

“Madelaine Lucas’s *Thirst for Salt* gripped me immediately, with the tender acuity of its voice and the propulsive electricity of the relationship at its core: a love affair so richly and attentively imagined it carries the grace and gravity of memory itself. It’s a novel whose momentum emerges not from melodrama but from the primal mysteries of human intimacy: How do people come together and come apart? Every once in a while, a novel enters my life that I know is destined to become part of my bloodstream. *Thirst for Salt* is one of those novels and I’m so excited to think of it finding its way to readers who will be changed by it.”

—LESLIE JAMISON

“This novel is a beautiful, melancholy tide. I felt inexorably pulled to it, and by it. Lucas is a brilliant conjurer of emotional and bodily longing. I felt, while avidly turning the pages, that briny tightness of the skin, as though I’d sat in the hot sun after an ocean swim. *Thirst for Salt* is a sensuous, visceral debut.”

—HEIDI JULAVITS

“*Thirst for Salt* is an exquisite, magnificent gem of a book. While Madelaine Lucas’s style is delicate and spare, her story is one of searing power—the story of a young woman’s exploration of the fraught, often dangerous, forces of love, motherhood, art, and wilderness. *Thirst for Salt* is a revelation, with a quietly radical view of female desire and independence, and Lucas is a brilliant new voice—compassionate, daring, heartbreaking. It’s no surprise that she is also an acclaimed musician, for this debut novel is full of verve and beauty, and it stays with you like a charged, lingering melody.”

—REBECCA GODFREY

THIRST

for

SALT

T H I R S T

for

S A L T



A N O V E L

Madelaine Lucas



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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First US Edition 2023

Printed in the United States of America

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Tin House, 2617 NW Thurman St., Portland, OR 97210.

Manufacturing by Lake Book Manufacturing

Interior design by Beth Steidle

Cover design: Beth Steidle

Cover art: iStock/suteishi

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lucas, Madelaine, 1990- author.

Title: Thirst for salt : a novel / Madelaine Lucas.

Description: Portland, Oregon : Tin House, 2023

Identifiers: LCCN 2022047717 | ISBN 9781953534651 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781953534729 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Bildungsromans. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3612.U2367 T48 2023 | DDC 813/.6--dc23/eng/20221007

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022047717>

Tin House

2617 NW Thurman Street, Portland, OR 97210

www.tinhouse.com

Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

*For my parents, for telling me stories.
And for Robert, for beginning a new story with me.*

*To crave and to have are as like as
a thing and its shadow.*

—MARILYNNE ROBINSON,
HOUSEKEEPING

*Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances.*

—ROBERT HASS,
“MEDITATION AT LAGUNITAS”

ONE





TODAY I SAW A PICTURE OF JUDE WITH A CHILD. NOT ONE of the fair-haired nieces I remembered from photographs around the Old House, who would be grown by now, but a dark-haired little girl. Three or four years old. Still soft-cheeked, straight hair cropped at her chin, a short fringe that looked home-trimmed. Eyes so brown they were almost black. A Cupid's bow mouth, stained with berries at the creases. Jude's lips.

The photograph had been featured in an article about a portrait prize for capturing contemporary Australian life. The artist herself was unfamiliar to me, but it had come up when I searched Jude's name. Such a long time since I'd seen or heard from him, though sometimes, lonely and between lovers, I looked him up online. There was never much to find—Jude had remained a great resister of technology, it seemed, in the time we'd been apart, preserving his privacy and his solitude. Within a few years of the fire, he had all but disappeared. But then this: Jude and his daughter overlooking a green valley at a farm or vineyard. Mountains behind them, bluing with distance. Somewhere in Tasmania. Low gray fog lingering above the hills like a memory of smoke.

It was something in the way he held her—that's how I knew she was his. Not composed and smiling, the way you would be when holding someone else's child to show that everyone is having a good time. They were caught off guard, Jude with his back to the camera and the girl in his arms—she was peering over his shoulder at whoever was taking the picture. He'd turned, just at the moment the shutter fell. His lips parted, as if about to speak.

His face had aged, skin creased and papery at the corners of his eyes and the folds of his neck, which looked sunburned and tender, his hair cut shorter now. If I am thirty-seven, Jude would be fifty-five. Old, perhaps, to be a first-time father, and he did look tired, a dark patch beneath each eye like a stain, a new vulnerability to his expression.

It was a beautiful photograph, and I was surprised how much that hurt. The greens lush and saturated, like a country fresh with rain, color so rich I could almost taste the earth, the water in the air. The little girl's expression, solemn and soft. The art of it, the intimacy of that gaze. Briefly, it seemed like I had stumbled across an image from another life. That what I had seen was none other than the unrealized possibility of our long-ago love.

YOU'RE HUNG UP ON THE PAST, my mother said to me earlier tonight. Why carry all that around with you?

We were standing in the kitchen of her house in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney and I was watching her attempt to slice through a lime with a butter knife. I remembered this feeling from when I was younger—we had moved so often when I was growing up that in the process of packing up or unpacking, we were always missing some essential tool for whatever task was at hand. Things got lost along the way. We made do with what we had.

I'd been trying to describe what it felt like to be back here, staying in her spare room again after living overseas for so long. It was like time collapsed along with distance, I said, though I'd had the sense not to mention Jude or the photograph. She hadn't understood. She thought I was talking about something else.

You can still have a baby if you want one, she said, sawing bluntly at the fruit. Isn't that what the doctor said?

In New York, I'd sent plastic vials of my blood in the mail to a clinic in Manhattan. I was asking a question about fertility, which is to ask a question about time. My results had come back indicative

of a *diminished ovarian reserve*. In my confusion, my shock, I heard *reserve* and thought of reservoirs, of lakes, of rivers, depleting natural resources, my body like a body of water. Without asking any further questions I hung up on the specialist mid-sentence and called my mother. Come home, she'd urged, get a second opinion. There's no shame in coming home, you know.

My latest teaching appointment was finishing up for the summer and I was soon to vacate the studio I was subletting from a professor on sabbatical, most of my belongings already housed in a storage facility in Queens. Okay, I'd said to my mother, but only for a little while, to see her and my brother. I wasn't planning to stay.

In the few days I've been back she has hardly left the subject of children alone. Each morning, more pamphlets appear beside the coffeepot from various donation banks and Chinese herbalists and, once, a psychic. But the fact remains that for me to have a baby now would likely be difficult and expensive, if not altogether impossible, and I'm not sure I want to go through with any of it alone.

This was something I could not easily explain to my mother, who raised me and then, twelve years later, Henry, with little intervention from our respective fathers. Seeing the photograph of Jude had articulated something that was painful to admit—some part of me had not given up the dream I'd had when I was twenty-four of having a baby with a man I loved and raising it together. Mother, father, and child—a family of three. It made the possibility of motherhood feel far from me now—as far away as my time at Sailors Beach with Jude and King, our beloved long-dead dog. Those days of homemaking, lovemaking, housekeeping remained the closest I'd come. How could I not be hung up on the past, I wanted to say to my mother, when so many things I'd loved had been left behind there?

Now, I sit beneath the lamp in the spare room at the desk that once belonged to my grandmother, drawn back to it by that same compulsion I've had since childhood to write things down, to document. It's late, but my body keeps New York time. This is what happens when

you break with one life to live another—it causes a doubling. Knowing eleven at night here is seven in the morning there. Some part of you is always in conversation with that other self.

Perhaps my mother is right. I've carried it all with me for too long. I need to find a place to put it all down. For so long I have lived like the woman in the parable, looking back to see whatever ruins lay behind me. If I had remained at Sailors Beach and had a child with Jude, if I had married him, as I once imagined I would, my bridal train would have been made of salt and sand.



WHEN WE MET, JUDE AND I HAD MARVELED AT THE SYMMETRY of our ages. Written down in my diary—24 42—they looked like a palindrome or a postcode from an outer Sydney suburb. It's hard to remember now that I was once that girl, lying in the sand in my red swimsuit and swimming late into the day. *Sharkbait*, he called me.

I had gone down south on a holiday with my mother that summer to Sailors Beach. A watery place, surrounded by the bay on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other, a place we had not visited since I was a child. It would be just the two of us again, for the first time since my younger brother was born. Our family an ever-tangling web and men the loose threads left hanging, but not our Henry, not yet. Man of the house, we teased, though he was still a boy then, only twelve. He belonged to us except for the month of January, gone fishing with his father up north, and we hoped he would return uncorrupted by the silent, absent ways of all the other men who passed in and out of our lives.

Back then, my mother had only recently moved to her house in the mountains, and though she often said she was used to life without a man around—preferred it, even—being at home without a child was something else, and I think she did not like the idea of spending weeks in the new place alone. She was repainting, she'd told me when she called a few weeks before the New Year, and the fumes were giving her a headache. Plus, there was something about the way the tree branches scraped at the windows in the hot breeze. The smell of paint, the heat—it played tricks on her mind. She had seen the

garden hose coiled on the concrete back steps take the shape of a brown snake baking in the sun, right beside her boots.

Though my mother is older now and has settled, she has always had a tendency to talk of houses the way other people talk about lovers: This is it this time, I've found the one, I can feel it. Her wandering eye for a Victorian terrace, or an aging Australian bungalow built in the California style. All her new beginnings took the shape of freshly painted walls, a roof under which nothing bad had ever happened. No wine spilled on the carpet, no fist-shaped hole through the drywall. I think she liked the work of it—ripping up a garden gone to seed, peeling back flaking wallpaper, stripping the paint from the floors to reveal a dusty golden pine or wide boards of solid Tasmanian oak. The strength it takes to bring an old house back from the brink of ruin, bringing in the light, the air. Water and seeds out for the birds. That kind of work, she said, it makes you believe that change is possible. You can see the difference you made, and all for the better too.

That was my mother—dreaming in blueprints, ever since I was conceived beneath the bare wooden bones of an unfinished house on a construction site in suburban Melbourne where my father worked as a laborer during the day and slept sometimes, after hours. She was in her last year of art school then and living in her childhood home, so my parents made love in sawdust, a blue tarpaulin slapping against the empty frame in the winter wind that blew in sharp off the Tasman Sea, moon shining through the crossbeams. Brushing sawdust from their hair. My parents separated sometime between my third and fourth birthday—young enough for me to have few memories of them together, but I had my mother's stories, repeated over the years until they gained the quality of myth.

Besides, she had continued over the phone while I sat in my bedroom in Sydney, I'm sure you could use a break, a sea change. You hardly left the library all last year.

I was living in the Inner West of the city then with two girls from university, in a Victorian terrace house that faced away from the sun. I'd turned in my thesis a month earlier, in November, and was soon to be, at last, a graduate.

I had enjoyed the rituals of research, sitting in air-conditioned reading rooms in companionable scholarly silence with the other young women who frequented the art library, though it was possible to go a whole day without speaking to anyone. Both my housemates worked nights—Petra at a Greek restaurant and Bonnie at an art-house cinema—and I often got home after they had left. Also, I was often sick. Pallid from months indoors, blue shadows under my eyes from lack of sleep, paper cuts on my cold, dry hands. Trailing a bar heater room to room. Living on tea and honey and oranges, and thin soups I stretched to last a week on my meager student's allowance. Whenever it rained, the house filled with water, the walls soaked through. Pots and pans made musical sounds in the kitchen where the ceiling leaked, and damp bloomed in my room. I went to sleep in sweaters, two blankets on my bed. Swaddled, said Bonnie, but Petra had ideas for a different cure. The body is constituted by other bodies, she said, quoting some theorist she was reading. Activated by touch. What you need is a good root.

That's your answer to everything, I said, and Bonnie clucked, God! You make it sound about as romantic as fixing the kitchen sink.

My mother also questioned my solitary habits—though they shouldn't have surprised her. I'd been a quiet child, and a dreamy, introspective adolescent. You tend to your loneliness like a garden, she'd said once during my last year of university, and on her trips to the city she began to buy me potted plants, bring me flowers and cuttings from her yard. But who, I wanted to ask, could I have learned that from?

Still, I wasn't offended by her suggestion that I hadn't been doing so well at looking after myself. I was always touched by my mother's

worry in a way I sensed was unusual. She had been twenty-four when I was born, the same age I would turn on our trip to Sailors Beach that summer, and we often joked that we had raised each other like two sisters, runaways.

Our holiday, I agreed, would be a pause—between my life as a student and whatever would happen next. I was on the edge of something, I felt sure. I could sense it, as one catches the scent of salt on the wind when the ocean draws near, before it comes into view. The year ahead stretched out before me like a lacuna in my still-young life, and it was this space that Jude would walk right into.



THE WEEK OF MY TWENTY-FOURTH BIRTHDAY, WE DROVE south. Past the empty roadside restaurants, retirement villages, and funeral parlors on the outskirts of the city and through a repetition of small coastal towns, their supermarkets and motor inns all clustered by the road. Beyond that, bush.

Finally, the road narrowed and Sailors Beach was announced by a reduced speed limit and an Anglican church on the corner with a billboard that read: *Need a new life? God accepts trade-ins.* At the turnoff from the highway, a sign out my window made a claim to the whitest sand outside Hawaii.

My mother had rented an old whaler's cottage for the month, a weatherboard painted pale yellow. It sat one street back from the water, on a rise, with a scrubby patch of lawn out the front. Blue hydrangeas, red bottlebrush trees, and flowering gum attracted lorikeets in the afternoons.

The beach was made from the lip of the bay, which let out into the South Pacific Ocean, and we could see it there from the small verandah, beyond the other flat-roofed rentals, square fibro shacks, and new, glassy modern houses. On our first evening, we shelled and ate prawns with our fingers, dipping our hands in a bowl of warm water and lemon, and toasted with prosecco in plastic picnic flutes, out on the porch.

Isn't it funny, my mother said, to think that when I was your age, you were born.

I was looking out at the horizon. At a certain time down south, sea and sky seem to merge, to kiss. Mirroring each other, like lovers do.

Above and below, one expanse of silver blue. I'd never known that kind of love—where all boundaries disappeared. Her observation had troubled me. I'm not a woman, I'm a child, I thought, on some romantic getaway with my mother. I finished my drink in one swallow.

I'm going for a swim, I said, and though it was growing late and we'd been drinking and the tide was coming in, my mother was not the kind to tell me not to. There had been times when I'd wished this was otherwise—that she might have offered me some words of warning, a gentle caution.

I made my way to an isolated cove, where the shore bordered the dense bushland of the national park. The beach, at dusk, was empty, the air cooling after the heat of the day. Small fish in the shallows darted along the sandy floor. In the high season, such privacy was rare, and I took it as a gift. There was no wind, no waves. I was sheltered there.

I lay on my back, floating, and my irritation dissolved. Thinking of what Petra said about the way that touch contours a body by making its boundaries known, and maybe what I wanted, what I longed for, lying there with the ocean outlining mine, was to be held in the way you're supposed to be when you're no longer a child.

I was high and free and lonely. I closed my eyes, felt the tug of the water beneath me. Imagining the movement was the earth in motion and I could feel it turning.



THE COOL SHOCK OF THE BLUE. MOVEMENT, WATER, SALT, light, heat. I began every day that way, my first week at Sailors Beach. Rising up with the waves and kicking down into the depths, into those sudden cold patches where the sun didn't reach. Patterns of light on the surface, shadows passing above, water darkening. The fear, sometimes, of something brushing past my leg—a tangle of kelp, or a lone gull landing beside me. Rocks seemed to quiver on the silty bed below, and once, I caught sight of a silver ray. Henry would have loved that, I thought. At twelve, he was fascinated by marine life, a wall of tanks tinted his bedroom at my mother's a neon blue. He'd sent me a picture of himself on my birthday, sitting on the edge of a boat, one hand in the shape of the rock 'n' roll sign. *About to go diving with hammerheads*, his message read. Already, my baby brother was becoming braver than me. I preferred to keep my eyes closed when I went swimming, moving blindly stroke by stroke. Happier not to know what might be out there, circling.

My mother was more concerned about the way our pale skin burned in the sun. From the waves, I could spot her on the beach with her wide-brimmed hat, dark sunglasses, and linen shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

I'm glad, she said, as we walked along the beach together one morning, that I was a punk for most of my youth, when tanning was all the rage. The girls at my school used to lie on their lawns on tinfoil, slathered in coconut oil, like they were nothing but meat. So many women my age look withered now. Overdone.

Unlike my mother, I wanted to burn, water drying off my body in the heat—once my favorite vice. It felt good in the way a minor transgression can, like taking a drag off a cigarette or kissing a stranger. I liked the sting of it, standing under the cool needles of the outdoor shower at the end of the day, rinsing the sand from my feet. The freckles I had as a child, long dormant, appearing again on my arms and across the bridge of my nose. I thought of them as light mapped on the skin. Evidence of where I'd been touched by the sun.

While my mother retreated inside to rest during the hottest part of the day, I stayed on the beach in the afternoons, swimming out alone, past the breakers. Each day a little farther as I gained confidence. Pushing my limits out in the deep.

Don't you worry about sharks? she said, when I came back to the cabin with my shoulders pinked, a fine crust of salt dried on the hairs of my arms and eyebrows. You wouldn't want to be out there on your period. They smell it, you know. The blood. Like dogs can.

Jude, too, would warn me: If you ever meet one out there, look it in the eye. Never turn your back on a shark. And I'd laughed at what seemed like a strange code between animal and man. One, therefore, that didn't apply to me, a girl from the city, a stranger to his town.

THIRTEEN YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THEN, and from this distance, it's tempting to substitute the weary father in the photograph, daughter in arms, for the younger man of that summer, when what I'm trying to do is remember us as we were.

The first time I saw Jude, we were in the water.

One afternoon toward the end of that first week, I became aware of a movement a short distance away from me while I was swimming. There was the sound of a body cutting through the waves with a swift stroke. Strong arms, browned by sun, emerging out of all that blue. The swimmer surfaced a few feet ahead of me, shaking hair darkened by water from his face. He kept his distance, but nodded.

We were out beyond where the waves were breaking, and at that time of day, the wind was low and the water relatively still. I lay back, kicking lightly to stay afloat, thinking he'd soon pass me by. But he stayed there, treading water, watching me. Watching my legs rising with the ocean's gentle swell. His lips curled and eyes focusing. Curious.

I suppose I'd been playing, the way I did sometimes when I was out there alone—making arcs, pointing my feet like a dancer—because in the water I could love my body the way I never did on land. In the water, I was graceful, a light and buoyant thing. I knew this to be my better self, the most fully alive, my lungs filling with air, salt tangling my hair and making my eyes brighter like after sex or after crying, sunlight catching the water beading on my shins.

Although we can never really know how we are perceived by others—especially those who come, in time, to love us, those initial impressions overlaid with the knowledge of later intimacies—I believe it came down to the fact that we were in water, that he saw me first that way. On the beach, or walking the one main street of town, I would have been concealed. I was shy, and I wore my shyness like a cloak that obscured me from view, and as a consequence, any advances I made carried a certain intensity that, I sensed, was unnerving—as if I'd abruptly revealed myself. And though I did not give myself up easily, was guarded and slow to trust, I was also painfully earnest. My young face had an openness that tended to reveal too much, and this, I knew, could be strangely intimidating in the way vulnerability sometimes is. I was not casual, especially with men, raised as I was in a world of women—all girls' schooling and a single mother—and even throughout university, it showed.

None of this mattered in the water. Out there we had no need of speaking. Still, he kept his distance that day in the deep, swimming neither closer nor farther away, and later I would remember this as an example of Jude's ambivalence. Sun bright as a flare, I closed my eyes, saw his face like an indelible print on the backs of my eyelids.

When I opened them, he caught my gaze, held it. Suddenly, it seemed we were no longer playing a game. It was a challenge, and I faltered, breaking away, turning and swimming quickly back inland.

Lying on the sand, I could hear my heart, louder than the rush of waves tossing themselves at the beach. With such abandon, I thought. The tide goes on, throwing itself again and again at the shore.