THE BLUE HOUR

PAULA HAWKINS



doubleday

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

Copyright © Paula Hawkins Ltd 2024

Paula Hawkins has asserted her right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact,
any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize
for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the
appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBNs
9781529938067 (hb)
9781529938074 (tpb)

Typeset in 11/15.75pt ITC Giovanni Std by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

Dylan Thomas

Life is short, the art long.

Hippocrates

The moon woke me, bright and close. It shed such a strange light over the sea, a dark kind of daylight, like looking at the negative of a photograph. I couldn't go back to sleep. I haven't been able to work for weeks so I went down to the beach. I was barefoot and the sand was cold under my feet, it made me want to run.

There was a wind. Strangely warm, it made the sands shift, and the clouds passing over the moon threw shadows to chase me. I kept thinking of the song Grace taught me, the one about the wolves, digging the newly dead from the sod, strewing their poor bones over the earth.

Lately, I've been feeling a bit savage myself.

I ran and ran until I had my feet in the water, and when I turned, I looked back at the island, at the house, at my bedroom window with the light still on, and I saw something move. The curtain, probably, but I felt chilled through. I watched and waited, willing him to appear again, but there was nothing, nothing and no one, only suddenly the water lapping at my calves, at my knees.

The sands weren't shifting any longer, I couldn't see the sand at all, everything was underwater and I had so far to go. I tried to wade, as fast as I could, but the wind was against me and the tide was like a river. I kept stumbling, falling to my knees; the cold felt like a slap, like being hit, over and over.

I don't think I've ever felt terror like it.

By the time I got back to the steps I was so exhausted I could barely move. I lay there, shivering so violently it felt as though I were convulsing. Eventually I managed to get up, to climb to the house. I showered and dressed and went up to the studio and started to paint.

Division II *(circa 2005)*

Vanessa Chapman

Ceramic, urushi lacquer, gold leaf, gold filament,
artiodactyl rib, wood and glass

On loan from the Fairburn Foundation.

One of just seven sculptures Chapman made combining ceramic pieces with found objects, Division II *is a deceptively simple spatial device: a group of objects are arranged in relation to each other, suspended by wires, enclosed in a glass box.*

In presenting these objects in this way, Chapman poses questions about inclusion and exclusion, about what we hide and what we reveal, where we are generous and where we are withholding, about what we make and what we leave behind.

From: bjefferies@gmail.com
To: info@tatemodern.co.uk
Subject: Chapman – Sculpture and Nature exhibition

Dear Sir/Madam,

I very much enjoyed my visit to Tate Modern this weekend, in particular the *Sculpture and Nature* exhibition, which contained some wonderful pieces. I did, however, spot an error on the exhibit label of Vanessa Chapman's 2005 work *Division II*, which listed artiodactyl rib among the materials. As a forensic anthropologist of many years' standing, I can assure you that the rib in the piece is not artiodactyl; it is in fact human.

I suspect that it is quite possible that Ms Chapman herself made the error: to the untrained eye, the rib of a deer looks very similar to a human one.

I thought perhaps you ought to be made aware.

Yours sincerely,
Benjamin Jefferies

1

In the chastening chill of a dazzling October morning, James Becker stands on the footbridge, hip hitched against the handrail, rolling a cigarette. Beneath him, the stream runs black and slow, the water close to freezing, oozing like treacle over rusty orange stone. This is the mid-point of his daily commute, which takes a full twelve minutes from the Gamekeeper's Lodge, where he lives, to Fairburn House, where he works. Fifteen minutes if he stops for a smoke.

Coat collar up, glancing quickly over one shoulder – he might appear furtive to an outsider, though he's no need to be. He belongs here, astonishing as that may be. Even he can barely credit it. How can he – fatherless bastard of a supermarket checkout girl, state-school boy in a cheap suit – be living and working here, at Fairburn, among the bluebloods? He doesn't *fit*. And yet somehow, through hard work and dumb luck and only a minor bit of treachery, here he is.

He lights his cigarette and checks over his shoulder one more time, looking back at the lodge, warm light spilling from the kitchen window, turning the beech hedge golden. No one is watching him – Helena will still be in bed, pillow clamped between her knees – no one will see him breaking the promise

he made to quit. He *has* cut down – to just three a day now – and by the time the water freezes, he thinks, he'll pack them in altogether.

Leaning back on the rail, he draws hard on his cigarette, looking up at the hills to the north, their peaks already dusted with snow. Somewhere between here and there a siren wails; Becker thinks he glimpses a flash of blue light on the road, an ambulance or a police car. His blood rushes and his head swims with nicotine; in his stomach he feels the faint but undeniable tug of fear. Smoking quickly, as though it might do less damage that way, he flicks the dog-end over the rail and into the water. He crosses the bridge and crunches his way across the frosted lawn towards the house.

The landline in his office is ringing when he opens the door.

''Lo?' Becker jams the handset between his shoulder and chin, turns on his computer and pivots, reaching across to flick the switch on the coffee maker on the side table.

There's a pause, before a clear, clipped voice says, 'Good morning. Am I speaking with James Becker?'

'You are.' Becker types in his password, shrugs off his coat.

'Right, well.' Another pause. 'This is Goodwin, Tate Modern.'

The phone slips from Becker's shoulder; he catches it and presses it to his ear once more. 'Sorry, who?'

The man on the other end of the phone exhales audibly. 'Will Goodwin,' he says, his cut-glass vowels exaggerated by enunciation. 'From Tate Modern in London. I'm calling because we have a problem with one of the pieces on loan from Fairburn.'

Becker stands to attention, his fist tightening around the handset. 'Oh, *Christ*, you haven't damaged it, have you?'

'No, Mr Becker.' Goodwin's tone drips restraint. 'We have taken *perfectly good* care of all three of Fairburn's pieces. However,

we have had cause to withdraw one of the sculptures, *Division II*, from the exhibition.'

Becker frowns, sitting down. 'What do you mean?'

'According to an email we received from a very distinguished forensic anthropologist who visited our exhibition this weekend, *Division II* includes a human bone.'

Becker's burst of laughter is met with bottomless silence. 'I'm sorry,' Becker says, still chuckling, 'but that is just—'

'Well might you apologize!' Goodwin sounds murderous. 'I'm afraid I do not share your amusement. Thanks entirely to your curatorial incompetence, in my very first exhibition as director and the gallery's very first post-pandemic show, we find ourselves in the position of having inadvertently displayed human remains. Do you have any idea how damaging this could be for us as an institution? It's this sort of thing that gets people *cancelled*.'

When finally Becker gets off the phone he stares at the computer screen in front of him, waiting for Goodwin to forward him the email. This complaint – if you can call it that – is obvious nonsense. A joke perhaps? Or possibly a genuine mistake?

The message appears at the top of his inbox and Becker clicks. He reads the message twice, googles its sender (a well-respected academic at a major British university – an unlikely joker) and then clicks on ArtPro, Fairburn's cataloguing software, to search for the piece in question. There it is. *Division II*, circa 2005, by Vanessa Chapman. Colour photographs, taken by Becker himself, illustrate the listing. Ceramic, wood and bone, suspended by filament, float around each other in a glass case fashioned by Chapman herself. The ceramic and the bone are identical twins: fragile spindles of pure white, fractured at their centres and bonded together with lacquer and gold.

The first time he saw it, he thought it must have been sent by

mistake. Sculpture? Vanessa Chapman wasn't a sculptor, she was a painter, a ceramicist. But there it was, beautiful and strange, a delicate enigma, the perfect puzzle. No explanatory note, only the briefest mention in a notebook, where Chapman talked about the difficulties she'd had putting together its *skin*, the glass box encasing the other components. Indubitably hers, then, and now his. His to research, to catalogue, to describe and display, to introduce to the world. It was shown, briefly, at Fairburn House and since then has been viewed by thousands of people – tens of thousands! – on loan at galleries in Berlin and Paris and most recently in London.

A human bone! It's *absurd*. Pushing his chair back from his desk, Becker gets to his feet, turning to face the window.

His office is in the public wing of the house, looking out over the east quad. At the centre of a lawn as neat and green as baize stands a Hepworth bronze, its curves burnished by morning light, the sloping convex walls of the hollow at its heart shimmering green. Through that oval space, Becker spies Sebastian striding quickly across the grass, his phone pressed to his ear.

Sebastian Lennox is the heir to Fairburn – once his mother shuffles off, Sebastian will own this house, the lodge Becker lives in, the quad, the Hepworth and the fields beyond. He is also director of the foundation, so not only Becker's landlord, but his boss, too.

(And his friend. Don't forget that.)

Becker watches as Sebastian skirts the bronze, his smile a little *too* wide, his laugh audible even at this distance. Becker turns slightly and the movement catches Sebastian's eye; he squints, raising one hand in salute, and spreads his fingers wide, indicating *five*. Five minutes. Becker steps away from the window and sits back down at his desk.

Ten, fifteen minutes later, he hears Sebastian's footsteps in the

hall, and a moment after that Sebastian bounds into the office, a golden retriever in human form.

'You're not going to *believe* the call I just had,' he says, pushing a hank of blond fringe from his eyes.

'It wasn't from Will Goodwin, was it?'

'God, yes!' Sebastian laughs, collapsing into the armchair in the corner of Becker's office. 'Wetting himself about getting cancelled. He called you too, then?'

Becker nods. 'They're withdrawing the piece from the exhibition,' he says. 'It's . . . it's a total overreaction—'

'Is it?'

Becker spreads his palms wide. 'Of course it is! It has to be. The piece has been viewed by God knows how many people, including experts. If the bone were human, I think someone would have spotted it by now.'

Sebastian nods, his mouth turning down at the corners.

'You're *disappointed*?' Becker asks, incredulous.

Sebastian shrugs. 'It might have escaped your notice, Beck, but the great British public haven't exactly been beating down our doors since we reopened . . . I thought maybe the suggestion of a mystery, a whiff of scandal . . .'

'Scandal? Oh, I like the sound of that.' The two men turn to see Helena standing in the doorway. She is clad from her chin to her ankles in black cashmere, a ribbed dress which hugs her neat bump. Wisps of chestnut hair have escaped her ponytail and there are bright spots of colour across her cheekbones. She's slightly out of breath.

'Hels!' Sebastian leaps to his feet, embracing her, kissing her gently on both cheeks. 'Radiant one. Did you walk over? Come in, sit!'

Helena allows herself to be guided to the armchair Sebastian has just vacated. 'I fancied a little walk,' she says, smiling at Becker,

who's regarding her quizzically. 'It's so beautiful out, what I'd really love is to go for a ride, but,' she wafts a hand in the air, pre-empting Becker's objections, 'I'm obviously not going to do *that*. So tell me, what's all this about a scandal?'

She listens attentively as Becker explains, interrupting when he gets to the punchline. 'But that piece was on display at the Berlinische Galerie! It was in the *Twenty-One* show at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris!'

Becker nods. 'That's exactly what I said.'

'So . . . what are you going to do?'

Sebastian perches on the edge of Becker's desk. 'No idea,' he says. 'To be honest, I'm not entirely sure I see what the fuss is about. Say the bone *is* human. It's not likely she robbed a grave, is it? Does it *really* matter?'

Becker bites the inside of his cheek. 'You can't just display human remains, Seb.'

'The British Museum is full of them!'

'Well, yes.' A smile breaks across Becker's face. 'But I think this is a bit different.'

Sebastian turns to him and scowls. 'Well, Goodwin agrees. He's having kittens, he wants to send the piece to a private lab for testing, on the QT, you know—'

'Absolutely *not*!' Becker leaps to his feet, jolting the desk as he does so, knocking coffee on to its fine green leather surface. Sebastian and Helena watch as he frantically mops up the spill with a handful of tissues. 'To test the bone, they have to break the glass case and the case is part of the piece. She made it herself. If you break the glass you . . . well, I should think you invalidate the insurance at the very least, but more than that you damage the work. They're not sending it off to some . . . *random laboratory* with no knowledge of its history and no expertise in this area.'

'O K,' Sebastian says, shrugging extravagantly. 'Well. What, then?'

'We could start by asking someone else, some other expert, perhaps even a couple of experts, to take a look at it. Just a *look*, through the glass. And while that's going on, we could talk to our insurers, explain the situation, explain that there might be need for . . .' He doesn't want to say *testing*, doesn't want to concede that point, 'for further *investigation* somewhere down the line.'

'And in the meantime,' Helena says, crossing and uncrossing her legs, 'you could go and talk to Grace Haswell.'

'No,' Becker says, stifling a thrill of excitement, 'I can't. I don't want to leave you . . .'

'In my enfeebled condition?' Helena laughs. 'Yes, you can. Come on, Beck, you've been dying to get out to Eris, you talked of nothing else during lockdown. And now here's the perfect opportunity. The perfect excuse.'

'I suppose,' Becker says carefully, 'I could leave early, nip up and get back in a day . . .'

He glances at Sebastian, who shrugs. 'I don't mind. Go if you think it'll be helpful. Not sure how the Wicked Witch of Eris Island is going to help with this, though? Unless you think she'll know something? Perhaps the bone's the last remains of one of the children she's lured to her gingerbread house?' Sebastian laughs at his own joke. Helena winks at Becker. *Idiot*. 'No, it's a good idea. It is. You could kill two birds with one stone – clear up this bone business and let her know in person that we're sick of her foot-dragging. It's time she handed over Chapman's papers, along with anything else that belongs to us. You can remind her that the artistic estate was left to Fairburn, and that she doesn't get to decide what to give us and what to withhold—'

'Well, technically,' Becker cuts in, leaning back in his chair, 'she does. She's the executor.'

'Don't try to be fucking clever.' Sebastian's playfulness evaporates like spit on a hotplate. Becker does his best not to flinch.

Helena looks down at the carpet. 'She's been holding things back, hasn't she? Papers, letters and quite possibly some works of art. It belongs to us. *All of it*. Every canvas, every sketch, every porcelain bowl she threw on her wheel, every fucking pebble she picked up on the beach and arranged *just so*. It's ours. Anything related to the artistic estate is ours.'

Becker bites his tongue. He is *desperate* to get his hands on Chapman's papers; a couple of notebooks found their way to Fairburn along with the main consignments of art, but there is a great deal more material that no one has ever seen. Becker knows from interviews that she kept process journals, that she corresponded with other artists about her work – if and when Grace Haswell hands these over, he will be the first to read them. He will have the power to shape how the world sees Vanessa Chapman, how it sees her work, how that work is valued. The thought of it is enough to make him light-headed.

But Becker is cautious by nature, and kind, too. If there is a way of accessing those papers without threatening and bullying Chapman's executor – and dear friend – he would rather take that route.

'I'm not *trying to be clever*,' he says eventually. 'You know as well as I do that it has not yet been determined what constitutes the artistic estate and what makes up the rest—'

'Boys.' Helena gets to her feet, waving away Sebastian's offer of help. 'This is all fascinating, but I think you might be missing the bigger picture. Say this bone does turn out to be human, then what? What are you going to do? How are you going to play this?'

'*Play*?' Becker repeats.

'Beck, Fairburn could end up on the front page of every newspaper in the country, on *The One Show*, on . . .'

Sebastian's face has lit up, but Becker is sceptical. 'I'm not sure

it's *that* much of a big deal, Hels,' he says. 'It'll be an oddity, sure, but—'

'Beck.' Helena smiles at him, shakes her head. 'Sweetheart, be serious. You don't think the press might be interested in the fact that a *human bone* has been found to form part of a sculpture made by the late, great, reclusive, enigmatic Vanessa Chapman? The same Vanessa Chapman whose notoriously unfaithful husband went missing nearly twenty years ago? His body never found?'