalion.”

“Hardly. You like them?”

“Like is the wrong word. They are alive.”

He laughed. “Stones are alive where I come from.”

“Where?”

“I am an Icelander. I work here in the winter, and go home in the summer, when the nights are bright. I show my work—my own work—in Iceland in the summer.”

She wondered dully where she would be when he was in Iceland in the summer.

He said, "If you like, I will give you something. A small thing, and, if you like to live with it, I will perhaps make you that monument."

He held out to her a carved hand, which contained a basilisk and two mussel shells. When she took it from him, it chinked, stone on stone, against her awkward fingers. He heard the sound, and took hold of her knobby wrist through her garments.

"I must go now."

"No, wait, wait," he said.

But she pulled away, and hurried in the dusk toward the iron gate.

That evening, she understood that she might have been wrong about her immediate fate. She put the stone hand on her desk and went into the kitchen to make herself some bread and cheese. She was trembling with exertion and emotion, with fear of stony enclosure and complicated anxiety about the Iclander. As she struggled to cut the soft loaf, the bread knife slipped and sliced into her stone hand, between finger and thumb. She felt pain, which surprised her, and saw a spurt of hot blood from the wound whose depth she could not gauge. She watched the thick liquid run down the back of her hand, onto the bread, onto the table. It was ruddy-gold, dripping in long glassy strings, and where it touched the bread the bread went up in smoke, and where it touched the table it hissed and smoked and bored its hot way through the wood, then trickled, a duller red now, onto the plastic floor, which it singed in amber circles. Her veins were full of molten lava. She put out the tiny fires and threw away the burned bread. She thought, I am not just going to stand in the rain and grow moss. I may erupt. She felt panic. To turn to stone is a figure, however fantastic, for death. But to become molten lava, to contain a furnace?

She went back the next day to the graveyard. It was a pale-blue wintry day, with pewter storm clouds gathering. There was the Iclander, turning a glinting sphere in his hand and squinting at it. He nodded amiably in her direction.

She said, "I want to show you something."

He looked up.

She said, "If anyone can bear to look, perhaps you can."

He nodded.

She began to undo her fastenings, pulling down zips, unhooking the hood under her chin, shaking free her musical crystalline hair, shrugging her monumental arms out of their bulky sleeves. He stared intently. She stripped off shirt and jogging pants, trainers and vest, her mother's silken knickers. She stood in front of him in her roughly gleaming patchwork. She looked out of her cavernous eye sockets through salty eyes at the man, whose blue eyes considered her grotesque transformation. He looked.

She croaked, "Have you ever seen such a thing?"

“Never,” he said. “Never.”

Hot liquid rose to the sills of her eyes and clattered in pearly drops on her ruddy hematite cheeks. He stared.

She thought, He is a man, and he sees me as I am, a monster.

“Beautiful,” he said. “Grown, not crafted.”

“You said that the stones in your country were alive. I thought you might understand what has happened to me. I do not need a monument. I have grown into one.”

“I have heard of such things. In Iceland, we are matter-of-fact about the world of invisible beings. We make gates in the rocks for elves to come and go. We know that stones have their own energies. Iceland is a young country, a restless country—in our land the earth’s mantle is still being changed at great speed. We live like lichens, clinging to standing stones and rolling stones and heaving stones and rattling stones and flying stones. Our tales are full of striding stone women. We have not entirely given up the hope of seeing them. But I did not expect to meet one here, in this dead place.”

She told him how she had supposed that to be petrified was to be motionless. “I was looking for a place to rest,” she said. She told him about the spurt of lava from her hand and showed him the black scar, fringed with a rime of new crystals.

“I think now that Iceland is where I should go, to find somewhere to . . . stand, or stay.”

“Wait for the spring,” he said, “and I will take you there. We have endless nights in the winter, and snowstorms, and the roads are impassable. In summer we have—briefly—endless days.”

“Maybe it will be over—maybe I shall be . . . finished before the spring.”

“I do not think so. But we will watch over it. Turn around and let me see your back.”

“I have the sense that the crust is constantly thickening.”

“There is an idea—for a sculptor—in every inch of it,” he said.

He said that his name was Thorsteinn Hallmundursson. Over the winter and into the early spring, they constructed a friendship. Ines allowed Thorsteinn to study her ridges and clefts. He showed her samples of new stones as they sprouted in and on her body. The two she loved most were labradorite and fantomkvarter. Labradorite is dark blue, soft black, full of gleaming lights, like the aurora borealis embedded in hardness. In fantomkvarter a shadowy crystal contains other shadowy crystals, growing at angles in its transparent depths. Thorsteinn chipped and polished to bring out the lights and the angles, and in the end, as she came to trust him completely, Ines took pleasure in allowing him to decorate her gnarled fingers, to smooth the plane of her shin, to reveal the hidden lights under the polished skin of her breasts.

She did not come to love the graveyard, but familiarity made her see it differently. It was a city graveyard, on which two centuries of soot had fallen. Every day fat pigeons gathered on the roof of Thorsteinn’s shelter, catching the pale sunlight on their burnished feathers, mole gray, dove gray,



sealskin gray. Every day fat squirrels lolloped busily from bush to bush, their gray tails and faces tinged with ginger, their strong little claws gripping. There were magpies, and strutting crows. There was thick bright moss moving swiftly (for moss) over the stones and their carved names. Thorsteinn said that he did not like to clean it away; it was beautiful. In Iceland, he would show her mosses and lichens she could never have dreamed of.

Winter became spring. The dead leaves turned dark with rain, grass pushed through them, then crocuses and snowdrops, followed by self-spread bluebells and an uncontrollable carpet of celandines—pale-gold flowers with flat green leaves, which ran over everything, headstones and gravel, bottle-green marble chips on recently dug graves, Thorsteinn's heap of rubble. They lasted a brief time, and then the gold faded to silver, and the silver became white, transparent, a brief ghostly lace of fine veins, and then a fallen mulch of mold, inhabited by pushy tendrils and the creamy nodes of rhizomes.

The death of the celandines seemed to be the signal for departure. They had discussed how this should be done. Ines had assumed that they would fly to Reykjavík, but when she came to contemplate such a journey she saw that it was impossible. Not only could she not fold her new body into the small space of a canvas bucket seat, which would likely not bear her weight. She could never pass through the security checks at the airport. If she was asked to pull back her hood, the airport staff would run screaming. Or shoot her. She did not know if she could now be killed by a bullet.

Thorsteinn said that they could go by sea.

They booked passage on a small trading boat. In the swell of the Atlantic, the ship nosed its way between great green-and-white walls of travelling water, in a fine salt spray. The sky changed and changed, opal and gunmetal, grass green and crimson, mussel blue and velvet black, scattered with wild starshine. Thorsteinn and Ines stood on deck whenever they could, and looked out ahead of them. Ines did not look back. She tasted the salt on her black-veined tongue, and thought of the Biblical woman who had become a pillar of salt when she looked back. She was no pillar. She was heaving and restless like the sea. When she thought of her past life, it was vague in her new mind, like cobwebs. Her mother was now flying dust in air, motes of bonemeal settling on the foam flowers in the beck where Ines had scattered her.

She opened her tent of garments to the driving wind and wet. She had found her feet easily and did not feel seasick. Thorsteinn rode the deck beside her like a lion or a warhorse, smiling through his beard.

She was interested in his human flesh. She found in herself a sprouting desire to take a bite out of him, his cheek or his neck, out of a mixture of affection and curiosity to see what the sensation would be like. She resisted the impulse easily enough, though she licked her teeth—razor-sharp flinty incisors, grim granite molars. She thought human thoughts and stone thoughts. The latter were slow, patchily colored, textured and extreme, both hot and cold.

Her first sight of Iceland was the jagged peaks of the eastern fjords. Thorsteinn packed the two of them into a high rugged trucklike car, and they drove south, along the wild coast. They were under the influence—literally—of the great glacier Vatnajökull, the largest in Europe, Thorsteinn said, sitting easily at the wheel. They glimpsed the sheen of it from mountain passes, and then, as they came to the flatlands of the south, they saw the first glacial tongues pouring down into the plains, white and shining above the green marshes. Thorsteinn alternated between a steady silence and a kind of incantatory recitation of history, geography, time before history, myth. His country appeared to her old, when she first saw it, a primal chaos of ice, stone silt, black sand, gold mud. His stories went back easily to the

first and second centuries, as though they were yesterday, and his own ancestors figured in tales of enmity and banishment as if they were uncles and kinsmen who had sat down to eat with him last year. And yet the striking thing, the decisive thing, about this landscape was that it was geologically young. The whole south coast of Iceland is still being changed—in a decade, in the twinkling of an eye—by volcanic eruptions that pour red-hot magma from mountain ridges, or spout up, boiling from under the thick-ribbed ice.

They travelled on, over the great black plain of Myrdalssandur. This, Thorsteinn said, was the work of a volcano, Katla, which had erupted under a glacier, Myrdalsjökull. There is a troll-woman connected to this volcano, he told her. She was called Katla, and she was said to have hidden a kettle of molten gold, which could be seen by human eyes on one day of the year only. But those who set out to find it were troubled by false visions and strange sights—burning homesteads, slaughtered livestock—and turned back in panic. Katla was the owner of a pair of magic breeches, which made her a very fleet runner. They were said to be made from human skin.

“Was she a stone woman?” Ines asked.

Thorsteinn said that there was no mention of her being stone. There were trolls in Iceland who turned to stone if the sun hit them. But by no means were all of that kind. There were trolls, he said, who slept for centuries among the stones of the desert, or along the riverbeds, then stirred with an earthquake, or an eruption, into new life. “Personally,” Thorsteinn said, “I do not think you are a troll. I think you are a metamorphosis.”

They came to Reykjavík, the smoky harbor. Ines was uneasy, even in this small city. Something was to happen, and it was not here, not among humans. She asked where they were going, and he said that they were going to his summer house, where he would work.

“And I?” she said, grumbling.

Thorsteinn stared at her, assessing and unsmiling. “I don’t know,” he said. “Neither of us can know.”

They drove east, heading for the valley of Thórsmörk, Thor’s Forest, which lay inaccessibly between three glaciers, two deep rivers, and a string of dark mountains. They crossed torrents, and ground along the dirt road. Thorsteinn’s summer house was built into a hillside, walled and roofed with turf. It was roughly furnished, with a stone sink through which springwater ran from a channelled pipe in the hillside. The grassy space in front of the house looked something between a chaos of boulders and a half-formed stone circle. Ines came to see that all the stones, from the vast and cow-size to clusters of pebbles and polished singletons, were works in progress, or potential works, or works completed. They were both carved and decorated. A face peered from under a crusty overhang, one-eyed, fanged, leering. A boulder displayed a perfectly polished pair of youthful breasts, glistening in circles of golden lichen. A hunched stone woman had a fantastic garden of brilliant moss spilling from her lap and over her thighs. On closer inspection, Ines saw that jewels had been placed in crevices, and sharpened pins like medieval cloak brooches had been inserted in holes threaded in the stone surface. A dwarfish stone had tiny, carved gold hands where its ears should have been.

There could be several climates in a day—bright sun, gathering storm, snowfall, great coils and blasts of wind so violent that even Thorsteinn could not stand up, though the stone woman found herself taking pleasure in standing against the turbulent air, as a surfer rides a wave. There were flowers in the early summer—saxifrages and stonecrops, lady’s bedstraw, and a profusion of golden angelica. They

walked out into soft gray carpets of *Cetraria islandica*, the lichen that is known as Iceland moss. Reindeer food, human food, possible cancer cure, Thorsteinn said.

Over a fireside supper of smoked lamb and scrambled eggs, he asked her whether she would sit for him. His face was fiery in the midnight sun. She had not looked at herself since they'd left England. She said she did not know if she differed any longer from the stones he had collected. Maybe he should simply decorate her, carve into her, when . . . She tore at the tasty lamb with her sharp teeth. She had an overwhelming need for meat, which she did not acknowledge. She ground the fibres in the mill of her jaws. She said she would be happy to do what she could.

Time, too, was paradoxical in Iceland. Within the fleeting island of the summer, the daylight was sempiternal; there was no nightfall, only the endless shifts in the color of the sky—trout-dappled, mackerel-shot, turquoise, sapphire, peridot, hot transparent red, and then, in winter, flowing with the gyrating and swooping veils of the aurora borealis. Thorsteinn worked all summer to his own rhythm, which was stubborn and earthy. Ines sat on a stone bench, and occasionally did domestic things with inept fingers—hulled a few peas, scrubbed a potato, whisked a bowl of eggs. She tried reading, but her new eyes could not bring the dancing black letters to have any more meaning than the spiders and ants that scurried around her feet or mounted her stolid ankles. She preferred standing, really. Bending was harder and harder. So she stood, and stared at the hillside and the distant neb of the glacier. Some days they talked as he worked. Sometimes, for a couple of days together, they said nothing.

He made many drawings. He made small images in clay, and larger ones, cobbled together from stones and glass fragments and threads of things representing the weather, which the weather then disturbed.

She made solitary forays into the landscape. Once, when she returned, she saw from a great distance a standing stone that he had made, and saw that through its fantastic crust, under its tattered mantle, it was possible to see the lineaments of a beautiful woman, a woman with a carved, attentive face, looking up and out. The human likeness vanished as she came closer. She thought that he had seen her, and this made her happy.

But she found it harder and harder to see him. He began to seem blurred and out of focus, not only when his human blue eye peered into her crystal one and his beard fanned in a golden cloud around the disk of his face. His very solid body looked as though it were simply a form of water vapor. She had to cup her basalt palm around her ear in order to hear his great voice, which sounded to her like the whispering of grasshoppers. When he snored at night in his wooden bed, the sound was indistinguishable from the gurgle of the water, or the prying random gusts of the wind.

And at the same time she was seeing, or almost seeing, things that seemed to crowd and gesture just beyond the range of her vision. From the deck of the ship, she had seen momentary sea creatures. Dolphins had rushed glistening among the long needles of air caught in the rush of their wake. Whales had briefly humped parts of guessed-at bulks through the wrinkling of the surface. Fulmars had appeared from nowhere in the flat sky and had plummeted like falling swords through the surface, which closed over them. Now she sensed earth bubbles and earth monsters shrugging themselves into shape in the air and in the falling fosses. Fleet herds of light-footed creatures flowed around the house with the wind. Stones she stared at, as Thorsteinn worked, began to dimple and shift, like disguised moorbirds, speckled and splotched, on nests of disguised eggs, speckled and splotched, in a wilderness of stones, speckled and splotched. Lichens seemed to grow at visible speeds and form rings and coils, with triangular heads like adders. Clearest of all—almost visible—were the huge dancers, forms that humped themselves out of earth and boulders, stamped and hurtled, beckoned with strong arms and

snapping fingers. After long looking, she seemed also to see that these things were walking and running, like parasites on the back of some moving beast so huge that the mountain range was only a wrinkle in its vasty hide, as it stirred in its slumber or shook itself slightly as it woke.

She said to Thorsteinn in one of their economical exchanges, “There are living things here I can almost see, but not see.”

“Maybe, when you can see them,” he said equably, scribbling away with charcoal, “maybe then . . .”

“Do humans in Iceland,” she asked again, conscious that something was staring and listening—uncomprehending, she believed—to the scratch of her voice, “do humans turn into trolls?”

“Trolls,” Thorsteinn said. “That’s a human word for them. We have a word, tryllast, which means to go mad, to go berserk. Like trolls. Always from a human perspective. Which is a bit of a precarious perspective here.”

There was a long silence. Ines looked at his face as he worked, and could not focus on the eyes that studied her so intently. Whereas the hillside was alive with eyes that opened lazily within fringing mossy lashes, that stared through and past her from hollows in stones, that flashed in the light briefly and vanished again.

Thorsteinn said, “There is a tale we tell of a group of poor men who went out to gather lichens for the winter. And one of them climbed higher than the others and the crag above him suddenly put out long stony arms and lifted him and carried him up the hillside. The story says that the stone was an old troll-woman. His companions were very frightened and ran home. The next year, they went there again, and he came to meet them, over the moss carpet, and he was gray like the lichens. They asked him was he happy, and he didn’t answer. They asked him what he believed in, was he a Christian, and he answered dubiously that he believed in God and Jesus. He would not go home with them, and we get the impression that they did not try very hard to persuade him. The next year, he was grayer and stood stock-still, staring. When they asked him about his beliefs, he moved his mouth in his face, but no words came. And the next year they asked again what he believed in, and he replied, laughing fiercely, ‘Trunt, trunt, og tröllin i fjöllunum.’”

The English scholar that persisted in her said, “What does it mean?”

“‘Trunt, trunt’ is just nonsense. It means rubbish and junk and aha and hubble-bubble, that sort of thing—I don’t know an English expression that will do as a translation. ‘Trunt, trunt, and the trolls in the fells.’”

“It has a good rhythm.”

“Indeed it does.”

“I am afraid, Thorsteinn.”

He put his bear arm around the knobs and flinty edges where her shoulders had been. It felt to her lighter than cobweb.

“They call me,” she said in a whisper. “Do you hear them?”

“No. But I know they call.”

“They dance. At first it looked ugly, their rushing and stamping. But now—now I am also afraid that I can’t . . . join the circle.” She tried to be precise. “I still don’t exactly see them. But I do see their dancing, the furious form of it.”

Thorsteinn said, “You will see them, when the time comes. I do believe you will.”

As the autumn drew in she grew restless. She had planted small gardens in the crevices of her body, trailing grasses, liverworts. Creatures ran over her—insects first, a stone-colored butterfly, indistinguishable from her speckled breast, foraging ants, a millipede. There were even fine red worms, the color of raw meat, which burrowed unhindered. She began to walk more, taking these things with her.

In September, they had several days of driving rain, frost was thick on the turf roof, the glacial rivers swelled and boiled, and ice came down them in clumps and blocks, forming where the spray lay on the vegetation. Thorsteinn said that in a very little time it would be unsafe to stay. He watched her brows contract over the glittering eyes in their hollow caves.

“I can’t go back with you.”

“You can. You are welcome to come with me.”

“You know I must stay. You have always known. I am simply gathering up courage.”

When the day came, it brought one of those Icelandic winds that howl across the earth, carrying away all unsecured objects and creatures, including men if they have no pole to clutch, or shelter built into the rock. Birds can make no way in such weather; they are blown back and broken. Snow and ice and hurtling cloud are in and on the wind, mixed with moving earth and water and odd wreaths of steam gathered from geysers. Thorsteinn went into his house and held on to the doorpost. Ines began to go with him, and then turned away, looking up the mountainside, standing easily in the furious breakers of the moving air. She lifted a monumental arm and gestured toward the fells and then to her eyes. Nothing could be heard in this wailing racket, but he understood what she was signalling: now she saw them. He nodded his head—he needed his arms to hang on to the doorpost. He looked up the mountain and saw not what she now, no doubt, saw clearly but figures, spinning and bowing in a rapid dance on huge, lithe, stony legs, beckoning with expansive gestures, flinging their great arms wide in invitation. The woman in his stone garden took a breath—he saw her quiver—and essayed a few awkward dance steps, a sweep of an arm, of both arms. He heard her laughter in the wind. She jiggled a little, as though gathering momentum, and then began a dancing run into the blizzard. He heard a stone voice, shouting and singing, “Trunt, trunt, og tröllin í fjöllunum.”

He went in, and closed his door against the weather, and began to pack.