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Seepage

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KELLY NORAH DRUKKER

Seepage

Mainistir, Inis Mór, Ireland, 2003

I am pushing my bike up the hill of the high road, just past Mainistir House hostel, when it occurs to me that Alida Koymans is dead. This is nothing I do not already know. She died two years ago, when I was still at home, in Montreal, but I have been on Inis Mór for just over three months, and as the thought slings through me like an arrow, I see that I do not yet know it *here*.

Alida Koymans is not on this earth.

Alida Koymans is gone.

I can never speak to her again.

I have to stop and lean my bike against a stone wall, October's briars catching on my sleeves, and turn off the main road, into a breen that leads to a field, where I can find a flat rock to sit, and fully take it in.

Never again. Never.

Alida Koymans is my grandmother on my father's side, and I come from her. Who am I if I do not sit at her table, drinking black coffee laced with sugar from the silver dispenser you hold over your cup and push the little trigger in three times, so it falls, a silken heap into your cup, and you stir it? On a plate beside you is *boterkoek*, with one of those silver forks she has set at the table for you since you were a child, a delicate fork, so you have to press hard into the dense crust and release the scent of almonds and butter and lemon.

Alida Koymans had been through a war—occupied Amsterdam when she was thirteen—and was chased through a field by German soldiers. She knew things, and would tell them to you as you stirred your coffee, each rich sip spiking you through with nerves, so that when you sit still, listening, you listen with all of you, the story absorbed into your blood until it takes root.

There is a leap, from here to there—and with no warning, my brain is making it. Since arriving on the island in July, I have learned to run a hostel by myself. I know how coin-operated timers on hot water heaters work; I can calculate currency exchanges in my head, and have learned to strip and make up twenty-two beds in a morning. I know that the skittering on the roof of my

cabin is a rat, not a squirrel, because they don't have squirrels here, and that the blue poison my boss has scooped into a hole beside the door will kill the rat within three days. I know the sounds that cows make when they call to each other across a hill for no reason I can discern but that it is urgent, and I have learned to let their bald cries rake over me and not die of loneliness. I have learned about gates and the importance of latching them behind me, because animals can get in or out, and it will be disastrous and costly for neighbours. I know about stiles and the satisfaction of hoisting myself onto them, desire paths cut across fields, permission to cross built into the stone. I know about cisterns that collect rainwater for the cattle—how rain finds its way to the island's wells, filtered through limestone and running invisibly through layers of rock, following the land's slope and collecting in underground chambers of coolness, where people have come for centuries to drink.

I know these things, and I know them here, like a new language I am learning, but I have not yet learned to speak my losses in this place. Where has Alida Koymans come from, on my walk past the hostel? She liked to go her own way, and was delighted with her independence, which flourished after my grandfather Sydney died, no matter how much she grieved him. Once I saw her in the downtown bookstore I worked in, like any other customer, looking for a book on reflexology to heal her ailing kidneys. She had not told me she was coming—I think she wanted to make it look like a coincidence that she happened to be there during my shift—but I was thrilled. I ran to her and was pulled into her arms, White Linen and Doublemint gum, and I squatted down among the shelves to help her look, ignoring my other customers.

A few months after the bookstore, I accompanied her to the Jewish General Hospital for an appointment with her nephrologist, and on the way home, as I was helping her onto the bus that would take her back to her apartment, she said, "I have two very good friends: you, and Corrie." (Corrie J. was her best friend, and later, her comrade in arms during ever-more-frequent visits to the hospital). I knew this was true—we were grandmother and granddaughter, but also two women who relished each other's company.

So sitting on the cold flats of limestone, with the long grass spiking through the grykes—the grass I've been told the ticks like to scale so they can be carried away by my jeans, or a goat, or a herd of cattle—I am carrying two loads: there, and here. In the still spot of my walk up past Mainistir, after a day of visiting with Karen at the organic farm, and pushing my bike toward the lookout where I can see the ocean, the past seeped through. Loss seeped in. Her hand, bigger than mine and papery, with the thin nails I've inherited, her fingers swollen and still wearing her two gold rings, reached out to me on an island she had heard me speak of, when I'd vowed to return and live for a while. Now I'm here, vow fulfilled, and she is dead. Her kidneys failed, and then she asked if she could be let go, no more dialysis running its fluid burden through her peritoneal cavity, or biting through a vein in her neck.

I visited her every day while she was dying, right up until the last two, when I caught tonsillitis and my father said don't come anyway, the toxins in her blood have pushed her into dementia, and then Alida Koymans really was lost to me, but I didn't see it happen. By the time I was

better she was gone, two gold rings and her clothing folded into a bag from the hospital, and my father circling the apartment in its emptiness.

Water seeps, like loss, through limestone, through memory, until it finds its mark—the solid ground, the place to pool in. I sit on the ground, in the middle of a farmer’s field, and let the tears come.

KELLY NORAH DRUKKER is the author of *Small Fires* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), a first collection of poems that won the A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry and the Concordia University First Book Prize, and was a finalist for the Grand Prix du livre de Montréal. *Petits feux*, a French-language translation by Lori Saint-Martin and Paul Gagné, was published by Le lézard amoureux in 2018. Her poetry and non-fiction have appeared in journals in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. Kelly holds a Master’s degree in English and Creative Writing from Concordia University. She is currently pursuing her interests in Irish Studies, Oral History, Memory Studies, and Creative Nonfiction through Concordia University’s interdisciplinary Humanities PhD program.