

48 Drum Street

“Futures not achieved are only branches of the past.”

— Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Bruno walks in towards the end of visiting hours, when others are gathering their belongings and leaving the wards. Bruno comes every evening at this time but the nurses are indulgent because for Anna this is the hardest time of the day. She has been confined to bed for weeks and there are several more to endure before the baby can be born safely. She has lost two before now, slipping from her body, out of her inadequate grasp. They can't risk her remaining upright for many minutes at a time. Anna can be fractious and difficult by the evening. Bruno needs to distract her and send her to sleep after another idle and uncomfortable day.

He comes to the hospital after his day of work, a shower and a meal in their tiny rented flat and his latest round of visits with the real estate agent. While Anna is immobile Bruno has been charged with the job of finding their new home.

Bruno picks up the visitor's chair from against the wall and sits down next to the bed. Anna switches off the television and shuffles around to face him. He puts a bowl of seedless grapes on the table and pulling one off the stem, peels it with his teeth and holds it up to her lips. Anna takes the grape and Bruno's fingers into her mouth biting down gently. Bruno laughs, retrieves his fingers, then leans in to kiss her forehead. Tell me, she says, as her teeth pierce the grape. She wipes away the juice with the back of her hand.

12 Balthazar Street

In Balthazar Street the house belongs to a cat. He arrives not long after we do, appearing in the kitchen quite suddenly and sitting expectantly beside the refrigerator. We shouldn't encourage it, you say, while pouring a saucer of milk. When it has drunk the milk, the cat walks from

the kitchen, across the passage to the baby's room. You are concerned and try to divert it with your foot but it easily evades you. The cat circles the cot and stretches up to look at the baby through the netting. The baby is milky and mewls in his sleep. His hands, encased in tiny white mittens to protect from his own sharp nails, rub his face. Returning to the passage the cat settles itself outside the door.

The cat leaves at dawn but returns each evening to inspect, then guard the sleeping child. From the time of the cat the baby sleeps peacefully through the night – except when there is a fever that requires a doctor and I wake to find the cat heavy on my chest. We never discover how it enters or leaves but it is an old house with a grapevine against the back verandah providing easy access to a gap at the top of the wall. The child never sees the cat, as it doesn't come when he is awake but soon amongst his babbling we discern that his first clear word is Miaow.

Bruno scrapes his chair a little further down the length of the bed, untucks the sheets and reaches under for a foot. Her feet are hot and swollen so he cups each one in his cool hands and massages the arch with his strong thumbs. Anna closes her eyes and purrs.

14 Poppy Street

The house in Poppy Street is overlooked by many windows. Lower than its high-rise neighbours it is surrounded by geometry, reflections and bits of sky. On sunny days the glass collects the light and all the neighbours open their casements to precise degrees. The beams of light converge on the wall outside our daughter's room, burning ants with an acrid smell. She will wake hot and damp from her afternoon sleep and will not be consoled until honey is placed on her finger to suck.

4 Swan Street

On Swan Street there is a low brick wall with a gate exactly in the centre. The gate is in fact two tiny gates, meeting in the middle with a click or swinging in small perfect arcs onto the brick pathway. The

pathway is exactly the length of each half of the wall and so divides the front garden into two geometric squares of lawn, each enclosing a pear tree. The house has a double gable front with a room on either side of the front door, which is, of course, in line with the path. Each of the rooms has a bay window looking out onto the pear trees.

On each window seat, within each bay window, sit our twin daughters one on each side. Their long hair is parted in the centre; there are ribbons on the ends of their plaits. They will sit and watch the pear trees change with the seasons and will collect the fruit when it ripens but neither will proffer nor accept fruit from her sister. Only if you watch, still and unseen, patient beyond the wall, will you see a tiny flicker of their eyes as each one looks briefly, covetously at the tree of the other.

Twins? Anna smiles and rests her fingers on her swollen belly. Today Bruno had brought her two russet pears.

47 Sea View Terrace

This is a house of twists and turns with not one wall matching the other. The hallway curves like a wave and we bang our right shoulders always on the kitchen door. When the wind blows freshly the surfaces all roll and pitch, cups swinging, plates sliding to the floor. You choose a sewing room facing the sea and take up blue green patchwork pieces, sewing them together along random edges to make a quilt for the child.

The quilt is enormous, shaped like the ocean and it refuses to lie still, sliding off beds and sofas, pooling in the corners of rooms. It streams behind him as he wanders down the hallway, thumb in his mouth, sea urchins in his hair. Only when we tie it sturdy with sailor's knots to bolts in the ceiling and lay him swinging in it like a hammock, will it subside and let him sleep.

13 Churchill Street

Churchill Street is loud with traffic and the stuttering of the crosswalk beyond the wall but the wall is high and thick and within there is a grove

of silver birch, collectors of quiet shadow. The house is the same colour as the tree trunks and is not easy to see unless you come in by the back lane. You lose your way often in the birch grove, walking an aimless path around the trees, first entranced and then enchanted, searching for the lost children whose hands have left smudged prints upon the bark. You will walk until the pattern of your feet forms a knot garden where nothing will grow. Even the leaves, when they fall, fall on either side of the path your feet have made, forming an intricate Persian carpet of yellows and golds within the pattern of your grief. You will walk forever along these paths searching for your lost children, seeing not the silver walls of your house, hearing not the voice of your husband.

Then this is not the house for us murmurs Anna, not opening her eyes. No, answered Bruno, not this house. He places a golden leaf on the shelf above the bed.

24 Katherine Street

This house has a silver bell on a metal spiral attached to a button on the front door. When the button is pushed the bell rings with such a pure high note that it rearranges the molecules of the glass embedded in the top panel of the door.

Every time the bell rings the glass transforms so that sometimes when you look through to see who is there it magnifies your guests so monstrously that you are afraid to let them in. Sometimes it reverses and shows them small like a beggar with hands outstretched and you shout out I have nothing to give you today. Sometimes it is so clear that you can see the thoughts of your visitors written in blue ink like veins on their skin and sometimes it is as frosted as the future. Sometimes when the bell rings the glass turns to a mirror and all you can see is your own anxious self, trying to find your way into your own house.

1 Bannister Hill

The house on Bannister Hill balances white on the hilltop like a shell in the sunshine, with deep blue shadows in the shade. There you will dress the children only in white. And all the curtains and all the bed linen and all the towels will be white and the white washing spinning on the clothesline will be visible all the way to the bottom of the hill. You will wear blueblack linen cool in the shadows and you will hand wash all your clothes, the water running dark. You hang them dripping from a line you have strung in the laundry and the blue will run onto the white tiles until you rinse it away. You will give me white shirts to wear that you wash for me and pin to the line one by one by one, and dark blue trousers which you send to the laundress.

Everyone will see your white washing and think of your perfect housekeeping and they will see the children playing in the garden and mistake them for new lambs. The garden will have only white flowers, roses, lilies, magnolias, until one day the white hydrangeas in the bed outside the laundry, flower a delicate grey blue.

Anna has blueblack shadows under her eyes. Bruno takes his white handkerchief and dampens it at the sink. He folds it neatly and places it over her eyelids. Small drops of water form at the corners and run slowly down the side of her face.

Apartment 112

The apartment on the highway is on the eleventh floor. It has a balcony facing north and one facing east. It has windows to the west. From up here we have a view of moving miniatures and a garden of wind and cloud. Never one to waste anything and without earth to dig your energy into, you decide to cultivate the air. By opening a window here, a doorway there, you channel the wind through the apartment to cool the bedrooms, to clear the steam from the shower, to flush out the odours of garlic and spices from the kitchen. In winter you drop clear blinds on the north balcony and open the small high windows to direct the air warmed by the winter sun into lounge room. On summer

evenings you open the west windows wide to the breeze from the sea and early in the dark morning you walk barefoot through the rooms to open all the east balcony doors to let the night wind flush the apartment with air cooled by the desert. You teach the children to orient themselves by the direction of the air, wetting a finger and holding it up. We each learn to fly home on a stiff breeze, tacking into the wind.

8 Alma Road

The house on Alma Road is tiny, almost as small as the flat in which we now live, but it is so flawlessly designed that nothing more is required. Every room has been arranged so that the perfect number of chairs or tables, or shelves or beds can fit. And every space allows every person to pass another in an elegant dance. There is room for exactly the right number of cups and sheets and books and each has their place right at the point you expect it to be so that it is easier to put them where they belong than to leave them untidily about. Even our son puts away his dishes and makes his bed.

But when we have everything we need we find it is only possible to bring home something new if it replaces something old; a toy, a lamp, a jumper, a teapot, a hairbrush, a baking dish. When we receive a gift of a pen, of a bracelet, of a briefcase, we have to reluctantly decide which of our former possessions must go. The joy of something new is always tempered by the loss of the growing list of the old.

Eventually the nostalgia for the time of the previous incarnations begins to weigh heavily, a sadness settles on the surfaces. There is no place to put this sadness and it lies disarranged and dishevelled in every room. We have to detour around it trying not to look. One day you discover you are once again pregnant and panicking we turn to locate our son only to find him disappearing out the front door.

On the shelf above Anna's bed is a birch leaf, a magnifying glass, a sea urchin, a jar of honeycomb, a shell, a tiny light within a prism, a bell, a silver bird, a paper fan and many other objects. Every afternoon

while the sick and infirm rest quietly around her, Anna takes them down and arranges them on the table like pieces on a chessboard.

34 Bird Road

The wooden house on Bird Road was once owned by a worker of metal. Whole internal walls have been replaced with curlicued screens; twisted metal flowers are attached to every corner of the rooms. Every door has intricate metal hinges and every shelf is supported by smoothly curved metal brackets that seem to grow out of the walls. The windows are shaded by filigreed screens and from the roof emerges a finial with a weathervane shaped like a nightingale. One day while investigating the attic our daughter finds an old box of sheet music, beautiful songs in a key just perfect for her to sing. She begins to spend all her time in the attic where an old iron swing is suspended from chains attached to the metal beams of the roof. She sings sweetly and swings gently and becomes less and less inclined to leave the house.

One evening when we are returning from a walk, listening on the air, as we always do for her song, we discover that somehow a fire has taken hold of the wood of the house. It burns quickly, consuming everything it can. Two neighbours prevent us from rushing in, as there is nothing to be done. The others stand with us, distraught as the house burns. But as the walls of the house crumble an intricate metal framework is revealed. Unconsumed by the heat it stands like a beautiful birdcage. We look up to find our daughter untouched, sitting on the swing beneath the silhouette of the nightingale. She calls to us, her voice softened by smoke.

41 Peppermint Road

41 Peppermint Road has too many rooms, each room with not quite enough furniture. Within each room we are compelled to move every item restlessly, the small table under the window, the rocking chair closer to the lamp. Because they are uncomfortable, when you are in one room you long to be in another, sitting, then standing, then pacing until you hurry out of the door into the next to start over again. Because

there are so many rooms we are never together in the same one and the only time we can converse is when we pass each other in the hallway. How was your day? I say as I see you just about to enter a doorway. Where are my shoes? Our daughter will ask as I disappear into another. How did I get here? Asks my father shuffling along the corridor, but by then no one is there to answer. Soon only the furtive dragging of furniture across floors can be heard and above it the querulous voice of my father.

17 Cathedral Lane

The house in Cathedral Lane is a surprise. It is the last house in a cul-de-sac, where you don't expect another house to be. The garden is a wonder of lilac trees budding next to tropical fruits and out of season daffodils forming golden circles in the lawn. Inside the house is a constant revelation. Each room you enter feels bigger, lighter, airier than you remembered. Yesterday the view from the bedroom window showed a distant hillside, today a glimpse of the lake. You are always opening cupboards, surprised to find them full, or alternatively surprised to find them empty. You glimpse unfamiliar doors from the corner of your eye, but find they open on to your own bedroom or the children's playroom tidy and pleasant on a sunny afternoon.

When you leave the house you are surprised to find yourself close to the city, a short drive to the sea, a pleasant walk to a park. When you return to the house it is like the very first time you walked through the door, full of wonder and delight, carrying a sleeping child. You investigate every room, surprised to discover your daughter kissing a boy in the kitchen, your son learning to shave in front of the bathroom mirror. In the doorway, reflected above his shoulder, you glimpse a woman you don't quite recognise, staring back at you in surprise.

One evening when Bruno arrives he finds Anna radiant and smiling, a fine sheen of sweat on her top lip. It's time, she says. Feel. She reaches for his hand to confirm the contraction tightening around the baby. Before Bruno gives her his hands he drops into his pocket the present

he has brought for her today. It is a key tied to a label on which is written 48 Drum Street.