

KF

I pulled the car up to the edge of the sea and got out in water up to my ankles, left the door open because I knew I wouldn't come back to the car. That world was ending, the world in which I drove a car, there was no road left for that car. I had a bucket of oysters¹, and I dipped the pail in the sea for seawater. To keep them fresh. Filled the bucket to the top, brimming. But as I carried my bucket across the beach I saw that the oysters had left their shells² and swum to the top of the bucket, soft and alive, and were pressing at the surface as though they wanted to jump out into the sea³. Madness: the self grown too big for its shell. I hoisted the bucket higher⁴. The sky was darkening. I walked with the bucket on through the water and the tide was high – higher than I had ever seen it. Little pleggies and other small fish swum beside me, all of us going the same way but the familiar landmarks were gone and I was getting lost walking through the water, which was now up to my knees. I was trying to get to the city, to the kind family⁵ who lived behind the church⁶. They would take me in, I knew; they would feed me. But I wanted to bring them these oysters⁷. I had nothing else to give them. I had nothing else, and the world was ending.

¹ We ate oysters at a restaurant recently. She said she'd had them before but I knew she hadn't. They upsold us on a selection platter: three each of French, Irish and English. My instinct had been to order the French alone. The French were the best. The Irish were almost as good. The English were of poor quality. My instinct was right. It annoyed me that I hadn't insisted on the French and that I couldn't remember the name for the minced onion and vinegar sauce you drip into the shell with a small silver spoon. I was playing the sophisticate. The taste of the oyster is too complicated to be delicious. It tastes like the sea and like a cunt. A nonpareil. It tastes alive.

² Luminous little swimmers I associate with the soft inner parts of me, these shell-less oysters were precious. Like the film 'Ponyo' which I have seen many times with my children – a sweet, innocent sea-creature befriended by a little boy, who carried her home in a pail of seawater.

³ You see, I am thinking all the time about how to protect these soft parts. These treasures of mine, usually bound tight in my shell. What we might call a persona, rough and pitted, harder than stone, covered in barnacles of sophistication – this must be wedged open with a special knife. There's a trick to it.

⁴ How would shell-less oysters fare in the vastness of the sea? There are many soft creatures who make their homes there, but I did not want to find out. Mischievous things, I thought, looking down at the bucket with affection. They did not realise the danger! They must be contained, protected. So beautiful and so innocent. They are like the way I love, so trustingly, like the way I give my body. What a burden bearing this naive questing love into the world.

⁵ The family were generous people, boisterous, a house of many children, an extended clan of blood and non-blood relations. They were poor and dark-haired people, of some other ethnicity that bound them tighter than shared nationality. Gypsies, or maybe Jews. I knew I would be safe there. When, in the dream, I stretched my mind ahead of my feet and imagined myself arriving, I came at night. Doors opened to a high room filled with glittering dim lights, stone and richly coloured textiles. It was an old place both grand and racketsy – hidden behind the church like a fortress that extended up and back and underground. A secret place.

⁶ When I asked myself what church was it after waking up the name Saint-Sulpice came to me. I looked at a picture of it, a real church in Paris I have never been to. It is not that church. And the life of Saint Sulpice is not interesting.

⁷ And yet, I wanted the oysters to be able to leap out of the bucket and swim into the ocean. Free of their shells and of my containment. Though the loss of the oysters would have made things difficult for me; I knew it was symbolically important not to come to the house I was seeking empty handed – despite this I was delighted to see they had so much spirit. I was secretly rooting for them. And now days later I imagine a scene in which I arrive with my bucket and explain about the empty shells and they understand. I am not arriving empty handed: I have a bucket of shells and a story. And across the fathoms in the sea of my dream, my beloved oysters are glowing, dispersed, winking at me like a constellation of stars.