

Dear Space Dad and other stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Henali Kuit

November 2014

My stories are set around the themes of family, animals and outer space -- which leads to other themes like religion, loneliness, romance, eating animals, growing up and longing for the past. Most of the stories have non-linear structures. Some use gradual shiftings of narrator voice; in others the narrative is flat, lacking plot. I favour repetition over plot-based climaxes to create coherency and narrative flow. I also favour free indirect discourse over dialogue or description as a means to characterize.

Contents

Contents.....	3
Dear Space Dad,.....	5
Comparative animal study	6
In the shadows.....	7
Grandmother	8
I'm sorry.....	9
Become safe	11
Let's bake.....	12
Personal responsibility	13
Slow and steady.	15
Mary.....	17
Young and beautiful.....	20
My giraffe is for my use only	22
Happily ever after	23
My Bird.....	24
Difficult things happen to me	26
A good man is hard to find	29
Up and leave	32
In the spring	37
Neon blue	39
Red Alien	41
Life & Times of Henali K.....	45
Strangers in a strange town.....	61
Tobias' body	73
Order or chaos.....	82
Me and Mrs. Williams.....	89
The On My Way Cat.....	95
Dust to dust.	100

Dear Space Dad,

You are in space now with a tube going into your ear trumpet. You have chosen to have our end of the tube in the living room but in an undisclosed location. It is not under the carpet. I know: I have checked. You have also chosen to spit down the tube going into your mouth through your shiny glass helmet. We were informed that Space Dads often do this. Space Dads like clogging up their speaking tubes. They don't want to have to say things to their Earth People. We were advised not to attempt a dislodgment from our end because that might kill you.

I do not understand gravitational forces and have recently become an atheist. All the same, I plan on killing you. When you die you will be so dead.

Maria

Comparative animal study

Chickens have bodies that are considered small on their planet of origin. There are 23 species of chicken all of which have these bodies that are considered small.

The average chicken is completely unable to play the guitar. Chickens are naturally ambidextrous. They could be forces to be reckoned with but their endocrine system lacks a key reciprocator that is known as the Money Maker in humans of the Earth.

Chickens experience emotions that are as layered as those experienced by the humans they share time and space with. Chickens cross-reference their emotions to emotions experienced by their ancestors. 20 of the 23 species also spell-check emotions before experiencing them. Chicken has a non-phonetic alphabet. Dyslexia is now completely absent in all chickens of the Earth thanks in chief to natural selection but also in part to selective breeding among the more egotistical species.

I am a disembodied voice in a spaceship. I have memories of a childhood on the planet of the chicken but these have become faded and irrelevant. At night I watch a looping video of a small child brushing and brushing the long hair I once had. A chicken is not like me. I am more beautiful than a horse.

In the shadows

I woke up one morning and found that my father had unplugged me and moved me to the garage. I do not have a very active imagination and so this is basically the most shit thing that could ever have happened to me.

Humans have soft corners in their daily routines and brilliant things grow there like mould. Essentially the same is true of garages – but that would be garages in general and my mother is a hoarder. Sometimes things become so intense that they flip back into nothingness. The garage is my home now and I accept that but such latitude has taken hold of me that I find myself spitting up into the air. And waiting.

I heard they found that shadows are composed of the black going out of keys when people turn them the wrong way in their locks. There has not been a shadow in the garage since I got here. I have never before been this invisible. While I stood in the living room, all I ever wanted to be was something else. I would control my diet and obsess over the patterns of my thought. While 40 is, generally speaking, the new 30, this has not proven true for me.

At night I pray for redemption and the ability to distinguish between night and day. If I had hands, I would touch myself to know where I am. But I have only my own sighs, soft and incessant things, as affirmation of only my cardio-vascular person. I heard that when you're not able to sigh, parts of you will actually blow up. It would start in your extremities. If I had hands they would swell. These are the things you never think about when you are fully functional.

Grandmother

My grandmother came straight from Swaziland. She spoke Swazi, Zulu and Afrikaans. She didn't have room left in her head for English or anything else. She ended up in Piet Retief and stayed there. She wore the same shoes all the time. She taught me how to bake. There were two cute things: she was insane – she mounted a picture of the pug in Men in Black II on the dresser in the cramped living room one day.

'My pet,' she pointed by way of introduction.

'Hello pet,' I remember I said and the pet was part of our lives. My grandmother stared at the pet throughout meals. She stared at him instead of the TV. She leaned close to him and stared with a broom in her hands.

There was another cute thing: she used 'English' as an adjective for impossible things.

'Did you see my husband's English eyes?' she would ask her pet in Afrikaans when she was looking for my grandfather's glasses.

'Did you see his English ears?' and my Grandfather's hearing aid eeeeeeeeeee'd alone under clutter on a chair where my Grandmother's insane ears wouldn't let her hear.

I'm sorry

I was putting this thing into my mouth. This beautiful thing. I felt happy to be having it: first my fingers and a bit of palm, then the hinge of my elbow, then my lips, tongue, teeth, mouth. I felt so happy. I was happy. The thing was very nice to look at. I mean very. What could be more important than this? I felt happy, so happy.

I was warm: not hot, not cold, not sweaty. Even my feet were right. I started thinking. I thought of whatever I liked. I wasted my time in my brain. I said (to myself): why say that? You cannot waste time. It is not yours to waste or not there to waste. I thought again: I thought of what I wanted to.

I said: why can't you just love me! with anger. I surprised myself with that. I said, actually, I can. I was very surprised. I was very, very surprised by this. I needed to get up from feeling. I felt confused. I repeated: actually, I can. The surprise became less unpleasant because it was less sharp. I felt better. I felt warm.

That's when the bird attacked me. I was infected with a metabolic disease. To this day, I sit propped up in the elbow the biggest branch of my tree makes with its trunk. I try not to stare. People don't like me looking at them.

Mother

My mother didn't grow up good. Something is really wrong. My mother's breasts are terrible. They go everywhere. They pull at her neck.

My mother walks around the house either naked or nearly. Her body is two hams on one big ham. That's only the middle of her body. But her limbs and face flail insignificantly on the edges of the big ham.

My mother is terrible. She doesn't know what to do. Her English is not good and she says 'apparently' a lot to compensate for that. She started working with children whose Englishes are not good either but she has to speak English with them by contract. These children are disabled. Her English has not got better.

My mother is terrible. She tells stories where her face copies the face of what Amy, five years old, does when Amy chews on her own tongue.

My tongue is important when it comes to my mother. Her breasts are evidence. When I look at her breasts I feel strange about being one of the people who made them that way. When my mother dies I will probably start loving her better. And then I think that when I speak people will understand what I am saying the first time.

Become safe

People latch on to the losers and the lowest in the world. I was walking on a busy street and right inside of the buzz a woman's face saw mine and the face stopped while all the other faces kept bopping. She did what people call 'lock eyes' with me. Actually did that thing with me. Her eyes came closer. Her face was flat like a tree trunk cut in half. Like scratches in the belly of a cave. Like fossils. Lines.

'Do you think it is right,' she said (louder than people who speak to themselves say things), 'what he's doing to me. Do you think,' she said, 'that it's right?'

It couldn't be right with her voice direct like that. And her hand popped out and twisted my sleeve even before she had a good grip on it. A celebrity, she said, stalking her, killing her family of like it's wack-a-crock.

I told her I had to go because she was the rambling person in the street.

'I love you be safe bye,' she said. How to become safe? And why?

Let's bake

Bad posture and affection are both habits. I don't know about a lot of things that are not habits. My sister has a habit of phoning me when she's in trouble. Trouble is not having a boyfriend or money. Usually, she does have some money and somebody, but then, I would also say that she usually calls me when she does not. That makes her calling a habit that she has. And when I go to pick her up and bring her to our house – that is also a habit. Even if it does not happen every day.

It is strange to think that being by yourself should be a crisis. For my mother it is a crisis too. My mother used to tell my father 'you are a constant gift,' when she had her sherry raised in his general direction and her voice filled our sitting room where the next-door neighbours from both sides had to share the same dusty couch. Bottoms-up, the neighbours gestured at my father who mowed their lawns on Sundays and didn't say no when they offered him R10 for the mower's petrol and a beer for the trouble.

My mother was only ever good at baking hertzoggies and then eating them. This was while my father was still around. After he transitioned, she gave in to her slow crisis. I was to be part of her life without my father: she dug out the recipe and bid me every Sunday, 'I've finished the cookies', like the rest of the sentence shined through the kitchen window by its own light: 'I've finished the cookies, you know what to do'.

Personal responsibility

The first girl I ever screwed had incredible elbow crooks. She cradled my johnson in the left crook until I came. She didn't have a vaginal cavity. She was conceived the old-fashioned way but grown in a tube. We called her No-Pussy Patty. I remember the flirting. She sat across from me at the Spur smoking her cigarettes because we did things like smoke when we were young and stupid. She was so cute and her boyfriend was on the border when we all started going to the Spur for the specials on Thursday nights. My best friend, Mark, wanted to marry Patty because he didn't have a deformity and he didn't want to go to the border. Patty was against conscription but she only had eyes for me. But this is proverbial because No-Pussy Patty had only one eye. She would take off her shoe and rub my johnson under the table while we all sat sharing a plate of onion rings drenched in that white Spur sauce.

I think of her every day these days. My No-Pussy Patty, I called her. But I'm a perfect example of all good things coming to an end. Although they are stupid, young people are right to be afraid of getting old. I've moved back in with my parents. My mother cooks my favourite meals and she sits listening to my stories. Today she snuck out to the Spur and pocketed a bottle of white sauce. We laughed together when she came home and had me peer into her purse to look at the bottle: glistening like a fat pearl.

My father is less sympathetic about the predicament – the sting of a grown man back with his parents – but he puts up with me nonetheless. He comes into my old bedroom without knocking, like he used to when I was a kid, and tells me to get up and go cook breakfast.

Used to be I had my own house with a pretty wife inside of it. I met my wife through Patty and we all stayed friends afterwards. Going to each other's places and having dinner parties and listening to vinyl.

Our group fell apart like a promise when our country was sold to Turkish slave traders. It surprised the hell out of me: my wife cheated on me with Patty for years and Mark ran over my cat and killed it – but I kept loving everyone and they me. I am always telling my mother how strong I thought our connection was. My mother's always scooping the dirty water out of the

sink instead of letting it drain; she tosses it out the window, thinking it will subdue the fires outside.

Slow and steady.

Mieke took a bus to school as a child. Of course there was nothing remarkable in that to her back then. But these days she lies on her back on the floor of her room and thinks about that bus as though she took it only once – like she would have taken a roller coaster by some exotic seaside location – and was left amazed and changed forever.

She got on the pale blue Garsfontein 8 on the main dirt road. The first main dirt road before you can take the narrow, rocky turn-off to our house. After she started high school she hobbled along barefoot on the zigzag of the road to her family's house until she got to the main dirt road and the bus stop. This was after Mieke looked down at assembly one day as the principal prayed and discovered she hated the powdery red-brown creases in the folds of her black school shoes. She sacrificed the crispness of her books for the relative cleanness of her shoes. Eventually she became preoccupied with her barefoot-rite and only took her shoes out of her bag once she was safely on the bus. She savored the scratch of the rough laces as she tied them.

Once the bus started moving, she turned her head to the left and locked it there for the next four kilometers. Trees, trees, grass, it went. Trees, trees, grass. Trees, trees, grass. And then the bus was at the first intersection and the dirt road spilled into a tarred street. She turned her head to the right. She let it loll around; the houses came thickly and the side of the road was spotted with people. Her head bopped languidly. She felt that her head was contained in a box that consisted only of outlines and corners. The sudden red flash of a roof was a top-corner. The telephone lines carried her to the next corner: a hadida flapping black in the white sky. She did not have to worry that she would see too much of the world outside the window, an amalgamated mess of blurry, overwhelming, images, because what she saw was safely enclosed by the neat bottom of the box. The bottom of the box was always there. And it made its sharp, 90 degree turn, back to the top-corner as reliably as rain came after heat out there in the Highveld. A beggar would thrust an indignant arm into the air and that would be the bottom of the box. Or sometimes bottom, corner and side – depending on the beggar's elbow. Or a newspaper vendor would slap *The Sun* against the window at the last possible moment and Mieke smiled because she knew all along that the box would continue to complete after all.

Once they passed the university, the inner-city was close and she picked her bag up from the seat next to her and put it on her lap.

Two stops later she had to stand up. There are a lot of old or pregnant people in the world. At its fourth stop the bus stood still for ten minutes only to let people in.

She had to let go of her bag and she could not keep hold of the handrail hanging from the roof either. Mieke released her bag and her body on to the sea of moving butts and buckling legs and swaying hips and she trusted blindly that her bag would come back to her body.

*

When she lost her virginity she thought about the jerky thrusting of the bus ride after the fourth stop. The driver, he was their neighbour for a few years, was easily made nervous by people. The more people, the more nerves. He had a thick, cheap blanket covering his chair. The sweat would have driven him crazy, otherwise. It was the nerves, not the heat. He would yank at the gear shift as though it was a fat, red tick he happened across in some defenseless, fleshy fold while taking his morning shower. And everyone knows not to yank at a tick, because you will push its stomach and that will squirt its smut into you.

It's been dawning on Mieke that that was also what the bus was after the fourth stop: a squirting tick. They were the tiny aliens living in the universe of its body as it hissed and spat with its fellow squirts propelling recklessly and aimlessly in the galaxy of the inner-city.

Her bag orbited the inside of the tick. Inevitably it soared back to her when her stop came. It could not be otherwise. That is entropy.

She disembarked. She looked at the driver and told him to have a nice day. She looked back at the bus as she walked into school.

That is how Mieke took the bus.

Mary

My sister Amy's scalp's flippin' gone, Johan says. Fucking gone, really he says fucking gone but I'm telling the story to Marlene, and Marlene tells her mom about swearing and her mom tells mine. Marlene licks her toast. Gross, she says.

The dogs at Marlene's house are almost just as bad. Amy was stupid enough to look into their neighbours' pit-bull's eyes, but I know how to look at Zina Warrior Princess and Max when I want to see them. My eyes go over their left butts and away, I don't even look at their tails, just to be safe. Usually I don't want to see Zina Warrior Princess or Max at all but my mother's at work. Marlene's mother too but her father is in the garage busy with Kayalami stuff so we mustn't bother him.

Want Nesquik? Marlene asks because she's a rebel. The choir teacher said to watch out for Nesquik. No, let's play Vikings, and I punch her in the soft curve between her first rib and her hip bone. You piece of shit! she screams and I run.

But when you run Zina Warrior Princess starts running too and Max starts barking and the only way out is the peach tree behind the clothes line. But no one picks up the rotten peaches at Marlene's house and my feet get juicy and I can't get a grip on the tree trunk.

Go, go gadget-power, Marlene screams and lunges to tackle and bring me down. Zina Warrior Princess snaps at my feet. Max has started howling like a bug in the sun.

Marlene sounds like that when we sing susanina. But she's pinning me down with my arms under her knees and, I'll get you back, is the only thing I say as she picks up a peach to have the rotten juice drop into my face. I dare you to, Marlene says and squeezes the peach.

*

We need to talk, the choir teacher says. I glance at Marlene. Her voice has been sounding like she's been drinking Nesquik. Close your legs, the choir teacher tells her. Marlene laughed so much that she peed again and her wet panties are in her case, in the middle of Maths is Fun because Maths is Fun has to be covered in disifix and stuff doesn't leak out of disifix a whole lot.

I am Mary. Yes, ma'am, Marlene says. And you? the choir teacher asks. I am Mary. No, she says. You're you. Straighten your bowtie.

My bowtie is tighter than everyone else's because when my biggest sister was in primary school she had a really thin neck and my next sister got to have her own bowtie because she made the A-team for chess. But I got stuck with my biggest sister's bowtie. It was my sister's, so it's a little tight, I tell the choir teacher. Your sister's bowtie, she says, was always straight.

It was Johan, really, who wanted to pull on my bowtie this whole afternoon so I was clutching at it the whole time and now I have it. Johan's not in the choir but he's a sheep.

This show, the choir teacher says, is a nightmare. I am Mary, I tell her. I know, she says, peeved. What do you think Jesus would have to say about all of this? Jesus is at home today, ma'am, because I forgot her outside and it rained and now she stinks.

No, the real Jesus! and she points to the ceiling.

*

A real fucker, Johan tells us backstage and taps against his thigh to show us how big the pit-bull was. This big, he says. Geez! Who're you? he asks. I am Mary, I pretend my pony tail needs tightening. No, you're that kid, he remembers. Stefan is Joseph, I want to be sure he knows what I mean. Stefan with the Magic cards? No, Stefan in your class.

Oh, that guy, Johan says.

Marlene is a shepherd and a Jasmine, dancing to that pretty song Arabian Nights, and she's in the choir. She doesn't come backstage a lot because she's always on stage. Did your sister die? she asks. Don't be stupid, he says, *I* was there.

Fap-fap-fap. Bap-bap-bap, Marelene says. Her voice exercises to warm up her throat.

*

Look at you, the show teacher says to me. Look at her, the show teacher says to the choir teacher. Well, the choir teacher says, there you have it.

Doesn't your mother know that you're Mary?

She doesn't know, ma'am, Marlene mumbles on my behalf. She has her Jasmine pants around her ankles and her choir skirt over her head.

But I know! The sheep are on the far side backstage and that's where I left Jesus. In a clean t-shirt because of tonight: ready. Johan has her on his lap and he's using a match to indicate on Jesus's scalp where Amy lost hers.

Lord knows, the show teacher says and looks at me and the choir teacher nods.

*

On stage I sit in Elizmarie's civvies dress because mine was wrong. There she is singing in her angel dress. Susanina, I sing too, and I hold Jesus up like in the Lion King, I feel I am the only person on earth.

Young and beautiful

I am beautiful and my eyes are very brown. Emotions happen to me. I wear square glasses and I have long hair. I am soft-spoken.

I sit down in the shower and undulate my tentacles all day. I bet my butt's a corner now, I bet. The water keeps coming.

My sister kneels on the toilet and looks out the window down on the people. We live in the highest room in the tallest tower. She likes spitting on their heads. She hawks a fat one.

'Dickhead,' I mumble. My mouth can't open but I know my smile's nice so I try. The shower curtain ripples back at me. My reddest tentacle is independent. It sits up and sways in front of the curtain like it's slow dancing. I try to communicate with it to stop because my heartbeat climbs quickly and I don't like that. The water keeps coming. My reddest tentacle sways.

'Oh,' my sister inhales her spit in a flash and chokes on it.

'Oh, Nina' she coughs and splutters. I can hear her feet flapping on the tiles. The toothbrush cup falls over with a clatter.

'There's someone!' she whips open the shower curtain. I look up at her and try to reach out to close it again. I bet there's no-one.

'Nina, a special person,' she yanks on my curtain. I take a slow breath. I need to watch my words or she'll rip it in two. My sister's this year's runner-up Miss Booty Booty Booty. My sister's ripped.

'Alright,' the water falls into the bits of my mouth that glimmer open. It falls nonstop. My hair feels heavy on my breasts.

My sister grips the curtain. Her amazing biceps pop.

'How do I look?' she turns around. She's wearing the jeans my mother wears in the photographs. My reddest tentacle blushes. The unexpected warmth smarts. She peers back at me, her eyebrows in expectant arches, and I try, again, to smile.

‘Thanks, sis,’ she reaches in to give me a kiss but the water’s falling and she thinks better of it.

Her fingers flutter to her face.

‘It’s happening,’ she says and her whole body contracts and bops up and down in little bits. I know the birds are singing outside because some of them can sing louder than the water can fall on me. Outside something moves in the sky and the plastic of the shower curtain becomes alive with light. My reddest tentacle darts back in alarm but I try, again, to smile. My sister leaves the door open behind her and it creaks a simple two-step. I hum. I bet there’s no-one.

My giraffe is for my use only

The world is young and I have one of its giraffes. My giraffe is gorgeous from top to bottom. What I like most about her are her knees. Her knees are very large – even larger than I thought when I saw giraffes in the newspaper. I acquired my giraffe using careful diplomacy and a nice ass.

I sit on my giraffe as people walk by on their way to the bus stop on the corner; I put a palm on the muscles of her neck and look at the people with an expression I check at intervals. My giraffe stands very still for she loves me like one swan would another and she knows what I would have her do. Swans mate for life and a swan can break a man's arm. A giraffe has the longest eyelashes of the land mammals and giraffes can disembowel a human with a single kick.

I take a turn about our lawn as the pedestrians on the sidewalk start to dwindle.

'Onwards,' I say, and she lifts one beautiful leg right after the other. I established bilateral communication only four months after my giraffe arrived. My giraffe likes to tell me special things as we walk around and she reaches her tongue for high leaves on the trees I have imported from a small African country you've never heard of. My giraffe has a favourite story and it is fast becoming a sweet part of our morning routine:

'As the sun rises over the majestic planes of the savanna,' my giraffe says and pauses dramatically, 'nature's most graceful and powerful giant,' pause, 'becomes humble again,' pause, 'and mothers a calf.' Then my giraffe plays ambient music and flashes images of impossibly white clouds racing across a purple sky.

When I giggle my whole giraffe shivers with delight. Her delight is a reflection as well as a natural consequence of mine.

Her coat has a smell I have come to associate with feelings of camaraderie.

Sometimes a young man walks by our lawn on his giraffe – the only other giraffe I've ever seen. Although I don't like the looks of his giraffe, I nod. Represent. I guess.

Once an unwed mother came to our door and asked to speak with me. She wanted for her child to have a ride on my giraffe. I said no.

Happily ever after

Let me buy you a house in the city and install a live studio audience in the kitchen.

My Bird

I had a bird and my whole family called him Bird. It was strange how me and Bird's personalities gripped onto each other and swayed like the earth and the moon does. I mean that we got to be dependent on the character and the colours of the other's mood. When I got Bird for my birthday I knew not to take him out of his cage or to touch him in any way. But Bird was beautiful. I could imagine how his little claws would feel if they curled around my index finger because my father has abnormally large fingers from being in the war and when we crossed a street I held his index finger – not his hand. The book with the big picture of him said that Bird would like sitting on the little stick in his cage – this was misleading because Bird couldn't sit on a stick. He stood on it like a gorgeous idiot. The book said, yes, Bird was not smart: Bird would sit on my finger if I make my finger pretend to be his stick. But this was also misleading because Bird would not sit on it. I had my hand inside the cage and my forefinger blossoming out of my fist. The book said Bird would be fooled. The book said I need only wait and Bird would fly to me. I had to wait for him. My forefinger started twitching. The seconds dripped on my forehead. So I did what I had to do. I had to catch him and he screamed like a pig and I stuffed him down my shirt and tucked it into my shorts like a wild fire: whoosh. I cupped him over the left breast I didn't have yet because he was trying to escape. Bird was very soft and he was perfect under my hand. He was like a warm stone. He also left feathers at the bottom of his cage. I made a plan to take those feathers and to keep them for my own. Bird froze under my hand. Then I could feel the beat of his body.

I kept catching Bird. He evolved to like it. He burrowed in my shirt. He nuzzled as much as the slow drag of evolution allowed a bird such as him to nuzzle. It is not uncommon for birds to get very old. I had the opportunity to grow out of catching him. And he grew out of nuzzling. I grew pubic hair and he grew weird stuff on his beak. I watched him carefully for signs of impending death. So I had the opportunity to witness that when he was happy he talked to himself; when he was sad he threw up on his little mirror. In this way, Bird was very much like a teenage girl.

He didn't die soon. Bird and me grew cold together. It probably hit him that he was in the cage. His cage was caging. Bird was not above staring at me with half-closed eyes: stuffing his bleakness down my throat. No-one would believe me, this is why I don't tell anyone: Bird

changed my life in the way that lives are changed in the movies. My mom found his body right before I moved away from home. This is also what she said as she sat with red eyes at the kitchen table: 'I came across his body'. But Bird was already on his way, coasting along in the trash truck, unmoved.

Difficult things happen to me

When I was younger I used to tip toe up to my sister's room on Saturday mornings while the house and everything in it slept. Maria's body was warm and her bed soaked up her warmth. I could feel it before I climbed in. She always moved when I came – she made space for me and curved her body into mine at the same time. I thought that that was a special talent only my sister had. She slept and I looked at the sunlight creeping up on us stealing through from everywhere. I looked at the dust in the sunlight.

My mother always said that god knows your thoughts even before they come to you. But I imagined that god didn't know about my trips to my Maria's room. I imagined I was the only one in my head.

I would also go poking about in her room after she left for school. It was an expedition: her room was an irregular rectangle of drywall haphazardly dropped onto a flat roof. The necessity of stairs presented a challenge. In our case the stairs went where the garage used to be. And the garage used to be nestled against the house. It was a benign parasite, a fat louse, not really a big problem only it made the red earth underneath it more and more convex as the years rolled by.

The stairs were dangerous. The topmost sloped downwards, the bottommost sloped upwards. The rest wobbled. And there was a (noticeably convex) vastness when you looked down and found yourself looking in between two steps. That was hard to avoid doing because the stairs were less of a staircase than a ladder. I ascended the ladder on weekday mornings. My sister's smell pulled me up and into the warm and safe messiness of her room. Dirty panties. Old sheets. And her guitar had a smell too. Her guitar was a paradise of smell. Up top where the fret board had been fingered to within an inch of its sanity it smelled like tree gum and blood. And closer to the guitar's gaping resonator it smelled warm and very layered somehow – it was a sort of mottledness that is hard to untie and to roll out into words.

My sister had had diabetes since childhood because her pancreas disagreed with her body. Not because she was fat – this problem rarely affected people from my hometown because they were too busy worrying about the end of the world to go for take-out.

But it so happened that my sister did get fat when she started high school because insulin is a hormone and, there being so many hormones in the prepubescent body, insulin became all angsty and agoraphobic and stowed away in her hips where it could be safe from the radio-active violence of the sex and tits hormones raging war on my sister's baby body.

'What a pity about my thighs. Mauritz Marais,' her diary read, 'is the most beautiful eighth grader,' Mauritz Marais. I liked him too. He would wallop after me when he came over to play and we ran up the stairs. He would pretend to eat the stairs right out from under my feet and I had to race to the top. Then he'd slide down the narrow banister – something I had tried before and had learnt never to repeat. So I would be stuck at the top of the landing until my sister gracefully squeezed passed me and floated down the stairs: proof that the stairs had reappeared.

They danced together. Mauritz and Maria, my sister. Not right there at the bottom of the stairs – that would be ridiculous. They danced together in the Volkspale. So they wore matching outfits every Saturday night and their parents came to look at the routines they had practiced on Wednesday afternoons and they would go home warm with praise and warm with the touch of the cutest boy or girl in their grade.

I didn't care about that too much. I cared most about the definite presence of my sister in a room where she was absent. She had scratch and sniff pajamas. Multi-flavoured. There was papaya and strawberry and apple. The pajamas were okay but scratching and sniffing her pillow and the corners of her bed and her drawers and the scariness under her bed – that was it, that was something enormous. I remember it, like blinding light, the passage up the stairs and the burrowing in her room.

*

My mother died in a car crash. My sister, Maria, died after a hypoglycemic episode. And my mother got it in her head to go buy milk and bread after the call came from the hospital. She had two other daughters and two dogs and one husband. They were not dead after all and they were bound to need milk in their cereal and toast beneath their jam. It was not my mother's way to think of her human charges before she thought of the dogs because the dogs were plainly better company. The call came at about five minutes after five – the dogs were waiting around for the ten minutes after five walk they had become accustomed to. She should've taken them for the

walk but instead she took the car through two lampposts and a wall. She did make it to the corner store first though and the milk and the bread were riding shotgun when it happened.

My father is a horrible driver and I remember, when he took me around, his sausagey hand shooting out to hold on to me in the seat next to him when he braked suddenly or took a sharp turn. As though he could keep me from shooting through the windscreen like a cork from matured gingerbeer; as though he did not always check that I had buckled up. And I imagine my mother sticking out her arm to save the milk and bread in the moment right before it become obscenely obsolete to save the milk and bread.

The dogs died of broken hearts when my mother was no longer around to feed them.

*

I have two big windows on either side of my room. It wasn't my room until my sister died. But she did die and I have the best view in the house. The room is the hottest and the coldest and the walls sweat and leak cold air and sometimes rain depending on the time of the year, of course: the room does not have a mind of its own. That would be ridiculous. All the same, it has the best view. On one side the green, or the yellow, or the greyness and the vastness of the blue roll. It rolls. And that is also the side the rain comes against. When it comes I press my cheeks against the middle pane in the rain. I stand there for as long as it takes. Sometimes it doesn't take very long and I leave to have a sandwich or something. And then I go back for more, having forgotten a bit what it felt like – the chatter of the rain so inside of me.

*

At night I stay in my room and cry like a cricket in a cage. For the things I want but cannot have.

A good man is hard to find

My mom thought that the best and most appropriate thing that could be done about my grandmother was to take advantage of her visits. My grandmother scrubbed at my mom's stove because it was filthy. She wore her sensible shoes, my grandmother did, in the city where those shoes were inappropriate. And my mom snickered. But my grandmother knew what she was doing and so did I. The day before my grandmother would visit us in the city, I would stalk the dirty stove like we were both animals and clean it, at secret intervals, with spit and a sock. My mom couldn't smell the residue of my spit and she never noticed when the stove looked cleaner. She hated when I cleaned things.

But my grandmother had a big body and couldn't hide it when she cleaned the stove. She also did not own socks – coming straight from the farm as she did, owning only pantyhose, not socks, as she did. She used lemons and the red mesh bags that oranges come in to clean the stove. It was a spectacle when she did it: breasts, butt, red and lemon. And my mom, being annoyed, could only pull up her lip and flash with her eyes.

'Don't worry,' my grandmother said to no one in particular, like it wouldn't be long, with her breast bouncing back and forth against the stove top and her arm pumping and the kitchen smelling like lemon. 'Don't worry,' she said, 'about anything'.

Her own kitchen was always clean or cleaner than ours. I think she was afraid to die when she visited us. My grandmother knew about immune systems and how they are built – a cumulative process. My immune system was amazing. I could eat worms. I could eat butterflies. No problem. I could eat tree gum but only the red kind from the dark trees because the yellows from the light trees smelled like tar to me. I am and have long been so deathly afraid of eating tar. I have nightmares about it. Deathly nightmares, like this:

I am tiny. I squat next to my sisters on the sidewalk and we are waiting for our father to come home because it is the first Friday of the month: we will be treated. He will bring biltong, still bloody, in a brown bag and say 'share with your sisters' – holding the bag and the phrase out to all of us packed next to one another on the side of the road. It is December. We know the heat will smell like the blood in the brown paper bag and the

blood will smell like the tar melting in the street. My father's car is a faded red far away. My father's car with the broken horn; it honks when he uses the left indicator. The faded red approaches like the heat rises from the sidewalk under our haunches: steady and loud. The tar in the street melts against the sidewalk and we play with it as we watch my father's car approach – we twirl it around little sticks and roll it in the dust on the sidewalks next to our butts.

I take a little ball of tar from the top of one of the sticks, roll it between my fingers and, dear god, as my father's car pulls up, I put it in my mouth.

Sometimes I can barely look at the streets. The tar scares me like it's already lodged in the pit of my stomach. My grandmother brought everything back to the pit of the stomach. 'Eat,' she said, 'or you will have nightmares'. 'Pray,' she said, 'or the tissues of your stomach will turn to cement'.

She was afraid of cement and of being killed in the greasy, hard filth of the city. She knew that she would not make it if she had one of my mom's dishes straight from the stove in the condition my mom kept the stove. This is why she had to change the stove's condition before she could bear to put her mouth to the chickens and macaroni's coming from its dark inside. My sisters, all of them, called macaroni 'little worms'.

'Pass the little worms, please,' they said and my grandmother played with her fork.

It is true that my husband is super afraid of worms. My parents only found out long after he was accepted into our family and taken for a drive in the pale red car. My husband oohed at the sights as my father drove and pointed, trying to avoid left turns, and I leaned out the back-seat window, sticking my tongue out like a dog.

My grandmother brought a cheap pig to be slaughtered on the day of our engagement. But the pig was really cheap and when the dominee pulled the knife out of its stomach there were two and a half worms wriggling on the surface of the blade. 'Oh my god, oh god no,' my husband, my fiancé on that day, heaved and tried to laugh. My first instinct was to save him from embarrassment and I went at the worms with my thumb and forefinger and flicked them away. He gagged loudly and that's when my parents gave one another a worried look and the dominee

said it was time for the blessings to be bestowed. My sisters elbowed one another and looked at my husband from under their pretty eyelashes.

My father had met my husband at the library. One day it was the first Friday of the month and a strange man got out as my father pulled up his car. My sisters looked at me knowingly and, indeed, the strange man extended a brown paper bag to me. I shared the biltong with my sisters.

My mom thought that the best and most appropriate thing that could be done with me was to wait for me to give birth and to have my grandmother teach me how to cook bobotie with the custard thick on top.

Up and leave

When I was a child my mother foresaw that I would be a good-looking grown-up. In his wisdom the foreseer gave my mother three children. After she slaughtered the last chicken and the dog got into the marmots, my mother could count her charges on one hand: husband, children, dog. As the foreseer gives, so he takes away.

My mother had no favourites. But it's not as though she couldn't tell that the third child was smarter than the first and that the second had a mean streak but would grow up to have broad shoulders and a thick beard. And that the husband was dull. And that the dog was the best company and the most fun.

My mother would let the dog off its leash and walk away from it. The dog waited. She walked until the dog was a spot in the distance on the other side of the veld. Then she called and slapped her knees and the dog bounded forward and ran towards her with the intensity of childbirth.

If anything, my mother taught me that life is not fair, and as the youngest child it fell on me to love the dog the most. I sat alone with the dog for days that turned into years. Accepting the burden, getting used to the smell.

On my eighteenth birthday I am gorgeous and grown-up in a snapshot in our front garden. The dog is sitting in the jakob-regops my mother had me pose beside. One of her fingers is creeping in over the sunset. I have one hand on my hip and the dog's face is caught in the triangle of my elbow. I'm throwing deuces with my other hand and my t-shirt shows my midriff.

I took off the shirt that night in the thick of trees that grew behind an electric fence at the bottom of our street. I whipped it off in the thick darkness and trampled on it in some sort of display of happiness.

My mother ran into me as I was pulling my boyfriend's shirt over my head.

The foreseer is interventionist by nature, but my mother could not trust him to intervene at the right time, every time. She was therefore standing next to a dead tree trunk with the dog in her

arms and looking at me on that night. The dog's heavy flanks pushed into her forearms, his long legs dangled down.

My mother asked us if we had seen my sister – referring to my sister as her second child. We said no ma'am, we had not. We watched my mother labour through the trees. We climbed on the dead tree trunk to see her go. She bent through a gap in the fence we thought only we knew about. She didn't put the dog down.

Neither my sister nor my mother came back but the dog was back in the jakob-regops the next day.

*

My father, that abhorrently regular watcher of cricket, was frying his fish when the dog did something different. The dog cocked its head in what is commonly thought of as a cute way, but then the dog vomited red between its own legs and slightly to the left. I was sitting in my tree and looking at my father frying his fish through the kitchen window. The dog was between us. The dog had never been sick before. My father looked at the dog and then down at his fish. I knew his heart: he wanted to finish with the fish – flip it over twice more, add salt and then eat it sitting down with cold potato salad. But, he loved the dog. A rock and a hard place. Was the dog a burden on us all from the moment it got here? As the foreseer gives, so he continues giving and does not cut it out even when the children of the earth are bent double under the load.

I lowered myself down between the branches and motioned for the dog to come towards me. I caught my father's eye when the dog didn't move. I saw him looking down at his fish and taking a breath before he turned around to hook the car keys off the kitchen door.

My mother wasn't happy and this is why she left us to our own devices. Three of her charges, all alone. Incompetently pretending to fend for each other while our evolutionary instincts, in fact, compelled us to fend for ourselves. But earth's children are wondrously and beautifully made and these two compulsions dovetail. Not by fortune but by design.

My father, that plain man, stuttered in a simple way at the counter at the vet's. 'The-the dog. Vomit-t-ed. Bloody discharge too, you-you know, we saw now-now, by the nose'. And the secretary, a vet herself of course, because who can afford a secretary nowadays, rushed around

the counter and opened the door of the examining room. We stood stroking our dog while it whimpered on the table. I had a good view of the window. It had a broad sill and jars filled with formalin and the fetuses of elephants were arranged on it from smallest to biggest. If you swept your eyes along the jars it looked like a single fetus was growing, developing. The biggest fetus ended that illusion. But it stood very close to the corner of the wall as though the possibility of an actual elephant, dripping in blood and afterbirth and standing on uncertain legs on the other side of the wall, was not to be eliminated.

I imagined the dog as a new born. Then I imagined it as a fetus. I loved the dog because it had, once, not existed and all of a sudden I put my face on its neck. It licked me with a rough tongue.

As it is natural for third children to love their dogs the most, it is also natural that third children be loved most by the members of their household. Of course one does not love back until one has love to love with. As a young child, I am sure I could quite distinctly feel my family's love dripping on me like stalactites onto stalagmites. One produced the other simply and without asking or being asked.

My father's love was angled to the right and produced a bumpy sort of complementation in me. While my sister and my brother's love was constant and regular and my mother's was what was to be expected, my father's slant threw off the rhythm. Of course this is quite natural, seeing as the man is a father.

I thought of calling my boyfriend in a panic, considering the situation with the dog. But my father was made uncomfortable by my boyfriend and called him 'brother-man' with terrible cheer. When I was young my family's habits struck me as particularly exclusive. Our collective frame of mind, when we were in it, was a structure prescribing that we shy away from others. I noticed that my sister exited the family frame of mind easily when she entered other social structures. But my brother did not or did not want to. My father was, in large part, responsible for this structure and existed as close to its core as he could. It was a structure which by its nature refuted assertiveness. My father could not be in the middle of it because the centre of it was occupied by a deity – centres often being holiests of holies, of course. At the same time, being on the edges of the structure made my father supremely uncomfortable, the source of ultimate discomfort looming so close by, a touchable precipice. A rock and a hard place again.

As a grown-up I know that our organized shyness was not as particular to us as I had thought. Children feel the unreal burden of uniqueness, perhaps unfairly, but ultimately by design. It was as a puppy that the dog most often used its cocked-head cute look to its advantage – old dogs don't do that.

My brother stood waiting when we came home from the vet. The sacrificial rite left my brother with charred black patches where his thick beard used to be. He extended his arms downward with his palms up and far apart from each other and his head hinged back at a severe angle, an inverse of Mary, and his eyes were looking straight up to the ceiling but looking at nothing in particular. His perfect loneliness streamed from him. I grabbed him even though I knew touching was wrong. I hugged my brother's stiff body and squeezed it.

My father walked in on that. It was bound to happen because my brother was placed right by the front door and my father was only parking an empty car – our dog still at the vet, under her knife. When he saw me hugging my brother, my father slammed the front door as much as his nature allowed him to slam things. Stop it, he said and squeezed past me. But he said it in the same panicked, guilt-stricken voice that came out with 'sorry!' when he forgot to lock the bathroom door and I opened it.

Although it is my father's custom to pretend things never happened, he took my brother and hid him somewhere while I was sleeping. I wake up every morning and hope my father put him back. I imagine that he reappears in the living room with his lonely arms reaching out in front of him and his beard still missing in that way that makes my heart feel tight. But he's been gone for over a month now.

I spend day after day by myself, making excuses for the absence of the sacrificial brother in the living room. 'He is not here,' I would say, 'for he has blown a fuse and is in for repairs,' and our visitors would tut-tut about the incompetence of the government. I had to stop letting people in.

The dog did not back home either. It's not even that it died. The vet keeps calling. He's resting, give it a week, she says. Or, he's resting but come get him tomorrow, but she calls again before we show up, he's resting, give it a week. I water the jakob-regops.

My boyfriend's started having to take me to parties to distract me from the hollow way the foreseer created the world.

When I was a child my mother foresaw that I would be good at going to parties. My trousseau was filled to the brim with nice dresses and lace and recipes on scraps of paper ever since I was 16.

With my boyfriend on one hand and a pudding or caprese salad on the other I go out night after night. People laugh at my jokes and look deep into my eyes. But that is a trick and a silly one at that. There is no noteworthy amount of depth to be seen in me. I understand that it is not so for other people. I am not Robinson Crusoe. There are people who call me 'friend' and who spill their secrets on me like warm milk in unguarded moments. Their secrets are things inside they call their own to help make them who they want to be. I have secrets to help me be someone. But the secrets simply happen, wash over me and are done with. There would never be a need for me to dig them up from some pulsing labyrinthine cave inside and lay them before someone. I plainly make up simple lies about myself as I go along. 'My mother made this dress,' I say. 'I want to be a chef one day,' I say. It is important to feel comfortable with the world and your place in it. I know how to and can do that. It doesn't have to be spectacular. Not everyone has a musical soul and I am one of those lucky few without.

I am a lucky person in general. Therefore I am not afraid of the rapture. I'll be ready when the day comes. I'm sure the dog will be back by then and I will say goodbye to it and go. Leaving my brother to take care of my father and my boyfriend to take care of himself. If the odds are in my favour, I'll meet my sister up there.

In the spring

My killer flipped me over and opened the flap of skin he had cut into my torso. He sighed like he was happy. My killer has the ugly sort of hands that a lot of male bass guitar players have. These sorts of fingers taper in a very bad way. As though these sorts of hands have upside down ice-cream cones growing out of their palms. My killer moved his fingers like his hands were dancing sea anemones.

‘Get to the damn point, twinkle toes,’ I snapped at him.

‘Shut it, pizza face,’ he said and turned my face to the back wall with a sharp jab of his ugly palm. The most annoying part of being dead was not being able to turn my head back and stare him down. People were always too chicken shit to look directly at my face. As though one of my pimples might explode on them if I should move the muscles of my face to meet their expressions.

My killer started to stroke the tips of my ribs. In the classically paradoxical effeminate way with which male bass guitar players’ hands go about their business, his palm was always lower than his fingertips. Like his palm was heavier than his fingers. This is exactly the opposite of what a piano player’s hands do, have you ever noticed? My killer started tapping the tips of my ribs with his fingers. Very lightly at first. Like a kitten paws a toy.

‘Here we go,’ he mumbled and then my killer gave my bottom-most rib a sharp rap with the knuckle of one of his ugly forefingers. He did it again. Like my rib was hollow and he could sound out just how empty it was inside.

‘Exquisite!’ my killer gasped and rapped again. But I didn’t hear shit.

‘Fucking lunatic,’ I said to the back wall.

‘Shut it,’ he said and needlessly shoved me at the back of my head.

My killer started playing me. He played the tunes I had to teach myself because no one really talked to me at school and mother ignored me. These tunes were simple and tripped over themselves as they went. My killer was obviously a beginner.

But he improved with time. As his shed grew mouldier and mouldier and then drier and drier again and the lightning storms gave way to dry white light falling across my decomposing body in stripes, my killer improved.

One day he lifted both arms over his head and interlaced his fingers. I could hear them crack and so could he. His eyes popped with the crack.

‘Hear that?’ he asked and brought his hands down to look at them. He held his hands out like I was a fire to warm them by. My killer rubbed his hands and then sank them into my yawning chest and he played me a final time. If I could have turned my head to look at him play me, I would have. Instead I peered through a tiny slit in the back wall. I could see little blue flowers growing in between the tall grass outside.

My killer dug a hole in the backyard and put me inside. He left the heap of earth next to the hole. With time the heap grew weeds that now dip into my hole. I look at the tiny ants going up and down the weeds and sometimes a bird crosses the sky.

Neon blue

It was raining today and I was looking out the window. Although we have done many special things together, the thought of Elaine made me sad. I looked at the neon caught on the pavement, the wet pavement. I felt sad. My whole body was a sad thing.

I called Elaine and told her, 'You and me, my darling, out there on the street, doing something, going to watch the new Spiderman, anything, living middle-class lives and being vaguely but deeply depressed.' The words 'my darling' gave Elaine pause. It was also hard for her to understand how middle-classery could be depressing. Elaine was running around on the wild, untamed planes of Africa with feathers in her pretty hair and animal skin over the curve of her rump.

She made noises down the phone and I sobbed. 'It is very, very hard for me to be happy,' I told her.

I imagined Elaine looking up at the sky, it would have been the night sky in her part of the world, and putting her index finger up to it as though she was tapping the stars like puppies on their noses. I thought of her aggressive kissing. She should be embarrassed about that.

'I will come and visit, get you out of there' I told her, 'do you need money?' She made her pretty noises in response.

I sighed and realized talking to her calmed me down. I felt better, in spite of the rain, in spite of everything. All the same, life was hard. I hung up. I buttoned up my shirt, opened the window and stepped outside. It was still raining but now only in a drizzle. I treaded sky and tried, very hard, to be happy. An old man passed me on a bicycle and tipped his hat. A mom with a pram, bopping slighted as it went, floated past in a leisurely stroll and I imagined Elaine with a child, with a baby. Pregnant.

The rain started clearing and I flipped into backstroke. It was a left turn at the bank and right at the next corner and then I'd climb into the coffee shop where I used to take Elaine. She and her sugary drink with cream. The sun was behind some cloud somewhere and I could look as though the notion of seeing forever was scientifically sound.

I had a thought which tipped me back into sadness. I thought of how, and why, Elaine was not a victim of time. Good and bad things passed her by at the same rate. How? And why?

It felt unfair to me – and to her. Suddenly I thought of stiffening my body and falling. I turned over to look down. I thought of smashing into and lying dead on the wet pavement. And someone would send a picture of me to Elaine: me, dead, in between the neon.

Red Alien

Early on there was God and my cousins. My cousins were in one large nest on the floor. We burrowed into the blankets and away from the hard floor into each other's bodies. There was the farm and the constant kittens. The kittens were cats toying with rats by the next visit; I crouched, frozen, in a pool of sunlight and staring.

And there was the holy fear of falling into the pen of a mother pig when we ran on the walls separating the pigsty into blocks. We ran on the walls anyway. We swayed on our haunches on the corners. We cooed down at the piglets.

There was the love of feeding a calf. This was a supreme love. Calves also suck on your fingers. Your fingers taste like udder.

There was the bedroom I now see everywhere. Why would my grandparents give us their bedroom to sleep in? We were stacked like chickens on the bed, on the floor, the smallest one on the bottom shelf of the cupboard. If there was a couch, we would be on it (but there was a chair). We breathed like a choir. Our sleep was beautiful. But grandparents are not beautiful like grandchildren and grandparents are old and my grandparents slept in what they had converted from an abattoir but still called 'abattoir'. There the cement floors crawled up the legs of the bed like an ultra-powerful tokoloshe and there it sliced its icy fingers through you. That abattoir.

But the bedroom was light and now I see it and feel it in your bed under the electric light in an apartment in the sky. Like God, this makes no sense.

Your body has no sun left in it. But I hug it like I would a chicken. A chicken will let you hug it if it knows you; a chicken has remarkable muscle memory. It knows you if you always pick it up in the same way: with both hands under the hollows its wings make. That is also where the baby chickens hide, if you recall. Your fingers feel like baby chickens. The chicken protects you when you pick it up. Like you, the chicken does what it was meant to do.

You have a large brain and you use it to eat and to sleep and to play video games. You use it to do your job. You use it to be good at your job and you use it to tell me stories that I like listening

to. Sometimes I tell you that I went to the supermarket to buy milk. Sometimes I make a phone call to tell you this.

Early on there was this daily phone call from my dad to my mom. If you don't believe in God, there is nowhere else things can go. But Americans say 'oh my God' when their nail polish chips because maybe their friend Francine wouldn't want to hear 'oh Francine' every time this happens.

Being alone is deeply stressful for the systems of the human body. God is not human but He is a trinity; it would follow that He has systems.

When cows got dipped, and we helped to single them out and chase them one by one into the sloped pool of poison for ticks, their eyes went enormous, enormous. Jesus. And when my dad opened up the gate on the other side of the pool of poison the cow ran out and right for the dipped cluster of dripping cows. The cow always makes its neck go up and to the side and puts the neck onto a piece of body of another cow. It presses its neck there with its enormous eyes.

You have real big eyes and sometimes I wonder if you are scared. But you talk about 'anxiety'.

It is really busy here so occasionally my feet lift off the floor of the train. This is because of all the people inside. The doors open and close and then there are more people inside and my feet go higher. Once, floating and pushed and collapsed onto the man in front of me, I fell right asleep. Sometimes you push my head into your chest and cross your arms over it. I hear my breath and it is the only thing I hear. It becomes more and more strained. I don't hear your heart beat or the noises of your stomach. I am alone there.

We used to talk a lot. But now we listen to each other's silence. Because it is very loud outside.

Sometimes you make a phone call to not say anything.

When you visit me in my basement room four floors under the ground I cannot sleep. Not because I dream of the red aliens swimming through the ground next to me. I cannot sleep because I obsess over this: your body falling asleep while the roaches and the spiders in the room wake up and I can hear their little scratches under your enormous breath. Why is your breath so

big? How is it that I can hear the scratches – tiny as they are? The wallpaper peels more every day and that is where the roaches and spiders go to scratch.

Everything burrows, I would say.

The day the aliens came I was as ready as I could have been. I don't remember panicking. My mother called my grandparents on the farm when we saw the flashes outside. But the line was as dead as my father who drowned when an alien tipped him into the pool of poison as he was walking along the rim (something he always told us never to do). My mother had no way of knowing. She listened to the dead line and she was still standing there by the time I had thumped my suitcase down the stairs and was wiggling it out the door. There was, early on, a daily phone call from my dad to my mom. But now my mother could hear only the absolute silence of invading aliens. She felt some infinite, enormous thing because outside the sky was the wrong colour. Her systems were overworked because of being unable to have the emotion exit her in the way she had always chosen (not because of the enormity the colour of the sky produced). Therefore there was no exit and my mother was nothing but a circuit for its endless electric laps and I closed the door behind me.

One of my cousins sent a postcard. My cousin said he was with my father, dipping the cows that is, and then an alien – it was a red one – made the earth crumble beneath their feet and stood up out of it. He said something in his alien tongue and stared at my cousin. My cousin stared backed and the alien extended his arm to the right and that tipped my father into the pool. Maybe it was an accident. My cousin said the alien extended his arm without sound or expression.

You wouldn't like my cousin if you met him. He is one of those: he chooses the wrong battles. He is still there. Like my mother: frozen. You have preferred to move on. But you were around the aliens early on and I only heard what I heard on the radio. If God descends from the sky, you said, and said, 'Hey, it's me, God,' then you would believe in God.

You said that with the glow of an alien and his clipboard rising up behind you when we were waiting in line to get our health checks. You were light, like that, with the glow behind you. I thought that you were beautiful. And I was happy that you had lost your temper because your breath went loud and I could listen to it.

Life & Times of Henali K

Listen you who giggle – you lot, listen here now. Don't go back to the city, Henali's grandmother said, and tell Mandela what I am doing to all the little blacks. And she swatted another fly and put her naked palm on it to drag its corpse across the table and into her kitchen dustbin. Henali's grandmother's kitchen dustbin was a fountain of fascination. What is at the bottom of the kitchen dustbin, Henali wondered. I know what is at the top for I can remember what my grandmother put there. For the life of her, Henali couldn't remember what her grandmother put at the bottom of the kitchen dustbin. To the left of her, Muggie peeped over the edge of the table to look at another fly falling away from their grandmother's palm and into the kitchen dustbin.

Muggie's white hair flew into Henali's face as she beamed up at their grandmother and laughed. But Muggie didn't get the joke either. She is a copycat. She saw Magda and Alida giggle. Magda and Alida who are old enough to know all about the separate names for places that have cows and places that do not have cows. If the city is a place to return to, where is this table? Tonight she will practice with Magda and Alida. Names, Surnames, Animals, Towns. This is a game. Use one letter of the alphabet, like this, K, which is the best letter: Karen, Kuit, Koala, Kaapstad. Henali always plays with K first because she saw about Koala's in a book. She saw orange foxes playing at the red gate where she's not supposed to play, she swears it. I will put my hand on the bible, she told Muggie but Muggie never believes.

Will her grandmother let her use the electric things for the batter? She will take the bowl no longer under her grandmother's busy hands but now only in her way and she will succeed in two different ways: 1) she will make space for her grandmother's soft arms to move other bowls around 2) she will feed the baby cat outside the door. The baby cat peed on her yesterday and she couldn't tell anyone because everyone already told her: you are messing with that cat now, miss, you must leave it be because you are making it ill now. And Henali did make it ill! Couldn't even help but pee. Better not to think on it anymore, Henali thought and stood up to look at the glistening electric things now all speckled with white flour and buzzing with the smell of iron and anise. No, her grandmother said. And Henali bit her bottom lip – her mother told her to stop

biting it – and she wanted to go outside to the baby cat but Muggie was inside and it would have been wrong to leave her.

*

Outside the white wall is yellow with sunrise. The flowers, beautiful in pictures, though the people here rarely remember about cameras, are red and orange. There is also light blue and I know that Henali does not like light blue as much as the specific, bright red and the colour she calls ‘orange’ she sees in her memories. Henali is sleeping behind the white wall. She holds her sister’s hand in hers. This is nice to look at and to think on. Her sister moves and I can see that Henali will wake up presently. I feel a large emotion that has no name. I am Henali’s alien. She was assigned to me at birth. We were born at the same time but I am much older than her. I have fallen deeply in love with her. But don’t worry, because aliens cannot feel love. I use the word with a pinch, as it were, of salt. The sisters sigh in their sleep and freshly cut cucumber slices enter Alida’s dream. She presses her face to her baby sister’s cool forehead. Outside I stand with my left foot in warm cow shit and the sunlight warms me from behind. I do not cast a shadow on the white wall. Henali is behind that wall and her hair smells good.

The people here will soon get up and plod around. I am not someone who meditates on frustration because this is a sensation I rarely have, but I feel like leaving the people of this farm and getting far, far away from them. In space it is quiet and space creates feelings that you can become, gradually if you so wish, aware of. In space I feel calm. I feel happy that I am calm. In space I take the time to remember my family. I often call my mother and I talk to her. Sometimes I take her to tea and we have lemon meringue tart. The tea garden my mother likes but thinks is too expensive floats about the black sky. All the tables look different; we gravitate towards a grey cast-iron with curled feet. We don’t say much and the tart is delightful.

*

Muggie must not do that! She knows what will happen: Henali knows exactly what will happen for a similar thing has happened to her. She can’t bring herself to call out but DON’T DO THAT flashes red in Henali’s head. Like in the book with the boy who does not look twice before crossing the street. Muggie’s feet make a squeaky noise where they are perched, all too close to Henali’s ears, on the rim of the bathtub. Muggie’s arms windmill about and her wet butt juts in

and out as she's trying to keep her balance on the rounded rim. Henali can't take it: she plunges her face between her legs, she blows bubbles and bubbles and loud and quick bubbles and her mother will be mad that she's getting her hair wet but she cannot watch her cousin hit her head and die.

But Muggie jumps and lands swiftly and is immune to the deathly cold of the cement floor. Your mom's gonna be mad, she says when Henali's air runs out. She has her hands on her hips and both feet flatly on the terrible floor, like the floor is nothing to her. Like she doesn't even know the floor is terrible. Your mom said not to get your hair wet. And Muggie does one more thing she's not supposed to: run. And not only that, but naked. The bang of the slamming bathroom door comes after the fact (thunder, Henali thinks, following lightning).

*

Because I can fly I know more about the farm than the people who live on it. Their deity is celestial. Their language has 37 idioms, some now archaic, directly referring to the firmament. I feel special; though it is not important for me to feel special, I can recognize that I do.

Sometimes Henali looks up at me and smiles with the incredible perfection of childhood. My heart, though I do not have this organ, skips a beat. Henali's heart is rising sour dough under a blanket on the window sill. Henali's heart is a butterfly I will never touch.

Today her grandfather will cease his plodding and nearly die when his youngest son aims at a snake in the barn and misses. The grandfather has vast knowledge of snakes as befits a farmer. The snake is not the first the youngest son was told to kill. Although snakes are not aggressive, the children are bothersome and the barn has many corners. This snake is also not the first the youngest shoots at and misses. I've heard Henali's father call the youngest son 'baby brother' to his face and 'shit head' behind his back. One of the children will call the grandfather as the shithead's shot fires and the grandfather will see his dead wife's face swelling before him with the peal of the crashing car. Henali's grandfather will be overcome and hurry away to the fruit trees where no one will find him and he will not plod for the rest of the day. He will sit down and clutch at his chest and think, irrationally, that he nearly died in the barn.

The farm shows me its future like this when I fly. I got my wings when I was fifteen. In space they're of no use but here I flap and cut and swerve above the farm. The first dam is where the

children play and where the future comes in auditory-form. The farm has many dams but the first one is referred to in this way because it is closest to where the white people live. The people, white and black, have more as well as more sophisticated senses than aliens. But we are able to focus one desired sense in a way that elongates, so to speak, the sensor. The second damn also whispers the future. But the blue gum trees show it in slow motion and this can sometimes be tedious.

Today Henali's mother will plot to have a sheep slaughtered. Henali, not knowing about the effort and time and cost involved in striking down a single sheep, will become unnecessarily excited. She will smell the red blood whooshing into the enamel bowls and think on the colour of the blood. Henali's mother will take the sheep's left eye and wash it in a way that seems precise to the point of magic to her daughter. She will hand over the eye with a flourish and Henali will think it's spectacular. Henali will close her own as she slips the eye into her mouth and she'll hold it still for a moment before she gives in to the chaos that is her teeth, chewing.

*

When she was told about shooting at things, she thought she would be able to do it. But she can't even see the thing that is supposed to be blue on the other side of the pointing fingers. She would like to lie about it and say 'oh there!' but her toes hurt and she has a headache. Stand back, her uncle says. His eyes go into the tall trees far away that her grandfather drives to the Sappi in iSwepe. iSwepe is the same as a fistful of chicken food: it seems like there's nothing, but the chickens don't think so. When she grows up, Henali will not live in iSwepe because the Sappi makes its noise over everything. And her father says morning to strange men who remind her of him. Their knees with earth on it above their rugby socks. Henali did something brave in iSwepe: she stood closer to her father and reached for his knee to rub the red earth off it so that her father may be spared looking so much like the stranger talking to him. The littlest one? the stranger looked at her and asked and her father smiled. Go wait in the car, he told her, if anything bad happens, scream.

The tall trees are far away and the blue thing is supposed to be among them. Because your eyes are still too tiny, her sister explains when Henali admits that she can't see anything at all. Her uncle pinches his fleshy face together and squints into the distance. She's bored and what about

the blue people inside the forest of the tall trees for there are probably people with light blue faces and a secret language living there. If her uncle shoots one, it will not be her fault. She will not have any part of it. This is what Henali's father said when he told her about the real Christmas trees. I will not have any part of this, I said, he told her. Your grandpa cutting down the top of a young fir, already so tall, to bring into the house. To look like a real Christmas tree because your aunt wanted a real Christmas tree. To make a mess for your real grandmother to clean up! To have the poor fir die out in the field – a waste.

Henali scowls at her uncle. The nerve. What about the blue people? And she hates his nose that snuffles and snorts all day long. If it was her, her mother would look at her with both eyes and say go, go now and blow that nose. Henali imagines that her real grandmother would have told her uncle the same. But the grandmother she has now is nice to touch at the back of her soft arms and she's in her yellow kitchen right now. Henali could have been there if she didn't want to see about shooting things. She will make it up to herself by putting her hands on the soft backs of her grandmother's arms the next time her grandmother sits down and she's close by.

When her uncle fires the shot she hits herself on the chin as her hands fly up to cover her ears. She can feel the corners of her mouth pulling down and her eyebrows going toward each other. Where is her sister because if she cannot find her sister right now she will start to cry. Where did her sister go? Where is my sister now? Henali asks. Her uncle squints at the blue thing that's not even there. Where is my sister now! Henali shouts although her mother told her never to shout.

Did you say something, pumpkin? her uncle asks the blue thing in the distance. My sister is gone! she thinks loudly and makes her eyes big so her uncle can see about the problem. Gone! she thinks. Her uncle looks down at the gun, not at Henali. Suddenly she knows what to do. Quickly she lifts the arm with the most freckles on it, her quick arm, and makes her hand snatch for the gun. You, and her uncle jerks. What did I tell you?

You –! it is out of her mouth before she can swallow it. Will her uncle get mad because she called him 'you'? Henali is not sure. The first dam shines in the distance – she will make a break for it!

What a good thing that she's not wearing shoes. The damn gets close so quickly. What about the toad in the damn? There are many frogs and baby frogs will come, to her own house too because

Henali put a lot of eggs in her bucket and the bucket into the trunk of her father's car when her mother was sleeping on Sunday. But there's only one toad and his long strokes are scary to think about. But she will stay on the edge of the damn with the little crabs that do not pinch but are safe. One day she will be in the dark water with the toad. He will cease his strange back and forth across the damn and start going in circles around her with his long strokes. Henali will have funny, long, very long, legs and slowly swim them back and forth, back and forth, right in the middle of the damn. She'll stay still like that, looking at her friend the toad and his long strokes going all around her in the middle of the damn.

It's supper, Muggie says. Looking down at her. Henali realizes that her legs went to sleep under her haunches. The crab mom is still going: under the rock, onto the sand, under the rock, onto the sand. Look, she says. Muggie comes down on her haunches too and this is good because Henali wants to climb on her back and be carried to supper.

*

At night I prey to the people's deity. I pray as they do: with my head bowed and my hand in another (because I am alone, I hold my own hand). The people here eat the main meal of the day in the evening. Aliens consider this unhealthy and I don't really like to look on as they eat. It is my habit to walk by the kitchen window twice and then retire. But the people at the table are arguing and I have a very, very soft spot for salaciousness.

It's the sheep, as I should have guessed. Henali's mother loathes coming to the farm and then leaving without a sheep. She is someone who likes to have an object of any sort to show for her efforts. The sheep is an object she can transform into several smaller objects and then keep in the freezer. When she needs to show Henali's father that she cares, she can cook the sheep with rosemary and smile when he does.

Well, Henali's mother says, referring to the deadness of the sheep, what's done is done. This is a common mentality here.

Henali vomits

The warm stuff tumbles down her legs. The unpleasant part is the splat at the bottom. As for the warmth, she doesn't mind that. She thinks it's nice. The hallway is not her room – it is a better

place to vomit. Her body moves. She puts her hand in the stream. All the buckets, she thinks, she will allocate and use all the buckets in the house. But she looks at her hands and the vomit slips away from her hands. How will Henali get the vomit inside of the buckets when she's found the buckets? Better to direct the next stream at the wall rather than the carpet – but even her night shirt is brown against her thigh when it used to be a pretty white. I will give up, Henali thinks, and sit down.

But Henali knows about SELF-DISCIPLINE, which is one very long and complicated to spell word in her own language. Look up, the headmaster said, look up and let your gaze move from my face at our new podium kindly donated by the Mothers Committee, all the way to the lovely arch of our hall, our school hall. Can you see it? the headmaster asked. Do you see it? SELF-DISCIPLINE. Big, lovely letters. Nice, red, big letters.

I cannot see it, she whispered to her sister, with her because it was Henali's first day. It isn't there, Magda said, cultivate the self-discipline to see what isn't there.

Self-discipline keeps you from sitting down. Left, right, she turns, wondering about the buckets. SELF-DISCIPLINE.

The small people

Just people are white. But the people are black. Small people are creatures: animals or spiders or insects or fairies or snakes or things that crawl out of mushrooms after midnight. The rain wakes the small people. The small people love rain like nothing else. I am of the small people, she knows. Not white or black but small.

In the ground, on the earth, between the rocks, the rocks as themselves. She finds the small people before the rain comes for she can smell it too. They all know. They have been created to know.

Her fingers go up and down: over the red earth, touch very lightly, up to her face and stroke. Then repeat.

Are we different?

Aliens can put our emotions in little boxes and sniff at them later. The technology has not been invented in this galaxy. The people here put their emotions into boxes because this is a function of their evolutionary psychologies, but the boxes are not real and therefore do not keep.

When my boyfriend calls and I'm keeping watch over Henali, I tell him that I am, at the moment in question, spending my non-existent heart on Henali and do not have emotional space for him. This is different to what the people of Henali's city do. Their feelings sprawl like their shopping malls. She lives in a city she will long for as an adult. I like coming here in summer because of the lightning storms.

The children of this city grow-up with lightning storms and although there are lightning-safety talks at assembly every now and again, they do not fear the flashes and the roars and their mothers, wherever the mothers have remained present, have to yell at them to enter some or other building.

Do not cross a golf course, the headmaster says, in a lightning storm. The children look at each other because they have never seen a golf course. The headmaster reads from a paper. Do not operate a sewing machine in a lightning storm, he says. Step away from the windows, close the curtains.

Puberty

The point is, she tells herself, to not draw attention to yourself. To be as small as you can possibly be. This is not only the point, she thinks, but also the key. The key to agency, sufficient alone-time, a quiet mind, she thinks, to a better life, she thinks. When Alida was in high school, she came home and told stories of chaos at school. Almost consistent chaos. The kids all white, but a handful not, and all of them Afrikaans together and all of them mad. Henali thought her high school life would be the same: strikes and angry young muscles and every time an uproar over singing the national anthem of the day at assembly. But the worst thing that has happened has been the sickly stick of her period every time it arrives.

And the uniform: its very cut a daily nightmare. Magda and Alida wore regulation underwear and her mother tried to pawn them off on her because the school is made up of staircases and Henali has come down with bad cellulite and the other kids walk in relentless rows behind her on the staircases and look up to see where they are going. The regulation underwear is bright turquoise to go with the light turquoise uniforms and covers not only your hooch but goes over your stomach and down all the way to cup each thigh.

This seems sensible in the light of the never-ending staircases. But Henali has an aversion to regulation underwear. What about undressing in front of all the girls on Tuesdays and Thursdays? Standing there in the primary school's practical dark green cuts. Hers was dark green only really long ago and used to be her sisters' or cousins' or both, who knows where it came from, and the holes it had were in exactly the wrong places. Sir, my tardiness is due to failure on my part to secure a school-panty before my sisters could and the fall-out resulted in a delay, Henali remembers laughing with her cousins as they practiced apologizing to the headmaster. When you were more than 20 minutes late it was straight to his office with your apology. Sir, I apologize for as I am standing here before you, late, with the breeze teasing the hem of my dress, I have gone commando due to failure on my part to locate and apply a school-panty. Regulation, of course, states that regulation underwear only is to be worn.

Henali will be alone forever, she realizes, because high school is too sweaty. Henali stands up in English class and pulls at her uniform. Turquoise is an interesting take on the pinafore, she wants to say for this has been on her mind. But she says, ma'am, I don't know in English, ma'am. And gets to sit down again.

*

Although she is in her teenage years and sporting a devil-may-care attitude, Henali has taken note of the references to classic coming-of-age patterns in her life. She has resolved to be despondent about her commonplaceness. She has accepted these patterns and has decided to embroil them with what she innocently feels to be an authentic self. I have followed her example in this. I hang out with my girlfriends and talk about these things while we float about, having brunch.

I meditate on pain

She hasn't died yet, all the same, Henali will never meet me. At night I lie awake and think on this. I try falling asleep on my back because my skin is always breaking out. Henali thinks that bodies know how to be beautiful. She says this a lot, 'listen to your body', things like that. But I am not so sure. I take good care of myself and I have remained ugly. It is not unnatural for aliens to be very ugly. Although there are plenty of exceptions, I am not one of them. Before my boyfriend comes over to the liquid black demarcated space that is my bedroom, I spend hours plucking and squeezing. I think, often times, that this is terrible and that everything is terrible. During those times I want, so badly, to die but aliens can't.

The older Henali gets the sharper the curves of the tunnels of her swerve. Humans are like this. The human childhood is a forceful experience. Humans talk about the formation of their planet: it blew up to make itself. This is an accurate description of the movement away from their childhood too: a quick vague sweeping out, a moment of contraction, a meticulous construction in and up.

My wings under my back at night bother me. Why must they be useless in the vastness of space? Why are they hard under my body when I try to sleep? I feel despondent. I put my hands on my stomach and, yes, there: the occupied-hollow feeling humans describe. Diamonds, or ice or fire, or coal or steel – glowing in the deepest parts of their stomachs. I see this feeling in my mother's face and this is how I visualize the feeling – a face. I wish I could tell Henali that I got this feeling in me because she would sigh and think it is romantic.

My boyfriend tries hard to have romance with me and I do appreciate his effort. Sometimes I choose to gradually become aware of and then experience his love. His love is nice to think about. I also enjoy being in the middle of the process.

We met in a forbidden forest behind the black space of my house. The roots of the tall trees tangle down into the silky black air. The roots grown longer and longer.

Henali is sad

Henali dreads the letting go. She thinks of the stiffness in not being able to sleep. The stiffness of her whole body. She thinks of how sharply she knows she will not sleep. How both the thought of that in itself and how her very body rings with this thought like a string in a bow. Her body stiff in her bed like a failure. A thing that fails to do what others of its kind can do. She has nothing to show for the ringing. Nothing gained. She merely feels the sharp extension of the experience. Henali thinks 'experience' is a filthy word. She is sad.

She has a phrase which translates from her own language to 'listen in the dark hour'. But it doesn't help. 'Listen late at night', Henali tells herself – more idiomatically. 'Listen in the darkness'. 'Listen to the darkness', at a stretch and with poetic license.

She listens. She cannot tell if that amounts to making it worse.

Always after all, life goes on. It is a choice, the fitness instructors on the internet say and the dominee says. But her mother does not say this and her father stares, all day, at the same spot on the wall.

The dog rolls around in the clouds of Henali's smoke for she has started, again, to lay on the ground or the grass. It will cure me, she thinks, for when I was a child, I lie on the grass like this. The ground is warm under her body. She smokes at the dog and he sneezes. I will write about you, buddy, she says and points with her smoking hand. I will write about your sneeze and the love you have for me.

Henali proceeds. She stands up in places and reads her story. It will be good for me, she thinks, telling these people about my dog. I will not only have eaten finger-foods at this party, she thinks and feels that this is correct and mature. I will have spoken up for myself.

Henali's girl has such a beautiful face

Her girlfriend lies on the ground also. There is a piazza at the university and her girlfriend goes there to lie on the paved surfaces people walk on all day and most of the night. Why, Henali is embarrassed, do you do this? and she thinks about the sloping lawns and the fact that there are sloping lawns and the sting of the presence of lawns having to be a pity. Why? but her girlfriend

is insane and glances side-ways to look up Henali's skirt. Don't, she snaps and slaps her skirt to her thighs. But her girlfriend lifts her neck and lets her head fall back on the hard cement. The girlfriend smiles when Henali flinches. You love me, and she smacks her head again and once more until Henali pretends to kick her with her arms way out like a soccer player going for gold.

*

On her 37th birthday, because this has a nice ring to it, Henali will stop being afraid of killing herself and think, briefly, of this girl and this time. She will remember cycling to the hospital on her new bike to visit the girl, who was not even good at killing herself. She will remember the wind and her skirt on the bicycle. The bicycle that helped her to become her best and most beautiful self. Henali will put her hands on her quads, feel their strength and regret that her life, a limp wet noodle in comparison, never did them justice. She will feel herself as muscle inside fat and skin over it. She will think of the bright pink cupcakes she baked for the girl. She will remember putting down the cupcakes on the hospital bed and then Henali will recall: back over the bridge over the brook where she couldn't linger because of the criminals, back around the corner of the street where she and Magda saw a potbelly pig holding up suburban traffic, all the way along the road where her friend lives with his five guitars, the steep hill, home. She will also recall a rosary slapping her knees as she peddles. As it stands, Henali confuses her romantic partners with each other all the time. She is not good at paying the careful attention she expects from them. Perhaps the rosary came from a movie. Henali wouldn't know about beautiful things with delicious names because she grew up in a dry place. But the image stuck. Sometimes I look at all the images stuck in her mind – all of them, every single one, wrong in some way.

I will be outside of the skyscraper she installed herself to fall from. I will not cast a shadow and I will not bring her attention to the unreliable nature of memory. My Henali doesn't care to ponder the concept of memory since she feels there is no point to it – there being no way to change the nature of memory even through hard and careful pondering. I will not reprimand Henali for being selfish and obstinate because I love her. And she does not need to hear things like this. I have always given her what she needed. I will be compelled to give her what she needs until the last second of her. I will observe her fall and go to space to be alone.

Go getter

It rains in the winter. I am horrified, she admits to herself and presses her nose against the window pane. This is not for me, she tut-tuts. Is this it? This is typical. The ground is far away. If the city is a place to return to, her mind wanders. She looks at everything she can see and the buildings are overwhelming in the sky. She slides her glasses on but the city persists. It goes up and down in the sky.

She thinks of the music of typewriters she only ever heard in plays. Her mother has a dead typewriter under the treasure-like junk she keeps in the cupboard in the room with the out of tune piano and broken projector. She twitches the muscles of her body. She is a body in front of a window. Move muscles, and they do.

Typewriters and their music are for grown-up women long ago. She raps her nails on the window. In the plays the women hitched up their skirts and danced – indicating that they are modern for the time they live in and grown-up.

What is the mark of a woman in the time she lives in? Henali wishes she had stayed home and married an engineer when she had the chance to.

She thinks of married girls popping out of ovens. Pop, pop, pop. They barricade themselves behind cookbooks and bibles. They are very safe.

Do you believe in evolution? Henali asks one of her boyfriends with genuine curiosity. He gapes. Do you believe in gravity, he says more than asks and laughs. Her cheeks burn.

Alone

It is said that the Highveld is a kak place to be in winter. But if it was, if the dryness was unpleasant and the dust in the air too much, then spring would also be kak and summer too (forget about autumn – the thing is a Western perception). The dryness is the same as the electrical storms. It is the same music. She opens her mouth and it dries out. She looks at the birds on their long red legs. Even when she isn't here, their legs run with red sureness across the dust. Their wings, shockingly wide when they open, lift the bodies they belong to out of the tall

grass. The grass is as much a part of her as memories of her mother. Does the grass belong to her? No. The Highveld sounds like dry nothing. Oh, she says, beautiful.

Henali is trouble when she walks in

If there were choices, which there are not, Henali knows the choices would be about men. One of them, or two. Or in favour of one and against another. Or, she has seen this on the internet, for a group of men, but all of them extremely mature and extremely consensual and not at all jealous. Henali is not as mature herself as to avoid cracking that joke, saying ‘I’ve yet to meet one of those,’ like men are a species and, moreover, a species which she can fault.

Henali is mad that her choices have been limited in this severe way. Her life, that beautiful thing when it is looked at as those two words, ‘her life’, ruined. Ruined, cut short, cut into a small block. What shall I do today, she asks herself. And, yes, comes up with an answer that has men in it like raisins in wedding cake.

Do not worry about it, a friend tells her. It is biological, it is an instinct, and the friend taps her stomach in a terrible way. But Henali knows it is not about reproduction.

Did her real grandfather not marry her grandmother when they were both too old to reproduce for all the world to see? In this way it is not about reproduction. In fact, Henali’s father explained it to her when she was small: people get used to company. And why wouldn’t they? Not the thing itself, but the paperbacks about it, the paperbacks her parents read to them every goshdang night to explain about life and about Jesus, said that the bible wanted humans to have babies. But Henali checked for the validity of this claim in the thing itself, the bible, and found the paperbacks to be lacking in correctness. The bible did not want for people to have babies. The bible showed how people got used to company like her father had said. Her father was right. People who are together want to be together more and more.

The great fault of her life has been to avoid people. But Henali cannot be blamed for this. In any case, the great fault of her life is neither here nor there because her body seems, always, to be making up for her poor choices. She feels for her body because it is already exhausted. But that,

also, is neither here nor there. Henali does not have time to worry about her vital organs as she has oral sex to administer.

But she tries not to think of it in those terms. Since, in those terms, her emotions and actions will be misinterpreted and undervalued. Henali clenches her fists, she is mad. People are always looking at her and thinking that she is a girl. But this is true and, also, what is there to do about it?

In any case, perhaps it will not matter in the long run. One of Henali's boyfriends is very sweet. Perhaps he will forgive her. This is likely since girls are often forgiven. This boyfriend is the kindest person she has ever met and she instinctively recoils. The boyfriend recoils in retaliation and this causes a large problem. But the problem is not unwelcome, because time must be passed in some way or another. Like idiots they spend much of their time talking about why they have trouble talking to each other. I'm sorry, the boyfriend says, I'm sorry, I'm getting really emotional. He fans his red cheeks like a girl.

Even in that, she thinks, this boyfriend is the same person she is. That the same person came across itself in the great big world is proof that it would be a mistake to imagine there is anything more alarming than being alive. You're being a coward, he says.

Fine, Henali says, but thinks, angrily that he does not open his mouth wide enough in general – when doing anything that requires an opening of the mouth. While it is true that they found each other, they found each other like Matilda and Miss Honey found one another. Will they spend their whole lives as versions of each other? Shrinking into their duplicate? Growing down? They sit stiffly across from one another, playing identical guitars, Henali hates it.

Henali, like love, goes on

In space my love for Henali is irrelevant. Sometimes I like to convince myself that it is not. I like to pretend my love is in a movie or a song. This would have made it beautiful. I like to think that other aliens are looking at it. I like to think that, years from now, mothers will take their daughters into their laps, stroke their hair and tell them about Henali. How she was brave. How I loved her. But Henali was just kidding – she doesn't believe in me.

Strangers in a strange town

The man is an unnaturally eloquent person. The woman thinks that a single stutter on his part would be equivalent to her whole body in a naked huff. The woman has to think about her butt yawning up her back as she hooks her knees into her arms and presses them to her breasts. But the man is paw-over-paw composed. His rare falterings are an ugly burden to him – the woman can tell.

When the man gets drunk, however, he oozes (like a fig). He remembers everything horrible and everything wonderful: he remembers with his mouth, loudly. His words are red, wet. He is a chunk of electric memory.

The woman does not need to worry because his mainframe reboots in the morning – without fail. When sober, he is a perceptive and receptive person. He listens and calculates. She imagines she can hear machine-like bo-beeps from his head when she is close enough to it. He composes apt responses to what he hears. This puzzles the woman: she feels he is not a liar. How can one be precise about truth and sincerity?

The man once turned his hand over to find the hardness of her pubic bone with his knuckles.

It's like egg-white, he said.

To her his stories are mottled and spin and they are warm with life. She imagines cow guts would feel like the feel of his stories. By contrast, she is dry with a sweep of egg-white on the surface.

This is why the woman has decided to acquire the man. The man is important with his eloquence. She wants to be important too!

By providence the man turns his head sideways and smells the hollows of her neck when they say hello. She cannot but conclude that she will be able to catch him unaware someday or over the course of many days and unravel him utterly to spin him into a glorious coat of skin for herself to wear.

He doesn't care about her whole face – the sharp and unforgiving contraction of her senses – being buried in the pinkest and most yielding parts of his body. She cooks for him and he eats everything she makes. He falls asleep like that. It is not hard to put something back together, she cannot but conclude, if you were the one to take it apart.

*

The man has been developing an ear for music. The woman has been developing distastes. She does not recognize these distastes for being deliberate and cultivated. Suddenly, she cannot stand low-pitched laughter or cow's milk. Suddenly, she sighs and mutters angrily when rain is forecast. She feels a change in her body but cannot fathom the origin. As a woman, she nurses her distastes like crying children. She does not recognize them for the demon-eyed familiars that they are: creatures that have turned on her and manipulate her actions. She merely feels the acidity in her body.

The woman gets sick. She vomits and faints, vomits and faints. She bleeds after sex and during sex. She feels a sorry virgin. She is probably not well. This will be what the woman settles for.

Is it that her body decided to speak up for her because she has been silent about herself? The woman constructs and maintains a philosophy to vomiting and this is what it is: what comes up went down. Of course she's heard people say something similar that is not as clever but equally true (however ho-hum). She thinks she is *more* right than people nonetheless. People, she thinks, should accept that evidence is a real thing. Vomit is evidence that something happened. This works exactly like words: they go in, inside they change, they come out – different, again.

Even the man has to dip words inside before he can apply words to others.

But she feels too solid. She would like to be able to grid, calculate, shift and readjust – so she may make people wait longer for her responses. So her responses will be more apt. Like the man's. But the woman is as good as a cement mermaid with iron rods and breeze blocks in her where there should have been steady gears – churning (something).

Therefore, the woman will be forgiven when she lies. Or if she does not come forward with her truth immediately. Or if she reveals the truth as the ghost of a bunny-rabbit flourished out of a hat. Or if she kills truth with a quick crunch as it bustles under her feet. Or if she sits on truth for months until she feels a crack beneath her – and neglects to get up. When she has a half-dead hatchling jerking and dying pathetically under her loins as the very last opportunity to give form to truth, she will be forgiven for nipping truth in the bud.

The woman knows very well that if she is candid, it is she who will stand trial as broken. If her truth were alive and well, streaming out of her with colour and life, as though she were Snow White, it is she who would stand trial as a liar. Don't remark on the smell of dead cat hanging around her. Overlook the pile of furry corpses known to be hidden in her bedroom. Pretend not to notice the bloodied feather sticking out of her hair.

The man, as a man would have done so. But the man is abnormally jaded.

It doesn't get any better, he continues to say. And sometimes: It doesn't matter.

The man develops his interests. The man readjusts his alcohol consumption for optimum functionality at his workplace. He settles down in his new town. He goes to community-theatre plays. He gets a second wind and buys a skateboard.

Both the man and the woman are young. For all their bodily gusto, the patterns of their thoughts are in retrograde. Their minds want only to return to what was previously known. Their minds want to return to a constant. Their bodies age quicker than their minds. In this way their habits catch up with them and they revisit the cold gusts of emergency. They speak about the concept of emergency. How it is coldly introduced in childhood when emergency is the sharpest and how doggedly it keeps coming. The man seems confident about emergency. He makes phone calls.

After all, the woman thinks, this shthead cannot even cook.

But she is lying to herself because the man throws rice and money and red bell peppers and coriander around and also fixes everything. One day the woman walks in to her own house, her

new home, to find the reassuring flap of the broken blind at the kitchen window fixed. The man gestures: I did that – for you.

The number of things he fixes accumulates. Yet he cannot fix the most obvious thing about him and the woman nods with satisfaction as she, in turn, visits his house to clean. She spits on surfaces and wipes them with his socks. She, distrustful of conventional ways of cleaning, demands shoe polish. He produces it because it is early morning and he is not entirely sober. He produces it from a bottom drawer between rolled up socks. She gasps. She has never seen these socks on his feet. Why hide them so meticulously in the bottom drawer? She looks him up and down. He bends down and reaches into the drawer – all the way back. He comes up with yet another pair of rolled up socks she has never seen. The socks are beige, thin.

I've never polished shoes, he says as he takes a beaten-up tin from among the socks. He looks at it then stops wanting to look at it and hands it over and turns away.

He has told her about his childhood – typical things about his childhood – before. Sharing is important in a relationship. They must both believe this. Therefore they assume their mutual positions of intimacy when the moment appears to compel it, brace themselves, and either talk or listen. The man, as such, does not like his face to be looked at when his face slides out from under his thumb. This suits the woman, not as good-looking as she used to be. When his stomach glows softly under her cheek as he speaks, she smiles, privately, at his feet. She thinks of the gurgles and squeaks as some sort of picture of his life. A deeper sound than his voice, sharing whatever it may be sharing, an octave above it.

The woman makes a point of cleaning around the islands of empty cans. The man will deal with his problem on his own. She approaches the nice chairs with the precious shoe polish and thinks of the overwhelming riches contained in this man's house: the valuable shoe polish, the good chairs. He brought these things into this house when he moved here. The man is rich on the outside and the inside. She would never say it out loud – but she is jealous. She has nothing warm in the pit of her stomach. Things happen, wash over her and are done with. Stories, she thinks, are a ball made up of tightly coiled things. And one swallows it. One can take it out and bounce it around to strike chords which people around one like to think they have. One can also

take it out very slowly, like a clown takes a coin out from behind a child's ear, and unspin a few yarns. If one wants to.

She, however, must keep her stories stewing in her skull. The stomach is dangerous territory for her since she is now a person that is sick. She leaves the stories about herself and the home she came from to soften up there in the broth of itself. Obviously, this broth is where stories are most comfortable. She would not dream of fishing the stories out and airing them in a foreign environment. Obviously, they would wither and die on the spot – being plump as they are, soaked with the secrets of her.

It is only on occasion that the man asks the woman not to listen but to speak. Sometimes she lies. Usually, she politely shuts up. This is a fine way of coping, obviously. The drawback is obvious too: she is left with no hardened ball to unravel into magic. She never allows the ball to form. And now she has no tool to ring out the disastrous amount of people surrounding her. Let alone the man.

One day the man runs into a door at full speed and the woman collapses on the ground with laughter. This becomes a kind of climax. The bump is there in the morning, right in the middle of his forehead. He squirms with embarrassment. The woman pumps her fist into the bed and kicks up her legs like a happy baby. She cries with laughter.

The door, she gasps, I don't know what you were trying to do.

At this point they surprise each other. He flops down on the pillow and groans and sighs into her neck. Defeat is a concept like emergency. Do not only think of it as something that comes or that happens. Think of it as something that will occur after other things, something that will stay within parameters. He sighs. She gives one last gurgle of laughter.

*

In some mistranslation of some translation the woman read that the city she lives in 'never dies'. She thinks that's something. If she were to bother, she would write home about that. She convinces herself there are profound things to be said about this vampire-, angel-, devil-like

aspect of the city. In her new city, the woman contemplates proximity. In her new city, she thinks, where no-one sounds like her mother and farther or her friend across the street, there is nothing to do but code-switch endlessly. She feels her tongue being pulled further and further out of her head by the manifold hands around her. The closer the hands the more unforgiving the grip. No matter, she thinks and bears it, this must be the growth people talk about. This must be the goodness that comes from what the TV calls 'challenging yourself'. A longer tongue, she soothes herself, is not an entirely useless thing.

She wants to try out her longer tongue. The man must be first because he is right in front of her and also, as an alcoholic, he must be punished for his bad behaviour.

Firstly, she feels, she must really look at him. He is nothing more or less than clusters of memories: burbling words flushing together and flash upon flash of upside down light on the back of his eyes. She pictures him where he used to live. She paid attention to his stories. She knows very well there are cacti and an unforgiving sun. She thinks about and then acknowledges the importance of everything she has been listening to. She feels that the onus is on her not to wince.

This is daunting. She starts to be afraid of breaking the man – precious and warm as he is. No, she will not hook her long tongue around him. Who knows what might happen. He has not been as lucky as she has. He has been more reckless. The woman thinks he could disintegrate at any moment. One day she vomits and a plan comes to her: evidence. The woman can copy the evidence of his make-up if she wants to make her another him. That, she feels, is easy and safe. Copies are malleable. Completely so. She has read the words 'anecdotal evidence' on the internet and misunderstood. She starts to tell stories about the man. She giggles and gestures. She rolls her eyes. She copies his accent when he is not around. She tells jokes that are his. She tells everything to people who have no business hearing anything.

The man also misunderstands. Is the woman talking to him less because he is an alcoholic? Did he say something he cannot remember? Something unforgivable because it was cruel, or something undesirable because it was too sentimental? The man most certainly did. Or perhaps the woman realized that he is awful. He takes a breath and makes phone calls. He writes things in

his notebook. He marks the date on his calendar. He looks in his mirror because he feels this is appropriate. He moves his money around in his bank accounts and starts boiling his rice.

The man decides. He makes a valiant effort. Every day is excruciating. The woman threatens not to leave but to stay. This is a hard and unpleasant exercise for both of them.

Tobias' body

Tobias drowned at the home of a neighbour after he had curled up in a basket filled with dirty clothes and was thrown into a washing machine.

Tobias attended St. Claire's High-school for the Specifically Talented in the Eastern Cape. Premier Noxolo Kiviet has extended his condolences to the family and the pupils and staff at the school. Tobias is survived by his two parents, two sisters and two dogs: Lulu and Froy (Tobias named Froy in early puppy-hood).

Winnie, Tobias's girlfriend at the time of his passing, has asked the next-door neighbours on either side whether Tobias was in the habit of going around to visit without their knowing. According to Winnie, both neighbours deny ever having knowledge of Tobias being, or not being, at their homes.

'We are a close-knit community,' the neighbour who did not kill Tobias said, 'and I am good friends with his mom, but Tobias was a teenager. I never saw much of him.'

The neighbour responsible for his death, after much embarrassment, admitted that she too, 'never saw much of him'.

'I could never tell,' she said, 'I couldn't, I wasn't one of those who could see him'.

Winnie is calling for a greater social understanding of Specifically Talented individuals like Tobias.

'I would not go so far as to blame the woman who tossed my boyfriend into the machine with her dirty laundry,' she says, 'but she freely admitted that she did not see, feel, hear, smell or sense Tobias – an actual, eighteen year old human – in her laundry room. She did not feel the weight of my boyfriend. She did not hear him speak in his sleep or snore – he did both these things all the time.'

Winnie has fallen out with her family members following the incident.

‘My parents blame me for speaking out. I can do what I want at home and they actually liked Toby as a person, I could tell, but my parents do not think it right that all this attention has been brought to my family and I would not go so far as to call them ashamed. But I am living with my grandmother right now.’

Winnie hopes to matriculate with distinctions in both History and Mathematical Sciences this year. Winnie was classified as an H2 Specifically Talented individual at birth and attends St. Claire’s.

Tobias’s family would like to bury his body on an ancestral burial ground near their home. Currently, however, the area in question is held up in a land claim case which has been in court the past five years.

‘Tobias died. There is no reason,’ Tobias’ mother said, ‘no reason for me to be upset about the land claim now. I would bury Tobias anywhere. I would not bury him at all. I don’t care. But if everyone lived like this – what would happen? Dead sons strewn the country over. I might as well care and I have to care; it’s the same thing. I might as well eat and drink everyday and I have to eat and drink every day. This makes sense to me.’

An emotional Winnie appeared on 3-Talk with Noeleen last Monday in response to Tobias’ mother’s comment, or lack of comment: ‘His mom said nothing about his Specific Talent and this makes me angry,’ she said.

‘Why does it anger you?’ Noeleen asked.

‘It angers me because it dismisses him: Toby was Specifically Talented. That is the reason, okay probably, he is now dead. That is something that should be mentioned. It also dismisses me. I am Specifically Talented. I don’t care who knows it. I want people to know it!’

‘Do you think land claims are unimportant?’ Noeleen asked after making a series of sympathetic noises.

‘No, it’s hugely important,’ Winnie said, ‘but I don’t care about it.’

The talk show went to commercial break and then took a caller, Marie-Allet, from Vereniging. Marie-Allet expressed her regret at Tobias’ passing and offered her condolences to Winnie.

‘Dankie tannie,’ Winnie said.

That night Winnie woke up from a dream which she revealed on a late night radio show which was shut down in the morning. Under the Protection of State Information Act the name of the radio station cannot be printed. Winnie’s dream violates the safety of the general South African public by inadvertently revealing classified information.

‘The bill has been controversial,’ minister Cwele said this morning, ‘but here we are presented with the perfect example of the bill’s worth and its necessity: this young, teenage girl has a dream, that is fine with us over here, but as soon as she expresses this dream and it is gobbled up and shot into space by a greedy and irresponsible media outlet, that very dream not only violates the girl but opens up an entire country to the dangers of espionage. That we cannot have,’ the minister said, failing to mention how the dream has compromised South African safety.

‘Of course I cannot tell you how,’ he said, ‘don’t be stupid.’

While Winnie’s dream is now classified information, selective parts of it have been printed by risk-takers in the print-media.

‘Tannie Marie-Allet stroked his hair,’ one magazine proclaimed on the cover before all copies were removed from stands and stores across the country.

A glossier, more expensive publication did a spread on Noeleen and, with uncharacteristic boldness, quoted the Noeleen from Winnie’s dream instead of the real Noeleen in three different paragraphs. These quotes are classified information. Noeleen, however, came to know what she said in the dream before all copies of the publication were destroyed and she responded as follows:

‘I would never have done that. Winnie and Tobias are children. I am not gay, or bisexual and I am a married woman.’

Winnie, still under her grandmother’s roof claims she is heartbroken and alone ‘in the worst way’.

‘It is hormones,’ her grandmother has told the media, ‘being alone is not bad – therefore, I say, it cannot be “the worst”’.

The controversy following the death has, understandably taken its toll on the late Tobias’ family. One of his sisters has moved out of the family home. Tobias’ father had the dogs put down after Tobias’ mother committed suicide last Wednesday.

A three-page note was found. It was folded twice, then crumpled, then put in the pantry under the thick, glassy hollow of a large apricot jam jar:

My boy came home and he smelled like his happiness. When I was young I never smelled like that – I know I never did. He is mine and I called him over for a hug and kisses. Tobias was the softest baby of them all. Tobias loved me best from the start. I had him pressed to my nipple and Tobias loved me with the entirety of the love he had at his disposal. When he fell asleep as he was drinking from me I made an o with my mouth and blew on his face in soft stops and starts. Never, like the other moms, did I take my nipple out of his mouth or shake it around in there. Some moms also press the nipple of their other breast to the baby’s cheek because babies know what breasts feels like and feeling breasts makes them so hungry they wake up again. My boy was insubstantial in the best way that could possibly be. He lived on air from the start and I’ve loved him for that as much as I can. When he was 13 he ran his bicycle into a tree stump and flew over the handlebars. I watched him fly from the kitchen window. He flew wholeheartedly into the space and time that he was given to fly. I loved Tobias like this: like flying over the handlebars before the ground looms large.

Today he came home smelling happy and he was too occupied to come when he was called to receive his hugs and kisses. My mother never touched me. I want Tobias to know this. But his knowing would ruin the lovely thing of holding him because he wants to be held. Tobias is too

kind. He would oblige me. I do not want to be obliged. He went to his room and shut the door – smiling to himself.

I hadn't left the house all day. I hadn't used the phone. I wore my housecoat; it was four o'clock. I followed my son to his room and knocked. He didn't answer. I told lies about my day through the door. I told him his grandmother called. I told him there was a special on fat cakes and mince at the cafe shop – if he wanted we could have that for dinner. Finally I told him Winnie called before he came in. And I smiled when I heard him jump up from his bed.

But Tobias didn't come out. When, two hours later, I went so far as to open his door myself, something I hadn't done since he was 14, he was already gone. I don't know what happened to Tobias. He wasn't hanging, or bleeding or vomit-stained. He lay on the floor in a perfect capital G. But the doctors all said Tobias would be fine. They said he could live like everyone else and die like everyone else. They said the H9 Specifically Talented defect comes with a set of emotional intuitions which influences the sufferer's appearance but in no significant way impacts their physical health except in so far as Tobias might cross the street and be invisible to a driver. They didn't warn me about the capital G. It was not supposed to happen. Everyone in our family could see Tobias. Everyone could touch him.

I lay down behind him. I pulled him close by his hips. I pressed my mouth to the back of his neck. He was cold; I could't understand it. One of my arms went under his neck and the other over his stomach. I don't lie with my husband like this. I must have remembered the mechanics of that embrace from when I was my boy's age. I clutched his hands in mine. Tobias held something in his fist. It was a piece of paper with the words 'simple math' written on it and that's when I knew Tobias killed himself. He wasn't scared of eternity because when your brain stops firing you are gone because you are, simply, the firing. That is what he said at the dinner table to enrage my husband. He wrote it down because he wasn't good with words but he wanted me to know that he committed suicide. He wanted the autonomy that is in that. I lifted his shirt and pressed my face into his stomach. Tobias had a very soft voice as a result of the defect so I spoke up for him on that day. I screamed his name and I screamed, 'it is astounding how much I love you'.

All the same, I picked him up like a toddler when I had done with my crying. I carried him to the women next door who drinks rooibos by herself at her kitchen window all day. I knew she left the back door open despite the women on the other side of our house being robbed twice and raped once in the space of six months. I put my boy in her washing machine – it was what I could think of to do: I don't have a machine – my husband is a manager at an automatic car wash. Her dirty things were in a basket next to the machine. I threw it all in. I closed the lid and started the cycle.

On Thursday Tobias' father responded to the note:

'I am not a manager at an automatic car wash,' he said.

'My wife never knew her mother. My son was not an atheist and he failed math twice – this is why he was in the eleventh grade at almost 19 years of age. Our next-door neighbour on the right, I happen to know, never drank rooibos tea because she was a domestic worker from the age of 14,' he slammed his right fist into his left palm as he said '14', 'till 39 and made approximately 9 cups of rooibos for the missus every Monday to Friday during these years.'

Tobias' father maintains that Tobias was loaded into the neighbour's laundry machine by accident.

'My wife was literally out of her mind with grief,' he said, 'one who kills oneself kills a person. That is calculated murder – the most widely appreciated sign of insanity'.

'My son suffered from an extremely serious illness. I did my utmost for him for years but what has happened has happened. My son will be buried with the ancestors as soon as the land claim goes through.'

Tobias' father said that his wife's organs were donated and he declined to be sent the.

On Thursday the neighbour who did or did not drink rooibos by the kitchen window took her life as well. It is unknown if she knew of Tobias' mother's passing or of her three-page note.

A note was found at the back of the neighbour's throat during autopsy. It was rolled into a tight tube and then folded in half. Presumably the woman tried to swallow the note and died before she did. A large jug of milk was found next to to body. She had milk spilled down her neck and breasts. What was readable of the note was verified as follows:

Tobias lay on his stomach and his face was crumpled next to mine on the mattress. His lips were forced forward and the skin around his eyes bunched and looked like caterpillars of dough. I touched one of the caterpillars. I felt something strange: I wanted Tobias to wake up and tell me something mundane. Tobias goes to the Shoprite and buys frozen peas for his mom. I wanted to hear about that. Sometimes I would see Tobias bending down and tying his shoelace; when he straightened up he was gone. I wouldn't know whether he took off running or sauntered along. Teenagers. I don't know. I touched the outside edge of the thumb that lay exposed in front of Tobias' crumpled face. I rubbed up and down with my own thumb. Tobias wouldn't wake up. I could touch him: he was dead. I wanted to take off his pants. I took off his pants. I started with the zip: I worked my way into the fold of his underpants. His penis was cold in the tunnel I made with my fingers. But at the base of my hand I could feel that his scrotum was still warm. I pressed the bottom of my pinkie into his scrotum. What of his testicles? I let go of his penis and I pulled his scrotum upwards until his testicles was easy to grab. I took hold of one and rolled it under his skin. I pushed it around with the bottom part of my thumb that swells up on my palm. I wanted to take off his pants. I undid the button and worked the pants over his butt. Tobias' underpants came with. I looked at the softest and most yielding parts of his body. How could he know? I wanted him to know that I could see everything. But Tobias was not breathing; I don't believe he could have known.

Tobias was like a drowned puppy when I unloaded him from the wash. I woke up yesterday morning from crying. I am a happy woman. I don't remember the nightmare. He was like a runt. Too soft and bendable, too dead.

I pulled the pants all the way down to the ankles. Tobias didn't breathe. My fingers are long and I remember half-seeing Tobias outside of my window once: crouching, prepubescent then, listening to me. St Claire's does not have music classes in their curriculum. They don't even have a piano at the school. I tried to donate my mother's piano when she died and

they wouldn't have it – claiming they had no use for it. But Tobias was crouching: his near invisible butt hanging low over the soil. I played hymns because I knew that Tobias' mom made him go to church and that he obliged without much of a scene.

Tobias' bare ankles lay together. I fitted my fingers around one, my fingers went all the way around.

I pulled up the pants. I picked Tobias up; long ago his father carried an invisible thing from the car up the steps to the house on one of the children's late nights. I might have been putting him to bed too. I carried him from the living room back to the laundry room. I put him back in the machine and closed the lid.

At the time of going to print, St. Claire's matrices were jostling each other in the hallways. Those students who could see each other made smart remarks about the shapes of each other's bodies.

Order or chaos

This was a bad time in Sam's life. This was a bad and lonely time. He had a mirror and of course he looked into it. It was an unavoidable thing to do. He had to control his face. His facial hair had to be controlled. The plaque between his teeth: controlled! Sam threw the blankets onto or off his body and thought resentfully of the circular nature of controlling facial hair and plaque.

Sam wanted to kill himself but he was afraid to. 'I am afraid of everything,' he said to himself in the mirror.

Yesterday, for exactly the seventh time in Sam's life, his wallet was stolen. Sam threw a hissy fit. He threw it inside his house. Then he looked at the windows and although they were all cracked and all of them dirty – they were there. And Sam felt guilty for throwing a hissy fit and he felt guilty that there was barely any cash in his stolen wallet and he felt guilty for not having shaved that morning. He thought of the wind because, if he grows up, he wants to be a writer, and the wind struck him as a terrible thing. A necessarily thin and cruel thing and to be someplace where there are no windows in frames to protect you from the wind. Sam felt guilty.

He sat down to write about it. But he got up again to make coffee. Out between the cracks in the kitchen window Sam's neighbour's arm was making coffee in her kitchen. He could not let the neighbour see him. There: her breast in that faded blue t-shirt dipping into a dirty bowl in her sink. Sam's hands jerked on his cup as she squealed. There was probably water, icy cold and dirty water, in the bowl. She probably tut-tutted but Sam made himself think of his hands instead.

But that was yesterday and now, again, he had nothing to think on and had to be content with the feelings of sorrow in his body as the main thing to be concerned about.

Tomorrow Sam will have a day similar to today.

*

He didn't understand how people could live in this world. Because in this world, Sam knew, there are killer whales in amusement parks. There are amusement parks between two countries sometimes, Sam knew about this, amusement parks on borders. Rollercoaster rides that are war-themed. He saw, with his own eyes, barbed wire with fairy lights strung around it and he had his photo taken with a soldier. Sam pretended to laugh and joke with his friends about it later – about the tour group at the border, all the fat Americans, and the lady, explaining with her accent: here are the bullet holes from that day, over here family members place flowers, there is the actual border. And at the shop he bought not only bottled water but a little snow globe with a fat dictator inside. Sam pretended to laugh but in truth he could barely stomach it. And in the tour bus there was a beautiful girl sitting next to him. He could appreciate the facts that she was beautiful and so close to him but he was upset all the same about having to get excited about the situation. The girl did the same thing over and over: opened her bag, checked that her passport was inside, looked momentarily at ease and closed it again before the same worried look settled on her face again.

Sam thought about it and then decided to do something about it. He had many things to speak about as long as he avoided some things that would make him close down and not say anything anymore. He didn't want to seem rude. Small talk is easy enough for Sam because he has already spent many years in the world he did in any case not want to be in; being in it has no end-goal for him – the objective, if there is one, is to not leave. He could accept this. He didn't have that objection to small talk – that it wastes time. But the girl was bad at talking. She put her hands on some part of her face when she said things.

Outside the bus the endless highway gave way to skyscrapers – first one or two here and there and then skyscrapers forever. Sam grimaced: it was necessary for him to fall in love with the beautiful girl.

Some killer whales lived up to a hundred years. What a beautiful thing to be thinking about. Sam pretended a killer whale was swimming with the bus, swerving between the skyscrapers and casting a deep shadow on him and the girl.

‘Will you be my girlfriend?’ he asked. Sam remembers feeling validated when she laughed. And he remembers how clever he felt he was – what a clever and sweet way to talk to a stranger. He didn’t mean any harm.

*

Sam felt that he was a naive person. And he felt resentful about being naive. He couldn’t understand why – it felt like things were always happening to him. And even when things were not happening, he felt the absence of them and this hollowness was painful. If he were better, if he knew how he was supposed to organize moments inside time, this would not be the case, he thought.

The beautiful girl was in his bed, pretending she wasn’t, when he woke up. It was not that Sam didn’t know or couldn’t remember her name. If you are going to call a person by name then you should make the correct sounds. If you cannot make the absolute correct sounds then you should at least be 70% sure that 70% of the noises are correct. He felt the vagueness of his panic contract when the girl introduced herself and had to repeat her name. There was no way, he knew, he could reproduce the noises, three distinct noises. Sam thought about and then made a decision.

‘Babe,’ he said and this was 70% correct because the girl had large breasts and nice legs. The girl was wearing his new longjohns and a t-shirt his mom got him. She was pretending that she wasn’t there.

‘Babe,’ he repeated.

Right then, Sam came up with a plan. Although it was very often sad (the eyes of the animals behind the glass) going to the aquarium struck him as a thing that he could do with this girl. She was there, after all. The zoo was not a place Sam could stomach. But he thought about the monkeys flinging their fruit peels and sometimes their shit at their bars and it occurred to him that feeding the girl may be the thing to do.

Sam got up to make coffee and all the while he was telling her about the 421 bus, the blue one, to the zoo. Then he was brave because her feet under the blanket when he looked at them gave him

the same feeling as looking at his dog's tummy when she was a puppy and he admitted that he didn't really want to go to the zoo.

'Cruelty,' he said by way of explanation.

Did you know, Sam thought to himself, that cereals marketed for children had eyes on the boxes. And not only this! The eyes, he reminded himself, looked down. The eyes on the cereal boxes looked down and therefore right at the children. Buy me, the eyes communicated, tell your mom. This was a way of making communication happen. Although the fish and the animals at the aquarium would have more, so much more, than eyes, he would have to go there now because of the girl. And again Sam felt resentful and frustrated and the worst thing about feeling that was that there was no reason to.

'Yes, I love the aquarium,' the girl said nervously and touched her nose. He gave her her coffee. 'But I have to go in a bit,' she added and Sam was surprised and relieved.

His favourite ex-girlfriend, Julie (that was a happy time in his life) made him feel this total absence of stress for a very long time. It was really strange. But he had a theory about it: he felt such staggering stress – all the stress that came with having to be around the pretty and cool Julie all the time – that the stress reached a tipping point and toppled over into something else. A different feeling: a nameless one. Sam knows about the ship and the wild island: a ship approaching an island full of people who thought the island was the world and didn't know about ships. The very important part is that they had no word like 'ship' and so the ship floated there for many days, maybe forever, not being spoken about, not being seen. And someone thought this story was important and wrote it down and this person was right because Sam feels similar things about himself: he is an island.

The beautiful girl will leave in a bit and it will be nice to have the day to himself but it will also be stressful. Is he supposed to be by himself?

Even in Harry Potter, which is Sam's favourite, people were always dying. He didn't mind that they die, what would be the point of minding since there is no way to stop the deaths from happening, but he was not about to pretend that dying is no big deal. Sam, who had many

problems, he was not about to pretend that he didn't, wrote something that was important to him in his notebook about quitting smoking and drinking.

'Certainly,' he wrote, and rightfully so, 'my dad's death is not the most significant part of his life.'

'It would be better to say,' Sam wrote, 'that it is the most insignificant part.' And then he wrote and wrote and came to a conclusion that scared him because it felt accurate and honest: it was really a bit shocking that he had not come to this conclusion before – earlier in his life.

'If I continue in this way,' and it wasn't necessary for him to be specific about the way because he was writing in his notebook that is specifically *for* writing about quitting drinking and smoking, 'me dying will be the most obvious and most interesting thing about me'. This was the conclusion. And he thought that people were like rolling balls of dough, squelching across the globe and accumulating problems as they went. The problems drive them towards death (faster and faster). The problems kill them.

The most correct distinction between being a boy and being a man is that Sam now buckles under his problems whereas he used to be agile, climbing trees and flying through the streets on his skateboard, driven by his own force, not walloped forward by the critical mass of accumulating problems.

'Well, I'll see ya,' the beautiful girl said and tugged an ear lobe and blushed. Sam made himself think of his one hand on his coffee cup and his other on the door knob. He didn't know if walking her to the bus stop would be the right thing or the wrong thing to do and so he waited for the girl to communicate her feelings about this. What did she feel would be the correct behavior in this case? But, like an empty envelope, she looked at him, not moving her body or face, waiting next to him for him to open the door. The white parts of her eyes struck him as more white than was to be expected and Sam felt embarrassed about his hangover but he concentrated on the ripple of sinews on his hand as he twisted the door knob.

The walls of his house, when he was alone inside, looked to him like alien things. But, this is the important part, things that should not be alien to him, to him Sam, things that were in fact supposed to be familiar. Again he thought of the lack of things to do and this was painful.

He thought hard but could not pinpoint a foreseeable shift in the way things flowed in and out of his days. There was routine – something he made and could alter. There was non-routine: the stolen wallet, the girl, even his neighbour's breast and how it dipped – only sometimes! – into dirty water in her kitchen sink. What about the feelings that clung to these events? The feelings did not belong to the events, however, they clung determinately. Sam thought of taking a bus with his mother as a child and of being introduced to the simple horror of spat-out gum that did not come out of your own mouth. It was hard to understand as a child and it is hard to understand as an adult: a piece of gum like a foreign soldier in your hair or under your fingers under the bus seat. A surprise.

Sam went to sit outside on the stairs of his building, because he did intend to, someday, try even harder than he was already trying and therefore could not sit inside like he had 0% hope. He smoked and it felt good. He felt relaxed and he looked out on the sprawl sloping away from his house and his seat on the stairs. Sam could see the beautiful girl waiting at the bus stop. It crossed his mind that she might be going to the zoo on the blue 421. He couldn't understand how people could go to the zoo. Specifically if they've been there before. How do they bring themselves to go? Sometimes again and again?

Then Sam felt a very strange thing in his chest. He thought, but calmly, that he was dying at that very moment and looked resentfully at the cigarette in his hand and felt like a cliché – worse: a cliché inside a cliché. But instead of dying Sam felt a voice travelling up through his chest and ring out in his mind. And this was the voice of Taylor Swift singing 'All too well'. He hears this song often. It plays at the supermarket.

Sam stood up. His cigarette crumpled and burnt the top of his hand and fell away. He was clutching the railing of the stairs and craning his body forward. He opened his mouth and let his voice go up and down with the Taylor Swift in his head.

'You almost ran the red, 'cause you were looking at me,' his voice was quiet and wrong. He watched to see if the girl at the bus stop changed her face or body, indicating that she heard him.

'You call me up again,' Sam tried again with his voice, 'just to break me like a promise.'

He gripped the railing and tried again with that same part of the song he always hears at the convenience store. He became anxious for the girl to hear him singing in the very moment that he stopped being anxious that she did.

‘Here we are again,’ Sam sang with his voice that was not fit for singing, ‘in the middle of the night, we’re dancing in the kitchen by the refrigerator light’. He was picking up steam.

The blue 421 came out of nowhere and took the girl away.

Me and Mrs. Williams

I am the main character in this story and Mrs. Williams is my animal. She's not my spirit animal or anything like that. My spirit animal is a unicorn because my penis plays a big part in my life. Mrs. Williams's spirit animal is a goat. Mrs. Williams and me have many adventures together.

One day, for instance, I met a girl. She was across the room as I had come to expect from females. Her light bulb went from black to mother of pearl as she talked to her friends. Her light bulb shot up high and did a flip at its highest point when she laughed. She put her hand over her mouth like she was astonished. She had beautiful eyes and they got rounder and rounder as she chatted and giggled and laughed.

'Garçon,' I said as the waiter made his rounds and I tossed a tooth out of my new sachet, 'your finest for the female in the silver dress at the bar'.

The female in the silver dress's light bulb flooded and she excused herself to head to the restroom. Her dress was backless. Her back was attractive.

I took Mrs. Williams out of my traveling case and had her sit on my shoulder. Mrs. Williams was sleepy from the long journey and slouched into my neck.

'Mrs. Williams, this is no time for a nap, look!' The female and her backless silver dress was already coming out of the restroom and passing alarmingly close to my table on her way back to the bar. On an impulse I reached for Mrs. Williams' tail and put it under my nose like a moustache.

'Madam,' I nodded and twirled Mrs. Williams' tail as the female in the silver dress swished past me. Her bulb steamed up which pleased me no end.

'Mrs. Williams, did you see? She likes me!' Her silver dress was particularly silver as she sat down at the bar, crossing one leg over the other, calf over knee.

The barman slid a glass across the table and she took it and cupped it in her palms like it was a cup of cocoa. The barman raised his eyebrows in my direction and she followed his gaze to meet mine. She lifted the glass and I twirled Mrs. Williams' tail.

‘Mrs. Williams,’ I said, ‘should we go talk to her?’ But Mrs. Williams had fallen asleep with her tiny claw holding on to my ear and I got no response.

‘I can’t do it without you,’ I said, but only half meaning it and Mrs. Williams started snoring.

The female in the dress sipped on her drink and looked me up and down. I stroked Mrs. Williams’ tail. I pulled a nonchalant hand through my hair. I reached up and gave my light bulb a twirl. The female bit her bottom lip. She slid a finger under a strap of her silver dress and lifted her elegant hand, rolled out her forefinger and curled it in – only once.

‘Let’s do this,’ I said, partly to myself, partly to Mrs. Williams and partly to the female across the room. As I got up, I checked my buttocks in a reflection in silvery vase on the table. The female looked at me and brought her hand to her smile. My buttocks were looking good. I nodded to the vase; I cocked my head at the female. This woke Mrs. Williams who nearly lost her grip on my ear. She grabbed a handful of my locks and gave it a sharp tug.

‘Mrs. Williams,’ I said, ‘this is no time for shenanigans’. I started sauntering. I sauntered across the room, swinging my travelling case as I went, swaying my hips, readjusting Mrs. Williams’ tail on my upper lip.

‘Sup,’ I stood in front of the female.

‘Nothin’,’ she sipped her drink. She was cute. Her voice was cute.

‘Aren’t you a cutie?’ I said. She giggled. I stood closer. Her light bulb’s heat emission increased perceptibly.

‘Nice buckle,’ she said and shot her hands out to stroke my belt and the teeth on its buckle. Mrs. Williams jumped.

‘Goodness,’ I gasped. Mrs. Williams swung herself onto my head and fanned my light bulb with her tiny fingers.

‘Do you want to get out of here?’ the female asked and Mrs. Williams’ scuttling claws scraped across my skull as I nodded.

‘All right, then,’ the female lifted her dress to pull the silver dagger from her garter.

‘Ready when you are,’ I said, and the female bit her bottom lip again as she stood even closer to me and put the blade into my neck. As I sank to the floor, dying, I’ll admit that I looked up the female’s silver dress and Mrs. Williams gave me a sharp rap on the head in reprimand.

At the pearly gates I sat straight up, checked my breath for freshness and smoothed my ruffled hair. I patted around the mist till my hand fell on my travelling case. I looked around. A solitary angel sat in a cloud of fog at the entrance playing her harp and giving me a toothless grin. She had boney feet propped up on a little velvet ottoman. Its fabric was full of holes. Mrs. Williams snuggled into my shirt and peeped out at the angel. Twing-twang-plunk-pink, the angel’s harp moaned but there was nothing to do but wait for the female to join me at the gates.

‘In the meantime,’ I said, ‘let’s explore’. Partly for myself and partly for Mrs. Williams.

The angel’s eyes followed us as I tried to find my feet on the clouds. She stopped playing for a moment and brought an arm down to her side. Mrs. Williams peeped in distress as the mist cleared enough for us to see what the angel’s arm was doing. A stuffed ferret stood next to her with an open mouth in a toothless yelp and the angel patted its head. She stroked her palm over its neck and, there, in the centre of its back, was a cup holder. The angel picked up her beer and brought it to her lips.

I wished the female would arrive already so we could consummate our attraction and be done with it. My bulb crackled with static. Mrs. Williams’ coat bristled and itched the skin under my shirt but it felt all right to keep her in there. Her little claws hung on to my collar and her little head whipped from side to side.

‘Goodness, Mrs. Williams,’ I said, ‘it’s only heaven – calm down!’ and she peeped pathetically, poor thing.

There was some graffiti along heaven’s walls and I walked us over to keep our spirits up. Mrs. Williams got a foot entangled in my chest hair with her agitated knee jerks and I opened my travelling case to take out the little golden pair of scissors I carry with me for this purpose.

‘Cut it out,’ I joked and held the scissors up to my chest for Mrs. Williams. She giggled.

‘Punny,’ she said, the perfect selection from a limited human-vocabulary.

‘Mrs. Williams, you are brilliant!’

‘Love,’ she said and cut herself lose with the tiny pair of scissors.

FUCK THE MAN was graffitied red on the shabby walls of heaven. What could the female in the silver dress be waiting for? Heaven smelled. I felt my bulb cooling ominously.

‘This is not good, Mrs. Williams,’ I said. Two stick figure angels were doing vulgar things with their own unmentionables next to FUCK THE MAN. The wall itself seemed to make a sound, low and deep and continuous. Mrs. Williams leaned out of my shirt and reached out a tiny curled finger to scratch at the plaster. The wall gave a sickly cough.

‘Goodness!’ I said and Mrs. Williams peeped frantically.

‘Mrs. Williams, don’t swear – you’ll get us into trouble!’

‘Damn straight,’ a tiny voice rose up from the mist.

There was a grimy halo floating next to my hip and a grimy face appeared underneath it. The face grinned.

‘Hey mister,’ the face said and I felt a sharp tug on my travelling case, ‘whatcha got in here?’

The little critter’s beady eyes shone wickedly. I thought of the stuffed ferret with the beer on its back and its horrific glass eyes.

‘Scoundrel, get away,’ but my voice sounded feeble next to the wall’s big sound. I backed away clumsily and my light bulb blushed.

I brought my hand up to my chest and motioned for Mrs. Williams to hold it.

‘Hold my hand,’ she said and I nodded, hurrying away from the brat. I had to hold my precious case out in front of me at chest-level. Who knows what kind of angels hung around below the mist? The wall boomed low behind us and let out an ugly whooping cough.

‘Excuse me!’ I headed to the harpist at the gates, ‘my monkey wants to leave,’ I wiggled the hand Mrs. Williams held at the angel.

‘Don’t we all,’ she, nasty thing, said and lifted up a bony foot, opened her mouth and scratched her toothless gums, ‘but we can’t’. Then she reached a wing out behind her and pushed on a pearly gate till it creaked heavily and swung slowly backwards on its hinges.

‘In you go, now,’ her halo swayed as she motioned with her head. Heaven smelled worse with its gate open. Heaven itself made a sound, like its walls. I was not going in there.

‘I’m not going in there!’

The angel’s halo boomeranged out and in as she whipped her head around to glare at me.

‘No need,’ the angel looked me up and down, ‘no need to be nice to me; I’m only an angel.’

‘Hallelujah!’ Mrs. Williams peeped in desperation, ‘praise be’. But the angel wasn’t falling for it. She spat into the fog.

‘Angel, where is the exit, please!’ I pleaded and the ugly thing twing-twanged her harp with one hand and lifted the other, raised a finger and pointed it straight ahead of her. I whipped around, scanned the fog. A small patch of glowing darkness was just visible a little way ahead of us amidst the terrible whiteness of the fog. I hurried us over, my travelling case flopping in front of me, and Mrs. Williams sweating out of her tiny glands into my chest hair.

I waved my case around to clear the dark patch of mist as much as I could and I dropped to my knees. The darkness was a hole the size of Mrs. Williams’ body and I put my face to it and looked.

‘It’s home!’ I said, for a round thing with dark red swirls on it that could only be my planet floated way down below in the vast expanse of space under heaven. Heaven’s underbelly groaned next to my face. Out of the corner of my eye I could see snakes, worms, pretty candy canes and cupcakes and snails all in a mess together writhing along its surface. The underbelly gave a whooping cough just like the walls of heaven and bundles of the snakes, candy canes, worms, pastel coloured cupcakes and snails fell away into space in clusters. I shuddered to think of these things burning through my planet’s atmosphere and plopping down roasted on its surface.

I sat up gravely. Mrs. Williams jumped down, popped my travelling case open and handed me small golden binoculars I keep for emergencies. I reached into the case and pulled out an even smaller pair of golden binoculars and handed them to her. We peered down the hole.

‘There!’ The female in the silver dress, in the middle of my planet, still at the bar where she killed me. Laughing ostentatiously. Mrs. Williams and me looked at each other, shook our heads, and looked down again, zooming in.

The female’s light bulb glazed over in a rosy pink as we glared. She looked up and squinted.

‘You cheater!’ I shouted, my handsome voice was shrill and thin, ‘come up here, come and get us’. But she laughed, bringing her hand to her mouth.

‘That’s not fair!’ I shouted.

‘Life,’ Mrs. Williams shouted as best her tiny throat could.

‘Not fair,’ I shouted. The female tossed her hair out of her face.

Behind us the booming of heaven’s walls and silence rang out. The harp twanged softly in the distance. I felt a small hand, which was certainly not the hand of Mrs. Williams, close around my ankle.

We’re still here. Mrs. Williams is forced to comb the ferret till its coat shines and her little paws ache. I’m chained to the gates of heaven by my neck. I’m thinking of a plan.

The On My Way Cat

The On My Way Cat was confusing! Where was he going and why? Sometimes the On My Way Cat would jump on her shoulder and then into her ear.

‘I’m coming’, he bristled, because he lost his voice in a botched routine tonsillectomy.

‘Crawlers out!’ she shouted. But it made little difference.

‘I have little regard,’ he bristled, ‘for your emotional or physical comfort,’ because this is how the On My Way Cat swears.

‘Health is happiness,’ she protested.

And the cat retaliated:

‘What about the sadness that comes at night under the blankets when your tummy is full and your bowels clean?’

Then she would scratch at her ears and make things worse for herself.

‘Out,’ she moaned but it made little difference.

The On My Way Cat lived in a digital land with his family. He was proud of his family and liked to lift his leg and lick there and then stare blankly ahead and then start a story beginning it with ‘my wife’ or ‘my kids’.

‘My wife is –’

‘Famewhore!’ she’d interrupt him, ‘dirty thing, bee sting, purity ring!’ she’d get excited and spit would sit on her whiskers.

This gave the On My Way Cat an idea: he slipped into her bedroom at night and opened his mouth. He put his mouth on her finger and then depthroated it.

‘Jesus fucking Christ wow,’ she swore though soundly asleep. And then was confused because she’s not a boy. In the morning she stared at her breasts in the mirror to remind herself. She sighed; this is called penis-envy and in his pixelated world the On My Way Cat chortled and parodied the moan of the human female for his wife. Digital cats are polyamorous and his wife didn’t mind.

The girl grew to welcome the strange dreams. At the dinner table she would put down her utensils ('go back to China,' she'd joke). She threw away her toothbrush. She scorned toothpicks. She squished her lipstick out of their tubes and into her grandmother's old ashtrays. She created opportunities for her fingers to interact with her mouth at every turn. A bullfighter orchestrating his own danger. An old guitar finally playing itself. A snake shedding its skin and leaving it behind on a hot dirt road.

The cat rejoiced and lay on his back. He pawed the air joyfully to the machine-like bo-beep-bo-beeps of his digital music in his pixilated world.

'Escaped unscathed,' he imagined. The two words jumped up and down and flashed in his mind. Sans serif.

'So free,' the cat told himself and bristled out loud with glee.

'A heart doesn't play by the rules,' the girl told her boyfriend and stuck her whole arm out. This arm kept her boyfriend at bay.

'Oh, my reddest rose,' the boyfriend pleaded and did a little dance because they were young and didn't mind having fun. But she had a finger on the end of the arm and a ring on the finger.

The On My Way Cat kept coming at night and he did beautiful things all around the ring. She grew happy and the sadness that used to flood her bed dried up.

But the world can be cruel and, honestly, the cat didn't take very good care of himself. His wife had another baby and forgot to remind the On My Way Cat to finish the course of antibiotics he started after his botched tonsillectomy.

'Super Infection called,' his wife mentioned at dinner one day, 'by the way,' because she almost forgot.

'Oh shit,' the cat said.

The deepthroating decreased in intensity, gradually but perceptibly.

'Da fuck?' she said in the mornings and wondered if she should see a doctor. All the more when she woke up one day to red threads of slime on her beautiful finger. She looked at her finger and heard an ominous, whistly tune in her mind. She looked up gravely and stared at a corner of her bedroom for the rest of the day.

Until her grandmother knocked on her door with Marie biscuits and rooibos. Even her grandmother, death, blind, mute, could sense her grave mood because the mood was as thick as sticky batter.

‘Shall I fetch my knife?’ the grandmother quipped, ‘to cut the tension in the air?’

She misunderstood and said, with a biscuit in her mouth:

‘The look of the cake, it ain’t always the taste’.

‘You can say that again,’ the On My Way Cat said and choked on his bile back in his pixelated house in his digital land.

He grew malicious again. He thought of the girl in the beautiful room, a highest room, a tallest tower, he grew envious – again, it should be added. His grin, mischievous and beautiful during the period of depthroathing, turned down at one corner and became bitter. He annoyed his wife and the new baby cried when the On My Way Cat held it.

He spat up black and had nightmares about it. He smelt terrible and knew that he did. The cat felt sorry for himself but it made little difference. He took up drink, the cat did. He lay on his back but now exhausted and with pixelated drool going out of the corner of his mouth facing the screen: bright blue drool the shape of diamonds with rounded corners.

He wanted to blow up the Internet but his doctor said he would most certainly die if he exerted himself. And so the Internet was spared but this doesn’t mean that The On My Way Cat didn’t plot a misdirected revenge which was not even his to take.

Do you think that the cat got up to his old tricks again? That he jumped on the girls shoulder and then into her ear and sat there and bristled even when she said ‘out’? Alas, the cat is much more of a meany than you had thought. Get this:

The girl had taken to wearing a red tracksuit to bed in the event of having to get up and run away. She, poor thing, sweated terribly all night and the suit cut into her armpits and inner thighs when she moved too much; this prevented her from adequately expressing her distress by tossing and turning all night and so she spent her days emotionally constipated and her nights in physical discomfort. Waiting for the uncomfortable sleep that turned into the uncomfortable nightmare which turned into the mornings that meant the feeling of disquiet and the slimy finger on the end

of her arm. One night, while the girl was lying in her bed in the night, the On My Way Cat jumped on her pillow and snuggled into her neck.

‘Please no,’ she groaned and slapped her hands vaguely around her ears, damsel-like for she was at this point already sapped of much of her earlier vitality.

This gave the On My Way Cat an idea. The intricate revenges of his dreams saw him entering the girl’s body through her mouth and going to sit in her stomach – proceeding to control her like a tiny Power Ranger sits inside a Power Ranger Robot Giant and controls its punches and kicks and its laser gun in the boss round. In his dreams he was her super hero and her ultra-powerful parasite in one. Pow-wow. But hold your horses because remember the girl’s beautiful and dramatic, frail flapping hands. Her ring glistened in the moonlight as she flapped and moaned, ‘please no, no please, thanks,’ and the On My Way Cat had a sober thought, the first one in weeks. With his paw he guided the special finger into his mouth, tasted the sweetness of slow anger that coagulates there in invisible layers, for a moment and then bit down. The cat bit down steadily even though she screamed softly, fainted and came to again. He did not stop biting down. He bit down and down and snapped the bone and bit down and down and shook his face like a dog would when it came down to the tough sinew that resisted until he had the finger. Her other arm swam through the air beautifully and she moaned with grief.

The video went viral because she was exquisite. In her quaint pixelated house the On My Way Cat’s wife clicked ‘replay’ over and over again. Her new baby cried unattended to.

‘Ravenous,’ the wife mumbled.

But the neighbours talked and she decided it best to kick her husband out before he even returned from the girl’s bedroom.

Down and out, in his pixelated cave above the pixelated city and animated farmland in his digital world, the On My Way Cat finished a papsak by himself, thought about his wife and kids and waited for the girl’s finger to pass through his system.

In the morning it was there like eggs are there in the mornings: a skeleton key. I bet your mother told you all about skeleton keys.

The girl swooned up high in her bedroom. Her grandmother pressed a Marie to the wound till it was too soggy to hold and then she tossed it blindly in the general direction of the window: one right after the other. Pretty chaos and her boyfriend walked in on it.

‘My darling,’ he gasped and this is when the On My Way Cat unlocked a chest in the heart of the digital world and took out a little balloon. As the cat huffed and puffed into it, his phantom tonsil pleading and his heart bleeding, her boyfriend felt a strange sensation in his chest.

‘My darling,’ he crooned for he filed the strange feeling into the wrong folder, ‘you make my heart swell’. And the pixelated balloon in the digital world got bigger and bigger under the cat’s paws. Until it burst and her boyfriend blew up. Pieces of boyfriend flew across the girl’s bedroom.

‘I told you that no good would ever come of that boy!’ the grandmother shouted, wiping the boyfriend’s hair from her forehead pathetically with a limp wrist, just like he used to do.

‘Get out of my house this second,’ she yelled.

Outside on the pavement, the girl sat next to her suitcase, her things all packed, and stared despondently straight ahead with a melancholy tune playing in her ears.

‘Shut it,’ she complained but it made little difference.

And the On My Way Cat ruptured one of his lungs because he was very ill and had over-exerted himself against his better judgment and the advice of his doctor. He dragged himself across the digital landscape – the pixelated heart of the digital world being inhabitable. His paws bled. He heaved. In his cave, finally, he collapsed and wished for Douglas Livingston to come and gentle him.

‘But at least I’m not alone,’ he thought to himself and pictured the girl.

The girl sitting next to her suitcase held her stare and thought the same thing.

Dust to dust.

In a photo he is standing on a dance floor. Front and centre. His beer is raised. He's looking into the lens. Everyone around him is laughing or dancing: too occupied to look into the lens.

I try to imagine him happy. He could not be happy. His grandmamma. His long gone pappa. His mamma: too fat to move without going sideways. Dead, eventually after 7 years in and out of chemo and she never did quit smoking nor chocolate.

His grandmamma clung to me when we left. He's a good boy, she said, Niel is, he's a good boy. The grandmamma hugged but I knew, by implication, that I was not a good girl, no.

And off we went. Into the sunset. The proverbial sunset because Niel and me wore Bob D black glasses that we seldom cleaned and not one of us could see much more than half a thing. We were pretty dirty things. But pretty as they come and we came as much as four times a day. Having not much else to do.

We ran out off money without the grandmamma's pension and without my pa's occasional here-you-go seeing as my pa went himself to God-only-knows.

After that I took myself and made my own way out off me and Niel's adventure. It was nothing to shed tears over. Niel didn't like me like Sam did. Seeing as boys don't matter much when none of you have any money, liking is pretty much a what-not but a secondhand emotion.

Ergo, I took myself to make my own way. A white girl with no discernible private-school accent should know better than to take herself to Johannesburg. But I know myself to be snake shit and I know snakes still shit all over Joburg: all that glitters not being gold. So now I share a room with several pear-shaped ladies and one stringy one who doesn't speak.

Niel, poor Niel, spent a whole lot of time in Pretoria. But Johannesburg is much entirely different. Though four hours by car, Pretoria was the only place where Niel could receive the psychiatric treatment his poor idiot brain drooled for. Niel was pretty cool but he was also without any pigs. The grandmamma drove me – with her it took only two hours - to sit quietly with Niel while he stroked his temples next to the ashtray and the grandmamma lit up one after the other.

I am a tough cookie and so I told Niel:

‘Now listen here,’ I said to him, ‘this,’ and I pointed at the ashtrays and the volleyball court over there and the snoepie next to the cafeteria ‘is the shopping of your dead mamma’s savings.’

And he said:

‘Yes.’

‘Are you drawing pictures or looking at pictures? Are you standing up in room full of catatonic dicks and saying ‘My name is Niel, I smoked too much dagga while playing The Sims and am now fucked in the head?’ Are you doing that, or do you want me to stay here and do that for you?’

‘Thank you for coming all the way,’ is what he said.

‘Dagga is not physically addictive,’ he said.

‘Son,’ the grandmamma said, ‘do you have a light?’

I wore two pairs of Bob D black sunglasses, with one ear each stuck down the front of my bra, hanging over my blouse, back then, to accentuate my tits (each of them). And that’s when I gave Niel one and kissed him on the cheek. He put on the glasses to cry and as did I. Niel did something he never before nor never again did. Like me, like I did to him sometimes, he pressed the bottom of his face into my neck. And pressed.

When he came home three weeks later he still wore the glasses. So I wore mine too and we started playing The Sims while playing with each other. Then Niel’s medication ran out and wore out in spectacular slow-motion explosion. He was bent double at his desk for days: planning our big escape, yes. And not opening the door when the grandmamma knocked with Marie biscuits.

In Joburg it’s okay to cry without any sunglasses because no one cares. Only if you’re bawling in our room the girl who doesn’t talk loses all her pigs and breaks the coffee cups. Ergo the pear-shaped ladies and me: we hold it together. We drink most all beverages out of those cups.

You’d think that you’d understand upon the first step out of the Gautrein. And your understanding would deepen as you taxi and walk and bus deeper into the heart of darkness. Seeing as you stamped your feet and chastised the grandmamma when she said ‘kaffer’. But not so, no. First of all, my pa was not right in the head and he spoke only in a hiccuping combo of

Zulu, Xhosa and Pedi. My pa was an educated man. He had a framed picture of himself holding on to several Bibles in several languages. A black man had a hand on his shoulder and they smiled into each other's faces. Seeing that I was the only fruit of his loins, my pa spilled every last bit of the clicks and flicks and guttural scratches flaring up in his skull into my baby ears.

'What are you,' he Zulu'd, 'but the mountain you built to resemble yourself?'

'Behind you, sister,' he Xhosa'd, 'is the mountain of things you have said and that mountain is at your back, always.'

My pa said one of his mountains is a heap of shit, pure shit. But he has devised a scheme, see? He speaks and calls forth and up another mountain. A different one: mottled and beautiful and musical and alive with clicks. And new.

I thought the mountain at my back – all multi-lingual and what not – would serve me well in the city of gold. But the pear shaped ladies do not even one of them speak Zulu, Xhosa or Pedi. Ergo we resort to the lingua franca of runaways. I had spent so much time with Niel that my English has turned into raging psychobabble the grandmamma could only speak Afrikaans and Niel harrumphed and spewed in his awfully Afrikaans English when he wanted to hurt the grandmamma's feelings without hurting her feelings. In our small room I scowel things like, 'pass me that fucking cup that are right under your shit-faced face, baie dankie and fuck you'. On automate That's okay, I think. The pear shaped ladies do not exactly primly articulate like Miss SA themselves.

There is the matter of occupation. Two of the ladies have boyfriends with full scholarships at marginally impressive institutions. The two don't do much else than give the rest of us a heads up when the heads about to go down. The boyfriends like to be together when their ladies are on their respective knees and the two says this practice would bother me and the stringy girl.

Perhaps it is in fact that we will bother the boyfriends. I know how to avert eyes, for crying in a bucket. But on Tuesdays the two take some of all of our clothes to the laundromat on the second corner of our street. So, that's nice. On Thursdays the two have bunny chow on the third corner.

If I had occupation I would have liked to join them. Currently I read passages of my far and away pa's Bibles in Nelson Mandela Square I intonate with damn near inappropriate beauty. On two different occasions men got erections and promptly dropped five rands in my for-this-

purpose-only red stiletto and walked away trying to hide the tears. A-sexual mothers bring their children to be evangelized. They drop more rands. Niel always did say that sex is cheap. In fact, criminally over-hyped. It is belief that costs you a lot.

But belief really does not pay off much when it comes down to it. Ergo it has befallen me to clean our room to earn my keep. I pay, but I have to clean too. Lotus has decided. Lotus has taken it upon herself to navigate the cramped situation we find ourselves in. Lotus has spent some time in the East, though she is not from there. Lotus is an educated person – like my pa. She's A Girl. That's halfway between prostitute and drug dealer is what I found out when I got here. Lotus rubs the thighs of boys and men (though mostly boys, she says) and whips out some high quality something or other and charms them into snorting it off her cleaves, or something like that – substance depending. She clocks out when they pass out and clocks back in when they phone her. After a while it is not Lotus who picks up the phone, but Thomas: halfway between drug dealer and pimp, naturally. Then the boy is momentarily confused about the no-Lotus situation but, by then, more lustful for the substance. And Thomas goes over. And he says 'Enjoy and by the way you owe me couple of rands for that there tik you lit up while watching Lotus tap dance topless to the clicks'. And the boy says 'Fuck'. But takes the substance notwithstanding.

Lotus is in the midst of an anthropological experiment, the being A Girl and what not, and so shares these details eagerly, seeing as anthropology is her passion. My English is by far the best (though, who knows what the stringy one might be capable of) so me and Lotus are friends. Lotus says, indeed, tik is by no means to be fucked with; she has never nor shall she ever. What's interesting, she says, is the face of a boy virgin when he discovers, not the vagina, but the high. She's deflowered two boys in her life – back in the East, it was – and the faces are much entirely different. A high face is slack. A coming face is agonized. We discuss the human face. Lotus is funny.

It's a coincidence that I have also deflowered two boys in my life, though am half Lotus's age. A bit less than half. At first I thought it strange that Lotus would be so prim; we do not have a closet and her suspenders and g-strings hang from the burglar bars at the window. But, then, suspenders etc. is Lotus's occupation, no? And Lotus, being a grown-up and what not, probably has sex with non-flowers only these days, anyways.

Lotus has the only bed in our room and she shares it with Enigbogan and they hug face to face all night long. Enigbogan was here first. She wrote her name on all four walls long before I moved in and her name is still, squarely, fatly right in the middle of every wall. Enigbogan decides who moves in and out. She sits by the window with little balls of pap going towards her mouth on the tips of her fingers. Enigbogan never told me her name. She just let me follow her home and talk and then she pointed at the four walls with the full length of her arm: Enigbogan, Enigbogan, Enigbogan, Enigbogan. She sits naked sometimes. Sometimes she kisses the burglar bars like she's making kisses fly down for the ants of people in the street below. Enigbogan doesn't touch anyone but Lotus and herself. I look at her all the time. She does not look back.

In my sleep, I once embraced the stringy girl from behind on the mattress we share. I kissed her ear and told her that I loved her in five languages. Unfortunately she awoke and jumped up to smash coffee cups against the burglar bars. Then I remembered what I did in my sleep and I cried like one of those flying dinosaurs. It was a howl such as I've never heard before. It was also a shit show because then everyone woke up and someone kicked me in the gut for crying and Lotus grabbed the stringy hair and smashed it on a mounted half-broken mirror. And of course the stringy one sprouted blood extravagantly and then we all bolted for the door screaming HIV and covering our eyes and scratches and scabs and picked-at little holes.

No one would listen to me outside of the door. They pressed their ears against the door and imagined their valuables being painted red. They were furious. It was me who would clean up the blood in any case. And so I pulled my leggings down and showed my panties to any of the ladies who would look. The panties said 'Thursday' on the butt, because it was.

'When I was little,' I said, 'when I was little, I had only a "Tuesday" panty and it was always a dream of mine to get all the days of the week'

One of the bunny chow ladies shoved my shoulder.

'I have now fulfilled this dream,' I said, being brave. I thought about saying,

'And must not move on,' but the thing is, I couldn't move on. I had no other dream.

In the morning I sat on the floor outside our building. The buildings seemed to curl on in over my head. I could barely sit close enough to the building to not get stepped on. I took out my ID book that I keep in bra at all times. There were three things inside. A picture Sam drew of my tits.

Niel's photo that I took on the dance floor. A paper as thin as tissue reading 'translated to isiXhosa by D.P Viljoen'. I put these things on the floor and looked as people trampled them to nothing on their way to work.