

Where the Body Ends

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Abstract

My collection of stories explores the intersection of the human body and the body of text via the tropes of disease and animality. Drawing on my experience of living with tuberculosis for many years, I attempt to write disease differently – not merely to be survived, overcome, cured, eradicated, but as something to be embraced via the Deleuzian affirmation of being worthy of what happens to us. Taking my cue from Sontag, I use a creaturely approach to writing, “an infinitely varied register of forms and tonalities for transporting the human voice into prose narrative”, emphasising the shared embodiedness of humans and animals so as to challenge the omnipotence of thought that subjugates and colonises the body as exclusively human.

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The Little Skeleton

The little skeleton rises after midnight. She pulls herself upward from her shallow grave. Scrapes and claws at loamy sand, finds a fingerhold on the hard ground and stands upright. She hesitates, sways translucent in the moonlight. Spits out a rotted tooth and dusts off her shoulder blades. Sand runs from each eye socket, vertebrae click into place. She tests her legs, rolls her pelvis and hipbones, bends her knees and hears something go crack! She shudders, then begins to jerk forward.

The little skeleton goes on instinct. She has nothing else. All around her is darkness, a scrubbed landscape of small bushes and dirt. She clacks and creaks down the dust road. Her body leans into the slope and the night wind chills her to the bone. She reaches town before daybreak. It is quiet, still dark except for shafts from the streetlights. She quickens her pace, passes windows unnoticed. Bares her broken incisors at dogs that bark. The house is as she remembers it, the unkempt garden, scatters of long grass growing up between gravel, the red roof and black gate. She knows to wiggle the slide lock forward and back. She knocks, hears the rasp of her bone knuckles on wood. Somewhere inside a light flicks on and the little skeleton feels a little, nervy spark slide down her spine.

It's her boyfriend. He stands frozen. The little skeleton sees his face go white, sees the suck of his breath at the sight of her thin legs and sharp hipbones, the grin that is now her default facial expression. She tries to push past this. The natural barrier that separates life from what comes after. Hello, she says, she wants to sound friendly. But her voice is a hum, a seepage of breath; it sounds as if it's located somewhere hollow, spleenless.

The boyfriend hesitates. His eyes flash and the door sways like he might slam it. Instead he steps back, swallows, makes a space for the little skeleton to enter. Wait here, he says, turns and then stops. Behind him a girl emerges, padding down the passage in pyjamas. Who is it? She rubs her eyes and blinks at the skeleton.

The boyfriend clears his throat, frowns, then springs into action. He herds the girl and the little skeleton through to the lounge, talking quickly: Let's sit, it'll be more comfortable. The little skeleton nods, happy to be off her legs, relieved of the dread of a hipbone popping loose or a rotten femur splintering like a chopstick. She takes a seat on the couch and the girl joins her, yawning, shuffling, then curling herself up as if she might nod off. The little skeleton ignores her, momentarily lost in the ecstasy of cushions, so different from the hard bed she's used to. The giddy

softness swaddles her bones, opens deep nooks to accommodate the sharp knob of her coccyx, the poky point of her spine.

The boyfriend breaks the silence. Coffee? he says, too suddenly. Springs up like something has bitten him, turns on his heels and nosedives towards the kitchen. Yes please, says the girl to no one. She yawns and stretches then turns left. So, she says, dragging out the word while projecting her eyes into the little skeleton's sockets, where do you know Matt from? The little skeleton stalls, uncertain how to answer, whether to start at the beginning or at the end with the dark dirt and shallow grave.

The last part is shaky in her memory, like it happened to someone else, her fleshy self. She remembers only after, the dirt falling on her face, the sand cold against her broken lips. She spins her head on the top vertebrae, looking for a distraction from the girl's question, and notes that the room has been redone. The couch is still the same, the big beige one she and the boyfriend bought because she loved its size, how its cushions sunk, seemed to swallow things up. But the Dali print that used to hang on the wall is missing, replaced by a black and white landscape that reminds her of the mountain where she was buried. For a second she feels sad. She liked the Dali with its melted clocks and skeletal scaffolds.

The girl looks bored, reaches for the remote and fills the room with the sounds of breakfast TV. On the screen, cartoon figures run frantic, occasionally colliding with objects. The girl giggles. She sits back and sprawls her legs out in front of her. The little skeleton stares, suddenly envious of the girl's languid pose, dangly arms and loose legs. She sits half-sunk and puckering. She looks down at the knots of her knees, raised and knobbed. Her frigid white legs. Her sharp pelvis. Feels a dark tide of anger well up from inside her. She doesn't know from where exactly. She no longer has a black hole in her stomach—or a stomach for that matter. She thinks maybe she is all hole now, just an empty black cavernous thing.

The boyfriend stops her sinking, bursts into the room. Announces, Coffee! in too loud a voice. He seems nervous. Sets down the tray and takes a seat, standing briefly to grab the remote and dull the cartoon whizzes and splats. The three sit, spoons clink, stirring in the milk and sugar. Only the girlfriend doesn't clink. She drinks her coffee black. Where's my sweetener? She hops up, returns with a small dispenser. Click click click and three small white pills land in the black liquid. For a long time they sit like that—faces, bones, hovering spoons, the silent cartoons on TV. Finally, the

boyfriend rises and releases them, makes for the kitchen, who wants breakfast? Not pausing to wait for an answer.

Now it is just the girls—or rather a girl and what's left of a girl, only a little skeleton. They shift nervously on their bum bones, glance askance at each other. For the first time the little skeleton notices the startling resemblance, how the girl looks so much like her or how she had looked before. Not the hair or the eye colour but something deeper. The little skeleton frowns, concentrates her sockets into x-rays, stripped away skin and flesh, pares the other girl down. The same long femurs, small tight ribcage, but most of all the facial bone structure. The little skeleton sucks in breath, or rather puts her bones through the action of breathing, expands her rib cage then releases it very slowly.

At the kitchen door the boyfriend stands poised. In a bright voice he announces, Breakfast! vanishes for a second, then re-emerges with a tray piled high: eggs, bacon, sausages, toast. The girl gulps audibly. At the sight of food her eye sockets expand into dinner plates. Her mouth hangs slightly open but she shakes her head and pours herself another coffee. Adds five sweetener tabs click click click click click.

The little skeleton glances at her and smirks, for the first time ever she can eat freely without counting kilojoules, without taking into account body mass index versus energy expenditure. Teeth creak, grind together in impatience. She doesn't wait for an invitation. Digs in, peels an egg, amazed at the dexterity of her phalanges. She squashes the egg between two slices of white toast, squeezes until the yolk pops, runs yellow down her fingers. The egg sandwich does not even touch sides. It rushes straight through her. Masticated eggs and toast and juice and coffee come pouring out. The carpet beneath is dark, spongy and absorbent.

The boyfriend looks from the little skeleton's empty plate to the glistening food mess below her. Says, um, how about pancakes? The little skeleton nods as she butters another toast, layers on cheese and marmalade. It doesn't matter that she tastes nothing. The pleasure is in the action, the jaw grinding, the teeth tingling. Next, the last two eggs. She cracks one, swallows it in two bites, drops the other in her eye socket for safekeeping.

The boyfriend disappears back into the kitchen. Emerges five minutes later carrying a stack of pancakes, explains: premixed batter, just milk. The little skeleton shoots him a fleshless smile as she

helps herself from the top of the heap. The girl looks on; watches the pancakes twirl on the fork and flop on the plate. The moment when she cracks is obvious from her facial expression. Something happens to her mouth and her eyes glaze over. She says, maybe just a little bite, grabs up a pancake, spears it with surprising violence and shakes it gingerly onto her plate like it's something dangerous, pats it down with a fork to make sure it's nested tight. I wouldn't want all this food going to waste, she giggles and reaches for the syrup, pours a small squirt, a perfect half circle. The pancake grins at the girl and the girl smiles back. Hesitates, then pfff! squeezes the bottle harder. The syrup spurts, drapes itself over the pancake, sprawls and pools on the white plate. Oops, the girl laughs at herself, licks fingers, begins to eat, uses knife and fork, cutting the pancake into little squares and triangles that she distributes evenly around the plate. Spears one on the fork and slowly brings it to her mouth.

The little skeleton grabs a second pancake, then another. One two three four. Makes a stack. Adds syrup, bacon, a big spoon of three-fruit marmalade. The stack sighs and sags like a Dali clock. The image makes the little skeleton feel somehow emptier, hungrier. She lifts the stack between skeletal fingers, imagines them as scaffolds or Dali ladders. Fitting everything in is no problem; her jaw simply drops on its hinges.

Next to her, the girl finishes her last triangle. Chews slowly, swallows, then runs her finger across the plate to soak up the last of the butter-sugar. Brings it to her lips, sucks, repeats until the plate twinkles. Starts to talk very quickly, tells a story about a girl in her gym class who can't do one of the exercises, says, it was like she harpooned herself on the apparatus, as she slides herself a second pancake, glancing left right, furtively adding bacon.

The boyfriend fidgets, shifts in his chair then hops up. More pancakes! It's not a question. In seconds he's whipping up a second batch of batter. The blender growls and the pan hisses. Ten stacks of pancakes rise in towers, butter and sugar melt together.

The little skeleton lays down her plate, picks up a napkin and uses it to swab the insides of her ribs clean. Drops the soiled rag on top of the ruin on the carpet and settles back. The food is finished; egg peels and toast rinds litter the table. Syrup drips down the girl's chin. She lifts a hand to wipe it but only smears it more. Excuse me, she says. Stands, hugs her arms around her swollen belly. Walks down the hallway without looking back, slams the bathroom door.

The little skeleton and the boyfriend sit in silence. They listen to the girl retching. The boyfriend goes bright red. He looks at the little skeleton and then at his hands. The little skeleton doesn't feel a thing. To her the purge has a certain ring, a rhythm almost like music. Numbly she drums her finger bones together and hums along. The boyfriend rearranges himself, sits on his hands and rocks slowly backward and forward. Finally stops, sits dead still. Only his head turns. Please, he says, go see if she's alright.

The boyfriend's voice startles the little skeleton. Its urgency. A tone he has never used before, like he is begging. She stands almost without thinking. Walks like a robot, steps jerky down the passage. Stops in front of the bathroom. It's suddenly quiet inside. She can hear the toilet flushing and water running. She looks at her feet, counts the number of small bones in her toes. Lifts knuckles, raps, once, twice. After a long pause the girl opens. She stands with her shoulders slumped forward. Her face is red, somehow caved in, sunk into the dark hole of her mouth. As soon as she sees the little skeleton she starts to cry. Heaves in big wet gulps. Spit trails down her chin. The little skeleton feels a strange rush, a surge that mingles joy and sadness.

The girl must notice the shift, the slight softening of the jawbone, because she steps forward, launches herself at the skeleton and buries her head in her sternum. The little skeleton stands suspended, awkwardly runs her fingers through the girl's hair, combs out knots and pushes it away from her face. It's okay, she whispers. Her bony arms wrap around the girl. She feels the heat of the girl's breath, the wet of her snot dribbling down inside her rib cage. She pulls the girl closer, drinks in her body's gluey excess and a jolt of pleasure runs from her pelvis to her breastbone. She can feel the girl's heart beat. It vibrates in the base of her skull and spine, down the small nodules of each vertebra.

The girl sniffs, slackens, says Thank you. Tries to pull loose but the little skeleton holds her tight. She wants to hang onto the moment, to the hot body, its heartbeat. She wants to steal it off the girl and hide it in the cage of her ribs. She digs her fingers into the girl's back. She says, it's okay, it's okay.

Childhood Illnesses

Julio says shingles, I shake my head, no, chickenpox. It starts as a single blister on my chest. Small, negligible almost, but it scares me that it can appear in an instant, without friction, boil up from somewhere. The doctor has me take off my t-shirt. His hands are cold, distant. He inspects my chest and stomach. He says if you wake up and you're covered in them then it's chickenpox. He tells me if the blisters blossom, I should stay in bed. Chickenpox is a virus; it cannot be cured, only endured. He says to get aspirin for the pain and camomile cream for the itching.

The pocks are small and fluid-filled, pale in colour, rimmed in red. They remind me of fish eyes, of frogs eggs floating to the surface. By morning I am pulsing. Chickenpox is worse in adults. The virus lives inside you and mutates. It happens slowly, in increments. It lives in the spine, quietly maps the body's immune system, waits for an opportunity, the first sign of weakness. Usually it reappears as shingles but sometimes there is an aberration, the evolutionary process falters, the pox replays itself, doubly, returning with surprising intensity.

Within three days the blisters are everywhere. They bloom between my nose and mouth, worst on my stomach and my back. Julio teases me. He thinks it's funny that I have a childhood illness. He is always on at me about growing up, taking responsibility. The underlying tension of me living as I do, no fixed abode or income. He says I'm like a young Linda Blair in the Exorcist. I am small and blonde, naked because clothes make it worse. Everything makes it worse. My head aches. My neck pustules are starting to weep. On my stomach they cluster into ulcers. They gush down between my legs, under my feet and between my toes. When I pee my vagina burns. Toilet paper makes the burn spread. It's like ants are crawling in my veins. I am not meant to scratch, so I pace. I walk endlessly up and down the passage. I can hear the blisters burst with each step.

At night I sleep in the spare room because I am too sick to share Julio's bed. I am too sick to sleep. The bed is too big and empty. Sometime during the night I find myself in the bathroom. The cool, tiled floor offers my burning feet a reprieve. I stand for a long time in front of the mirror. I stand without moving, not bothering to pick the hair from my sticky brow. I am looking for the first blister. Blister zero, the one that started it all. For some reason it is suddenly important to identify and isolate it. It is of urgent importance. I grow frantic. There are too many—dots that coalesce and crawl together, impossible to differentiate. Everything is blurry. My mouth, strangely thin, eyes

disappearing. At some point I see Julio, his reflection behind me. I see him go wavy. He is saying something but there is no sound, only lips moving.

I can't answer. I am staring at my chest. The scrim in front of my eyes makes everything coalesce. I am back at the beginning, inspecting a single pale blister, this time it is further down, slightly concealed, nestling between my two breasts. I reach and cup them. They fit perfectly in my hands and I peel them apart. I start to rub the pale surface, scratching and scratching, digging deep with my fingernails until abruptly, my skin bursts open, not alarming so much as revealing, seeing it, something dark and shapeless unfurl and then begin to cry, softly.

Siren

As a child, I dreamed of being taken away by an ambulance. When I heard the sirens, I'd cross my fingers, whisper: Let it be me, let it be me. It never was. The ambulances were always moving away, the sirens growing faint and then disappearing.

When an ambulance did finally come, the siren howling like a soprano duck and the coloured lights making flapping wings on the ceiling, I wished it wasn't me. I was in no way prepared for an ambulance. I had not bathed in days; my feet and armpits were smelly. My hair was glued slick to my forehead. To make matters worse, I had no pants on, nor was I in any condition to get pants on, my leg being so swollen that no pants fitted, at least none in my closet, as I was more disposed to skinny jeans and leggings, rather than baggies. And even if I had had pants of the right size, I was unable to stand and walk to the closet to retrieve them.

Aside from my half-nakedness and terrible personal hygiene, there was the problem of language. I was in a foreign country and I did not understand the tongue. It was my first visit and I was unable to communicate even the basics—the hellos and how are yous and where is the bus, that are the expected norm of every tourist. I wasn't really a tourist anyway, or not a conventional one. I was not in a hotel or some other facility well-suited to dealing with foreigners, to making their stay easier and more pleasant. I was alone in a shitty apartment building on the edge of town, the industrial area, as these sort of spaces are called, or at least as we call them in my country. It was one of those housing estates for poor people, like The Projects in America, or at least how I imagined them from the movies, only filled with whites instead of black and Hispanic people. It was mid-winter and outside the ground had turned to mud, which I inevitably trailed into the flat behind me.

Because of the state of my leg, its worsening condition, I had been unable to do any cleaning—routine things like vacuuming, washing dishes, taking the trash out, shopping. As a result the place was not only run down but also very dirty. There was no heating and I was forced to keep the doors and windows tightly shut. Even in my weakened condition I could smell it, the sour pull of dirt and damp and unwashed body mingling with something darker, more dangerous, a fermented smell that made me suspect that my injury had become infected. My situation was increasingly precarious. I needed to call for help, I knew that, but I kept telling myself I would wait until morning. The sun

would come out and I would feel better. I would clean the house or at least tidy things up, and then contact someone.

I never thought ahead who that someone was. I didn't think an ambulance—that seemed so dramatic. But who else was there? I knew no one in the country. Since arriving I had kept to myself. And even if I had met someone, how would I contact them? There was a telephone and a telephone directory in the apartment but I had not paid the deposit necessary to have the phone connected on my arrival. Nevertheless I had tried it—more than once, to be honest. Maybe I hoped for some kind of miracle. That I would lift the receiver and someone would be there. A man's voice would say hello—hello in my own language!—and the voice would be friendly. It would say, I'm coming to fetch you. No, no, stay right there, where you are, don't move. But of course there was no voice. There was nothing. There was my breathing. The dead mouthpiece and earpiece created a circuit, a closed off space, that captured and amplified my respiration. The sound of it shocked me. It was too fast, raspy. Just hearing it made me breathless.

I told myself what I needed was some air. I limped to the window. At some point, inevitably, I slipped on the wooden floorboards, hunching on the ground, pulling myself upwards. I stood swaying, stared at the wall of the building opposite, two open windows at the very top where someone had hung their bed covers out to air. It looked like two yawning mouths, hanging the tongues of the night out in the morning.

Below I could see children from the building playing, as they often were. Before my injury I would pass them in the morning setting out, or returning in the late afternoon. Always playing the same game. At first I assumed it was some kind of war game because of all the shooting and dying, mimed in exaggerated actions, fingers flexed into gun metal and legs flying out from under. But later, after numerous mornings and afternoons observing, I decided that my initial reading was old-fashioned. It was some kind of terror attack they were enacting.

I always passed quickly, walking head down and with long strides, so as not to attract unnecessary attention. I was aware that my status as a foreigner made me suspicious. It was not just my inability to speak the language but also my dress that set me apart. The people in this country are seemingly predisposed towards neutral colours and clean lines, blacks and greys and whites, so that whenever I walked down the steps leading to the train, the passersby would lose their colours entirely. Even the columns and posters withdrew into the mood of a black and white film.

Inside the tunnel, voices reverberated. It was like watching a foreign film without subtitles. People were talking. I understood nothing. Phrases washed up and flowed back like background music, vowels and consonants rose and fell around me. I was always relieved to be on the other side, to emerge into the light and silence and to exit the station.

From there I would cut across the abandoned area to get home. I don't know if abandoned is the right word; what I mean is a place that seems relegated to the side, set apart from its surroundings. I always took this route, not only because it evoked similar places in my home country, but also as a way to avoid the pockmarked youths who hung out on the main road. It was not their obvious drug addiction that scared me, their gaunt faces and dirty clothing, so much as the look in their pin-prick eyes, a desperation that resembled hunger, the only thing familiar here, a look I knew too well from my own country; one that I knew from experience to be dangerous.

As it turned out I would have been better off in their hands than in the abandoned area. It was there that my accident happened. Though at the time it did not feel like an accident. It was as if I could see it happen, was participating even, but was unable to stop myself. Like I had left my body and was somewhere outside of it, observing, not unlike those UN representatives who are sent to war-torn countries to observe the violence, and stand there watching, somewhere off on the sidelines, doing nothing at all, as something horrific unfolds in front of them.

At the time of the accident I was thinking about the nature of colour and how colours here were so different from those in my home country. Green especially, due to the light, its specific intensity. It was impossible for me to describe adequately the vividness of the green, especially against the grey of the city. I was looking at the grass to see how green it was. Boredom, a word I rarely thought of, came to mind. This is all too beautiful, I thought. I was trying to understand this, closing my eyes, trying to think of names to describe the different greens. I didn't see the hollow of smashed pavement at my feet. I couldn't stop it. I could only watch. I watched myself fall.

My hand flew up in front of me—an involuntary motion, for balance. It was too late. My body was no longer touching the ground; I felt it take flight. I heard the sudden snap, felt a heat spread through my skin. A sudden muffled scalding at the bottom of my chest then the pain of sundering that wrested me from the mute dream that had been suspending the reality of the world around me.

It took me a long time to re-enter my body, which is maybe why I wasn't aware of how severe the injury was. From the outside I looked okay, not so bad really, a few deep scratches and some bruising, nothing dangerous or life threatening. I was fine, just fine. That was what I told the man who reached me just as I was standing or trying to stand. He must have come out of one of the buildings next to the abandoned area, or so I assumed, because I had not seen him on the street before it happened. Though, of course, I hadn't really been looking, not only because I was consumed by the colour of the grass, but also because I imagined the building, the whole area, to be abandoned.

The man held out his hand. He wanted to help me stand but I held him off, drew back: no. I stood slowly, wiped the blood off my elbow and shook the impact from my bones. I was scared I might start crying if the man touched me. I shook my head vigorously, said, I'm sorry, it's just the shock really. And then, realising that he couldn't understand a word I was saying, I started to gesture and even did a little dance to prove it. Nothing fancy, just some simple movements, minimal bum wiggling and hip thrusting. He opened his eyes wide, in fright almost. Perhaps it was because he realised then that I was a foreigner, or maybe because of how peculiar the dance must have looked. I could barely stand and must have looked spastic, hopping from one foot to the other, stomping feet, shaking, twitching.

I stopped at once. I have to go now, I said quickly, and began to walk. I did not look back. I forced my feet to move, one in front of the other. Took the route I always took, through the conglomeration of city outskirts: slums, factories, converging tram, train, bus routes, arterial roads. I crossed the road and at the corner, turned into the block that the housing estate was on—my block, as I had started to call it, even though it felt nothing like home.

Usually I walked around the back to avoid seeing any one, but that day I entered through the front gate. It was cold, raining and exhaustion was setting in. I was shivering. My clothes were heavy with water. The passing cars had splattered my thighs. My shoes had come untied, leggings soaked, my jacket stank like a wet dog. The mud outside the building looked blackish-red and, maybe it was foreboding, but it made me think of blood.

It was only later, when I got inside, that the pain hit me. A throbbing pain, a pain that vibrated deep inside me. During the night it moved slowly upwards, travelling from my knee to my hip and then lodging itself in my stomach where it made my insides jump and swim. By the next day the

swelling in my knee was visible. By lunchtime my leg had ballooned. Later that evening, I undressed and felt the heat of the discarded garments in my hands.

I sat for a long time, looking. It is strange to see one's body transformed suddenly. We are used to it happening slowly, in increments. This was different. My knee had swollen to the size of a winter melon in a matter of a few hours. By that evening it was near exploding. The skin was pulled tight, no longer pale; it was bright pink, the web of capillaries pulsating. It didn't seem like skin. It was more like an internal membrane, the inside of the mouth or throat.

Perhaps it was the pain or the fever, but I clearly remember thinking that my leg would be able to assist me in learning the language of this country. I had tried when I first arrived but failed horribly. My body felt too small to produce the number of vibrations necessary to speak the language. My mouth was too contained, my lips too full. Speaking meant wrenching one's mouth wide open or pursing the lips to form a narrow passage or pushing the air through the sinus cavities behind the nose. Especially difficult for me were the guttural-sounding vowels. I couldn't get my tongue around them.

My mouth was as equally ill-adapted to the food as to the language. I ate a cheese that tasted like pencil eraser. I ate hard sausages I had to gnaw on for a long time before they could be swallowed. I took a bite of a sandwich that stuck to the top of my mouth and made me feel like I was choking. Even the water was hard to swallow. It had a chemical taste to it that constricted my throat.

Finally I gave up on food. I bought cigarettes. Not real cigarettes, which I could not afford, but tobacco. At the time of the accident I was down to my last sheet of rolling paper. I thought a cigarette would take my mind off the pain and the cold, the smoke would warm me. I took the paper out and rolled. I tried to fill it but my hands were shaking too much. It was as if the vibration from my knee ran through them. Soon, I had torn the paper so badly it was unusable. Tobacco shreds littered the table top. I stared at the mess I had made, ready to burst into tears when I remembered the phone book. It struck me that it might be possible to use the pages for rolling, to tear strips and glue the ends together with my spit.

I opened the first page and, in my fevered condition, started to read the names in front of me. I read and read. At first I just said the names in my head but then I started to say them aloud, to sound them out and finally I began to memorise them. I spent a long time wrapping my tongue around

vowels and consonants. I practiced my mouth movements. I made my mouth wide, an O. I stretched the O bigger, a hole, bigger yet. I wondered if the hole was big enough to fit the whole of my swollen knee inside it. I rearranged myself so I was sitting cross-legged and tried it. Immediate I drew back, repelled by the foul smell that emanated from the injury.

I had no choice anymore. I crawled to the window. I tried to open it. I pushed but the latch would not give. Either it was stuck or it was not meant to be opened, one of those windows only for show, to show the outside, allow light in. It was late afternoon and the light was fading. The children were playing their usual game. Already they were on the last scene, the rescue and evacuation. I started to knock. I imagined I was part of the game, a wounded hostage that had escaped the terrorists but was now trapped in a building. I knocked harder, beat the glass with the palm of my hand.

After some time the children stopped. They turned and stared. They were looking straight ahead, as if posed for a picture, their expressions set. It was like they had frozen into a photograph, and for a moment, I thought maybe I was not in the flat, but in an art gallery, attending one of those exhibitions of war photography that had become popular recently. I was looking at an image of terror victims, and the glass was not a window but in fact part of the framing. Then one of the children moved, the small girl who usually acted as a bombing victim who had lost a leg. She whispered something to the boy next to her and he nodded then started to run. The others followed. They seemed excited. They were shouting something but I could not understand the words. I watched their mouths move as they disappeared into one of the buildings.

I continued to hit at the glass after the children left. I was sure my hand would break through at any minute—but what good would that do me except to let the cold in? The light outside was fading fast and suddenly I could see my reflection in the window, my face—a pale, beaten lonely look, eyes looking out with an expression of fear, frightened and lonely in a foreign country. I forced myself to stop, crumbled to the floor below the window, exhausted.

It was over. I had scared the children so much they would never return. I had performed my role as a terror victim badly. The children had mistaken me for the enemy, a suicide bomber probably. It was then that I heard the sirens. For a moment they blended with the explosion in my head, the silence of the aftermath and then the noise that usually followed. It felt like a live TV report.

The sirens came from far away, as they had done when I was a child. As they drew nearer the sound became clearer, more distinct and finally, unmistakable. They sounded almost like the sirens in my own country but the pitch was slightly higher and the pace faster. I lay and listened to them screaming, watched the lights rotate on my ceiling. They were a different red to lights I knew, or maybe the red was just a little more piercing.

I never got to experience the ride. I passed out soon after. By the time I came around we were already at the hospital. They were unloading me. Someone asked my name. I started to say the names I had memorised from the phone book. I started at A. I said, Willibald Alexis, Midhat Andersch, Antero Ahlqvist, Irakly Andronikov, Paavo Outi Alanne, August Aksyonov, Umayya Apitz, Konstantin Achim von Arnim, Berthold Azhayev. The names poured out in a torrent. They came out perfectly. My mouth contorted, my chest filled, my knee vibrated, the flesh around it, soft at first, then swelling still more, truly enormous, and the purple stain opening. There was a sour smell and the words gushed out, flowing. Everything perfect— each syllable, accent, pronunciation. They started wheeling me. The hospital was close to the freeway. On the far side of the parking lot, red lights swooped against the dark sky.

The Functional Anorexic

The functional anorexic arrives in Africa. She brings her aspartame-free sweetener, her sugarless gum. She carries a cosmetic bag containing a six month stash of appetite suppressant tabs, her vitamin Bs and Cs and calcium. Things not readily available on the vast continent. She has been instructed to stock up on essential toiletries and prescription medication. She is travelling as part of a voluntary programme initiated through Save the Children, International Rescue Committee, UNICEF, Doctors Without Borders. She will be part of a team dishing out Western donated food supplies in a drought afflicted region.

Her placement is arbitrary. She would have as easily travelled to Cuba or China. She's interested in the programme, specifically, the feeding. She wants to feed starving children so she doesn't have to feed herself. She has the well-documented symptom of an overwhelming preoccupation with feeding others or with meal preparation. The functional anorexic loves to cook. Her specialty is baking. Her cookies are heart-shaped, decorated with red glazes and sprinkled with hundreds-and-thousands and powdered sugar. The competing aromas of chocolate chip, peanut butter, and anise rise around her. Ginger bread, cakes, cookies and pumpkin pies. Sugar bubbles on the stove. Flour dusts her sunken cheeks.

In Africa, the functional anorexic does no baking. The cakes sit somewhere else, far away, uneaten. She is put on the baby re-feeding team tasked with admitting more than a hundred babies who arrive at the camp daily. An army of mothers arrives each morning, black swarms swathed in white robes. They are all bone and muscle and skin and light. They carry babies on jutting hips, hand them in without a trace of emotion.

The volunteers' instructor explains: starvation differs from hunger in several respects. As the stomach begins to atrophy, the physical experience of hunger grows milder, less urgent, even as the chances for acquiring food to cure the nutritional deficit grow slim. The energy deficiency inherent in starvation causes fatigue and renders the victim more apathetic over time. The starving body becomes weak and its interactions with the surrounding world diminish.

The starving babies no longer resemble babies. They are stick arms and legs and swollen bellies. Sometimes the functional anorexic thinks they are nothing but holes: bumholes, fontanelles and

toothless salivating mouths that no longer serve any purpose. The babies no longer eat or shit. They never cry. They lie swollen, silent, pliant, stationary.

The silence scares the functional anorexic. She has always hated crying babies and screaming children, the little boys and girls with their red faces and dimpled knees who clutch their mothers' skirts in the supermarkets. Now she wishes the babies would cry. She wills them. Sometimes she wants to shake them, an overwhelming compulsion that starts in the stomach and moves through her chest to her arms. A variation of Baby Shaking Syndrome, a desperation, but in reaction to emptiness not excess.

Sometimes she bites the babies because it's easier to get away with than shaking. Her stomach knots and her mouth itches. She brings her lips down, pretends she is kissing. She coos and clucks, makes little preening movements and then takes a quick nip. The babies taste like tree bark, bitter and raw and sinewy, alive but in a dead way. Even her bites do nothing to rouse them. The babies stare up at her, brown and wrinkled, blank black eyes like they are daring her, like in place of eating they want to be eaten.

The thing the functional anorexic hates most is the feeding. It is nothing like making treats for her family, the giddy pleasure of watching others stuffing themselves with unnecessary calories. There are portion sizes and weights that needed to be taken into account. There are timetables and schedules. Most of the babies have to be re-taught to eat, trained to know what food is, to overcome the gagging reflex and hold it in their sunken mouths, to masticate with toothless gums and swallow. Quantities have to be measured, different combinations of protein, vitamins and levels of calories administered, depending on the baby's weight, the duration and extent of the starvation. Too much can result in re-feeding syndrome, too little in dehydration and wasting.

It is her responsibility to mix the formula, to add water until it makes a sticky paste. The formula smells like artificial flavouring, like pale Pronutro. Its constituency is viscous, a gooey glutinous texture that attaches to the side of the bowl. She holds a baby on her lap and brings the spoon up. The baby kicks its legs and turns its head. Its belly is so distended that she is afraid it will pop if it eats so much as a drop. She is almost relieved when, time after time, the baby spits, opens its mouth so the food dribbles, running dirt rivers down its chin.

By the end of the day she is drained. Her hands are coated with formula, her overalls stained with splats and blotches that form an orange-poo camouflage. The food and poo smell clings to her skin. The smell is overbearing. She smells it on her hands and in her hair. It tightens over her crotch which grows more and more moist as time passes.

Africa is nothing like what the functional anorexic imagined. There are no wild animals or green jungles. The camp is a tent city in the desert. Everything is dull, functional. The eating area is a concrete slab. The plates and cups are metal. Everything is saw-edged and spiny-pointed. Everything is defensive and fierce. The articulated beds, diapers, morphine, gauze, serum drips, needles.

The functional anorexic retreats. Something has frozen in her, the muscles in her arms are tense, her head feels heavy. She is afraid of the weather, the air that arrives in bursts, the noise it brings with it. Scared of mosquitoes and myriad insects she doesn't know how to name. Even the light is strange to her, there is too much light. The morning sun blinds her, bruises her arms and face. A sharp ringing brightness. At night, the stars whirl into new configurations.

The sleeping quarters are large military tents with cots down the one side and rows of lockers facing. The functional anorexic sleeps next to a German Development Studies graduate and a born-again Christian from Iowa. She can hear the American praying softly for the babies. She turns anyway and blocks her ears. Unlike the other volunteers, she does not dote on the little ones, she does not have favourites.

She struggles to tell the babies apart. They all look the same, crumpled faces and brown swollen bellies, like they are mass-manufactured, cut from a mold or popped out of a machine. They are like the plastic baby dolls she had as a child with latex limbs that could be detached, taken out and put back in, endlessly swapped one for another. Interchangeable faces. Identical dolls' legs.

She maintains her distance, does not give the babies pet names or speak to them in baby talk. She does not ga ga ga goo goo or cradle them like she is practising for motherhood.

The functional anorexic cannot have children. She has no libido and her periods stopped years ago. Sex, to her, is monstrous. There is heavy breathing and sweating. Everything wet and slippery; germinating. She looks into the blank eyes of the mothers who bring their babies and thinks they

have no need for prayers. They are already one with God, already in heaven. The babies are all little Jesuses, countless products of virgin births. They are born and crucified and resurrected all within the first years of life.

Thin as she is, functional anorexic has started to lose weight, or thinks she has. The babies drain her. They eat into her head through her eyes. Suck her thoughts out with a straw. She has no way of measuring the loss. The only scales she has access to are the baby scales. Rickety hanging devices with suspended vinyl sling seats where the babies are loaded and can swing, or rather twist. Some once a day, others two or three times, depending on their condition, on their last weighing and improvement or deterioration. The scales go up to 25kg but mostly the needle quivers then comes to a standstill in the middle, at 12 o'clock, meaning 12kg more or less. During the day she watches the numbers rise and fall. No matter how many she feeds, weighs, cleans, the babies never get less, only more, as if they multiply biologically, rather than mathematically, increasing their numbers with nourishment.

The functional anorexic is no longer sure she is functional. The word has lost its meaning. It is both swollen and bone thin. What does functional mean in a place without food, without water? She struggles with the suffocating heat, the long days. The smell of the babies seems stronger, more oppressive. She suffers from nausea in the morning and cannot concentrate during the day. Mixing the formula, it is all too much, the numbers and abstractions, all the formulations.

She withdraws, no longer participates in the social evenings and movie nights organised by the programme to raise morale. She has no interest in the endless chitchat between the others girls, the ongoing arguments between the German graduate and the American Christian: who is to blame for the food crisis, the deteriorating state of the country, the people's own culpability, if only they would embrace a better work ethic, democracy, family values. She wishes that they would stop talking. She wants to say something witty and devastating to shut them up but her head is empty, her mouth feels tight. It all takes so much effort. She no longer bothers to shower in the evenings. The bathroom scares her. The walls weep. The tap is stoically silent. She heads straight to her tent, strips and stands in front of the communal mirror. She runs her hands along the curves and angles of her ribcage, the lines running across her body, the flesh hanging loosely around them.

She has difficulty sleeping. Her dreams are filled with babies. Hairless, toothless, balloon-bellied. Babies on their backs, their stomachs, their feet treading, moiling the air. Babies to be drugged with

milk, sprayed clean with water. So many, more and more. In one dream the camp is under attack. She doesn't know by whom, because she can't see any enemy except the relentless sun, the heavy air and wan blue sky, the wind and the sand that coats everything. In the dream she is running for her life. She is carrying one of the babies in her arms, imagines that she is trying to save it, hugs it tight against her like heroes do in the movies. It's a perfect fit; the baby's swollen belly against her concave stomach. Like puzzle pieces joined together. She pulls it close and runs faster. As she runs the baby's belly expands. It gets bigger and bigger, swells until it presses on her kidneys and liver. It's only then that she realises it is not a baby but a bomb that she is carrying. She is running toward the enemy camp to deliver it. She does not know who the enemy is or why she wants to destroy them. In the dream it is enough that they are the enemy. She tries to focus, to concentrate on the mission, on putting one foot in front of the other but the baby is swelling so fast, too fast. She pushes forward as quickly as her stick legs will move. It is too late. No matter how fast she runs, it's not fast enough. No matter how far she runs, she cannot outrun it. Already the baby-bomb has reached zero. She knows because she can feel the quiver before the blast, the slight spasm as skin and organs reach maximum stretch capacity. The bang seems to come from deep within her like something in her stomach has finally snapped. It is like giving birth. She feels the sudden emptiness against her chest. She stands frozen and watches tiny baby limbs flit through the air like chicken wings, skeins of ruptured blood and tendon, shards of shrapnel that hang suspended for a second then rain down.

She wakes tired and disorientated. The dream leaves her feeling fragmented, unsteady. It returns to her in flashes for the rest of the day, an afterimage superimposed on the scene as she goes about her duties, admitting a new batch of babies. The process is rote by now. The forms to be filled in, detailing weight and signs of malnutrition: dark patches on the skin, brittle hair, enlarged liver and distended stomach, most of all the eyes staring blankly upward.

She lifts the baby, feels the hard tightness of its belly against her chest. Slips it in the hanging scale and notes the weight on the admission sheet. She shifts her eyes without moving her head to look at the rows of babies still to be dealt with. From her perspective they are nothing but bellies, as if they lack organs of sense or motion. And suddenly she is overcome by an urge to run down the line of cots, to bring her hand down hard on each stomach. Like popping bubble wrap, the same sense of pleasure, knowing that what you are doing is destructive but that it doesn't really matter because there are always so many more tiny plastic air cushions, another and then the next one, rolling into infinity.

She flashes back to her dream, the feeling of the baby in her arms, pressed tight against her stomach, the moment its stomach ruptures... She stops, momentarily overcome by the genius of the baby-bomb. She thinks of its possibilities, its capacity to go undetected even in a high security situation. A scene at an airport: a female suicide bomber nursing a baby, holding it close, swaddled in folds of garments. The security man, how he smiles as he leans in, says, in a cooing voice, my, what a beautiful baby. In her head the explosion is swift and lethal. Like that scene in Alien where John Hurt's belly bursts open, the skin stretched to the limit, body convulsing.

She closes her eyes and imagines the babies detonating one after the other, activated by some built-in switch that turns the infant from passive to active. How their bodies quicken in precognition of the coming moment, gloaming, tummies rising erect as if being stretched or pulled. And their eyes, the way the lids close over and the skin around their holes fills with blood, growing so dark at the edges that all light seems sucked up.

The baby in her arms jerks the functional anorexic back to the feeding tent. It suddenly feels very heavy. Its mouth is an endless cavern, a black hole into which light and thought and sound descend, never to return. She presses her ear to its stomach and hears a quiver, a gurgle-stutter like machinery shuddering into motion. Blood beats in her temples, her ears redden. She lets the baby slide out her arms. Its limbs fail the air, sending the metal tray of tools flying, dippers and spoons skittering across the floor. There is a crash, a shrill wail. She turns, runs, legs flexed, neck corded. She ignores the uproar, the voice of the German Development Studies student shouting after her.

Outside the sun is already high and she blinks against the rings that coil across the sand in concentric circles. She runs, until she can't anymore. She is near the far periphery of the camp when her legs fail her. At every step they flinch, lapse. She pauses, tries to catch her breath, puts her hand to her chest. Her ribs flare, her diaphragm stutters.

The functional anorexic wakes slowly. Her eyes flutter then open, at first, unfocused then slowly coming together on the army brown of a tent roof above her. As she stares a dull sluggish fear begins to build in her body. She tries to move but the pain stops her. Her stomach is tight and swollen. Her legs feel far away. She recognises the voice before she sees the face, the Christian that she shares a tent with. She is looking down at the functional anorexic, her eyes so wide, looking so sincerely, leaning forward in her chair.

The functional anorexic blinks, she tries to follow what the Christian is saying but she is talking in a baby voice, a high pitch that turns words into a glutinous, sticky goo so they are impossible to hear. The functional anorexic shakes her head. She tries to lift herself, her chest, to seat level, reaching for one of the metal cot rails. She grips, slips and falls back down. The Christian says, shhh, shhh, slowly now. She leans in. By the time the functional anorexic sees the spoon it is too late. She tries to clamp her lips, but already the warm formula is flooding her mouth, seeping between her teeth, dribbling calories and nutrients slowly down her throat and into her digestive tract.

The Way Things Go

Diagnosis

She had been expecting the call from her doctor's office. He had promised that his secretary would phone as soon as her results were back from the laboratory. At the time, he made it sound so routine she imagined the call simply procedural. She imagined that she would instantly be given a clean bill of health or, at the worst, her condition would be trivial, something common, easily fixed by a change of diet or a new exercise routine.

When the phone did ring, the secretary did not reassure her. She did not even give her her results. In fact she flatly refused to reveal anything. The secretary said it was really essential that M come in. She told her to come as soon as possible. M suggested a date for the next week but the secretary would not hear of it. She insisted that the appointment needed to be first thing the next morning, if not now, this very minute.

After M hung the phone up, she turned her attention to her stomach: as usual the pain seemed negligible—if pain was even the right word. The sensation was often very vague, hardly a sensation at all really, if anything, maybe a shadow, that sometimes seemed to be in the shape of a hand or a fist, a thing that squeezed slightly. It had been constant for so long now that it had begun to feel familiar to M, more a part of herself than a disease or an infliction. She wouldn't have gone to the doctor in the first place if one of her co-workers hadn't suggested it as a precautionary measure.

Now she had no choice but to return to the doctor's office early the next day. The waiting room looked different emptied of patients, it felt large and intimidating. The air conditioning was an audible cold that engulfed her as she sat, knees pressed together. After an hour of waiting, the shadow in her stomach awakened, slid coldly up her spine and threatened a headache.

She was relieved when a woman emerged from a side door. Not the usual secretary, but a young woman in a white coat that she guessed must be the doctor's assistant. M stood and briskly followed her through the opening. The corridor was wide and antiseptically white, a row of closed doors on either side. They passed the doctor's office, despite M's protests, and continued on through to a door at the end.

M had never been this far into the hospital building. Usually she was in and out of the doctor's office in a matter of minutes. The room she now stood in was large, not so much white as blanched of colour. There was a single desk and two chairs and a silver examination table in the corner.

M moved towards the closest chair and sat down, uncertain what to do with her eyes as there was seemingly nothing to focus on. When the doctor entered, she stood quickly, holding her clasped hands across her stomach as she greeted him. The doctor was wearing a surgical mask which obscured his features, and for a moment M thought it was not her usual doctor. It was only when he spoke that she recognised him, and even then she could have been wrong, as the mask somewhat distorted his voice, making it almost monotone.

The doctor sat, indicated for M to join him, then proceeded to flick through a pile of papers as if she wasn't there. He took a long time with his preparation, rearranging folders in a different order, before lifting his head. Then he sat very still, staring at M with such intensity that she felt herself shrink back in her chair.

M was not prepared for his hostile attitude. He had been so pleasant at her last appointment. He had listened so patiently as she described the stomach ache, and other symptoms too, including her difficulty sleeping and her nagging dreams. She remembered how the doctor's face had furrowed into an expression so sincere that M was sure it indicated deep concern. He didn't interrupt her once, despite how she stammered, her symptoms being, as they were, very vague and difficult to describe. He was quick to reassure her that it was probably nothing, certainly nothing to worry about, probably the symptoms were merely manifestations of the stress she was under. He said they would run some tests just to be sure. He promised the secretary would phone with the results as soon as they were available.

Now that he was observing her coldly, M felt the familiar clenching pain resurface in her stomach. Then, as if he could sense her vulnerability, the doctor delivered his diagnosis, saying the name of the disease very slowly. It startled M to hear the word in the doctor's mouth. She had of course heard it countless times before on radio, on TV, but hearing it from someone in person was altogether different.

Do you know what that means? asked the doctor, and she had no choice but to nod her head, because yes, of course she knew what it meant, everyone knew what it meant, even if, like her, they

only had a shadowy grasp of its symptoms: stomach and back pain, weakness or clumsiness of leg or hand, eye pain, poor bladder control, vertigo. Painful swellings, accompanied by panic and a feeling of uselessness. Sometimes there were changes to physiology, even to bone structure, turning sufferers into hunchbacks, cripples. The progression of the disease was often very drawn out. Many remissions and worsenings.

She knew that in its final stages the disease was terminal but to her, as to so many, the disease seemed very far away. Threatening, but only from a great distance. Something that happened to other people. To those from a different background to M's. To people living in slums or outlying rural areas.

She had shadowy images in her head from the TV news reports: a devastated village, now little more than a smear on the landscape, a handful of survivors, a dozen maybe. Whole areas cordoned off. Fear of it spreading, mutating and then infecting broader communities heretofore untouched.

A wave of nausea engulfed her. Her entire torso ached, and suddenly she realised, as if she'd been thumped in the chest, that most of her symptoms were a perfect match to those of the disease, at least in its early stages. She sat staring at the doctor, momentarily unable to move or speak.

His cold stare had now grown into open disdain and suddenly M imagined herself leaping up, breaking from the room and running with great speed down the corridor and out the door, away from the hospital, the doctor, the disease. Before she could try it the doctor spoke again, said, you know that the only way to contract this specific condition is by ingesting the flesh of someone who has already been infected. He said the words as if he was pronouncing some kind of sentence.

M started to shake her head. Her face flushed. No, it's not possible. Of course she knew it was. She knew that despite its unlikely method of contagion, the disease had spread rapidly. But it was simply not possible she had committed such a heinous act, certainly not consciously. She tried to think whether she might have eaten something by mistake. No, she was always very careful about what she ate. Since the first outbreak of the disease almost everyone was.

When it started it had appeared to be a wave of food poisonings. People stopped going to certain establishments. Certain restaurant venues were avoided, spoken of in hushed tones. Tables sat empty. She had herself had only eaten out once recently, and then it was at a respectable

establishment. She remembered the restaurant only vaguely. She remembered that it had been a pleasant evening, except for a man at the next table, his incessant complaining. At the time she thought he was just a difficult customer but now his complaints came back to her.

It was only now, now that the doctor was saying this, that it could have occurred. And once it had occurred, it was impossible to completely deny. Why should your gut be rumbling so early in the day? Were your bowels loose this morning? Is the sinking of your stomach in response to the thought of what you think you might have eaten, or to what you, really and truly, did eat?

She shook her head. She had no answer for the doctor. She could only stare at him. He stared back. They sat. Finally, the sitting was interrupted by the entrance of two men. They wore protective medical gear. When M wouldn't go with them voluntarily, they pried her hands from the chair handle and lifted her out of her seat.

The men escorted M down the corridor. She kicked her legs until they dropped her, then walked with her head down. She tried one last time to suppress the tears but she couldn't hold them back any longer, and the world began to blur around the edges. She could hear the footsteps of the men. They echoed against the tiled floor. M had no choice but to fall into their rhythm. She put one foot in front of the other. She pulled the sleeves of her jersey over her fists, like gloves.

Aetiology

It was Aditi Degla who used the slogan. He is recorded as having spoken it in a speech given to the Subcommittee for People's Freedom on the 28th of January. Degla was the last to speak—he talked for forty minutes. The slogan appeared towards the end, as part of his closing remarks. In a recording of the event, one can hear the crowd's response, a distorted cheer that breaks into feedback.

Degla is not, however, the original author of the words. The archive contains photographic evidence, seemingly dating back to the last century, of unidentified youths wearing shirts emblazoned with the slogan. It is not known what political party or grouping these youths belonged to, or the exact context of their rebellion. Their uniform reveals nothing—heavy boots and leather jackets, heads clean-shaven. It is also not known if the youths in question ever acted on the words inscribed on their clothing.

Following Degla's speech, the slogan spread rapidly throughout the country. There is documentation of its appearance in three provinces. In the capital city the words were regularly used to deface public buildings, and for a while it was popular to vandalize both private and government vehicles by scratching the words into their enamel surface. In one particular incident, students rushed into the university's administration buildings and hung a banner carrying the slogan outside the windows.

It is not known precisely where or when the slogan was first taken literally. There were numerous unconfirmed reports from the rural areas in the north, a territory notorious for its kidnappings and its pockets of guerrillas and paramilitaries.

The first recorded case happened in an informal settlement not far from the capital. A government minister touring the area went missing. His bodyguards claimed it was an ambush. They were taken by surprise by armed men in an unmarked vehicle. The official motorcade was stopped; the minister dragged out, tied up, and hauled to the back of a jeep.

Later bones were unearthed from a nearby garbage dump, ragged and chewed-looking, but unmistakably human. One piece of evidence, later identified to be a humerus, was still enrobed in tatters of fabric from the jacket the minister had been wearing at the time of his disappearance.

After that, bodies started appearing in numerous townships. Often they were naked, their arms and legs half-eaten, faces gone, scooped out along with their brains, only the backs of their skulls remaining.

Degla officially disassociated himself from the practice. At a press conference he reiterated the slogan's metaphoric and symbolic function. But he spoke freely off-record, saying that it was unavoidable, expected even. People were starving. What did government expect?

At the height of the uprising, whole neighbourhoods were invaded and bonfires built. Witnesses detailed the mass slaughter of residents. One video, filmed by an anonymous bystander and posted to the internet, shows a pavement glinting with tiny fires then zooming into the main blaze. The dead, visible only as silhouettes, are wheeled out in shopping carts. Bodies hoisted and swung into the centre. Flames rise up like hands.

After that, one sees very little. Whatever is visible is blurred and incandescent because of its proximity to fire. Nevertheless, in the last frames, the smoke lifts and one can see bodies being hauled from the coals and dissected. A cheer goes up as hunks of charred meat are passed around. The people gathered look, if anything, hungrier than before, their cadaverous appearance accentuated by the setting sun's duet with the dust, and the light thrown up by the fire.

The minister's death was followed by a massive government crackdown. The army was sent in and hundreds were shot or arrested. Books and papers were confiscated and burned. Newspaper were raided. All photos and evidence was deleted from the servers. The slogan was banned. But the acrid smell of the burned flesh could not be wiped away, only masked by chemicals. Finally the whole stretch of road was blasted, then tarred over.

Somehow, the slogan survived. It still appears from time to time. Over the year it has changed, gained weight and accumulated new inflections. One usually comes across it unexpectedly. A scrawl on the wall in a public toilet. A youth who passes you quickly, hood low, just a flash of the phrase printed on his sweatshirt before he disappears down a side street.

There is an SUV parked in an almost empty parking lot. As you approach, two young people run off, black bandanas covering their faces, their work interrupted. Only the first few words of the slogan are etched into the driver's silver door.

Degla, who disappeared from public view soon after the crackdown, is believed by many to be amongst those slaughtered by government forces. There are rumours that he was captured and of tortured, transferred to a black site where he was shaved and beaten... and other practices used to extract information. Other instruments.

In an alternate version he escaped and fled the country. The new airport is modern and well-planned. Security footage shows long shining corridors, businessmen carrying brand-new pieces of luggage. A man with a black beard walks briskly past. This face is completely different, yet its expression is the same.

Over the years, Degla has become almost a mythical figure. Sometimes a statement will come, or a piece of news passed through a hundred mouths. A posting on Facebook. A photograph.

It starts just like that: with an image. You receive an invitation to a dinner to be held in Degla's honour from a former colleague at the university. The picture included in the email is from happier times, Degla is smiling, his arm around an unidentified comrade. It's not stated in the official communication, but there is a rumour that Degla will make an appearance. You are surprised by how much you want to see him. So much time has passed and yet immediately the feeling comes back. Sounds, memories, well up. The roar of flames. Tangled notes hedged by screams, by shatters.

It's in a building in the industrial area, surrounded by empty buildings, concrete. Plastic bags with unknown contents are scattered amid the rubble. Unpaved roads lead off into abandoned building sites and empty patches of veld. The smell of petrol mingles with the more acrid stink of something rotting. Across the street, a refinery, a railroad bridge.

Access to the building is heavily restricted. Three men with automatic weapons check your invitation and identity documents. You are led up a dark corridor, concrete stairs, but once inside you see the mood is festive. A band is playing songs from the struggle era. You do not see Degla amongst the guests but maybe you just don't recognise him.

Time changes people. You yourself have changed.

You give up looking and decide to enjoy yourself. The tables are laden with food. It's been a long time since you have eaten this well. Meat has been meagre in your own household, and you'd guess that at least a few of the men gathered here have known hunger. No one mentions these hardships. Sounds of jovial conversation run around the tables. You prick up your ears but hear no mention of the slogan or the killings that followed. You stop listening, tear off a piece of flesh with your knife and dig in. There's bread to soak up the blood.

Scalding

We live on a street where derelicts sleep in boxes. Every morning they go through our rubbish, throw the contents of the black municipal bins in our doorway. We do not complain or try to stop them. We mutely pick up the rubbish. Wash and dry our hands after. We discuss poverty and the state of the economy and the rise in unemployment. We use words that make it sound distant and controllable but the truth is we are bound so tight we are suffocating. We draw air in and sit back, watch how an escaped plastic lifts. How it tumbles, end over end, along the concrete then comes to a standstill.

The cottage is semi-detached like so many others in the area. The roof leaks and there is only one working electricity outlet. We move between rooms, swapping out devices and plugging in extensions because the landlord won't fix the broken plugs. In the morning we are jolted awake by the sound of his pipes. We are subletting. A thin wall separates us. Sometimes we hear noises from his place that sound like a wrench hitting metal. Footsteps creak on floorboards.

I am always burning my hands on the stove. I'm not used to gas and Alvaro has to show me how to hold the match. Still, I leave the gas running a little too long and it sends an explosion of blue flames into my face when I try to light it. I smell burnt hair and touch my fringe. My fingers are singed at the tips, numb. The pain comes later. My whole hand is throbbing, like when you test of blood pressure, the band clasped too tight around the upper arm.

I wrap my fist in a dish cloth and go next door. I am ready for a fight but as soon as the landlord opens, I start to apologise. I tell him about the plugs and the stove. My voice is soft and uncertain and he stops me and launches into a lecture on gas and safety. I hug my bandaged hand and listen to the warnings and indulgent rebukes in silence. When he is finished, he steps away from the door and calls his son out. The boy is about fourteen but already he is taller than his father. The same broad shoulders and big hands. He is embarrassed, but when the man nods, he lifts his shirt and shows me the scar spread across his stomach, a putrescence of waxy skin, stretched and knotted, where hot oil spilled on him.

Back home, the house is dark. The stove is black and cold again. When Alvaro returns, we fight about power. I am listening to the radio and he wants to use the computer. He pulls the plug out and I start to cry. I take a breath and turn away, cover my face. Alvaro sees the burn for the first time. How did this happen? He takes my wrist, plies my fingers, touches my palm like he is reading it. I

start to tell him about the gas and the stove and the landlord's son. I try to describe the boy's disfigurement, the shade and intensity of the gelatinous area of burned flesh. Dense and dendritic. But the words sound thin, rubbery in my mouth. My voice is pitched too high. Alvaro doesn't listen. He says shh, lifts my hands. Kisses my knuckles. Takes my burned fingers in his mouth one by one and sucks them, as if performing a medical procedure, as if the pain is a venom that can be sucked from my body, extracted then spat onto the dirty floorboards beneath our feet.

Injuries Sustained Through Falling

They haul the body up the slope. Already they are arguing: where to throw it from, the exact location, the position and angle of the body; its state at the time of descent—conscious or unconscious, what kind of fall—a throw or a jump, or maybe not a throw but a push, and even then accidental or deliberate. There are too many positions—the position of the body and the position of the men. They are on top of the koppie, a small outcrop of rocks above where the incident happened. They are looking down at the site where they were standing only two days previously. The tyre-prints of their vehicles are still clearly visible on the dirt track leading up to where the body was found, face down in the ditch, not far from the road.

A girl, probably between twenty-three and twenty-five, 170 centimetres tall, wearing a sweatshirt and synthetic-fabric Reebok sneakers. Bruising on her chin and around her left eye, severe bruising on her legs and ribcage. In the forensic examination a significant sampling of semen is found in the vagina, but no indication of violence or rape. Death appears to have been caused by the fall, or rather injuries sustained through falling: hemorrhagic shock, craniocerebral damage, multiple lacerations to the liver and spleen, any one of which may have proved fatal.

Now they lift her body from the morgue's thick plastic wrapper. An awkward moment, because they lack a vital piece of knowledge: how to lift a dead body. Up close they can see the pattern of freckles on the slim forearms, the dark bruising below the shoulder blades, the discoloration of the fingernails with their chipped varnish. They look at each other trying to gauge if there is a correct method, a proper procedure for handling cadavers stipulated somewhere in the police manuals. Finally they just heft the body as if supporting a drunk, taking hold under the arms and the elbows so the feet drag. They walk like that, two men trailing dirt, to the edge of the precipice. Hesitate because they have yet to determine the location the girl fell from. Stand in the gathering dust, the girl hanging between them.

The captain watches the men from a short distance. From his position on the koppie he can see the clearing where the body was found, and beyond that the remains of the outer perimeter fence and the iron-stained roofs of some shacks. It's a hazy white day, a drained sky above him. He squints, walks to the edge then back again, trying to get a better sense of perspective. Behind him the men, the police, are busy with the body... but which police? The captain is suddenly struck by the effect of the government uniform, to unify and homogenize. It is impossible to distinguish one policeman from the next. He has never thought about this before: how loaded a word police is. All at once

singular and plural. He glances back and notes the fatigue collected in their faces, a constant weariness that has nothing to do with age or tiredness.

The captain is from a different generation, young and ambitious. He was trained outside the country as part of a nationwide government intervention into crime prevention designed to combat police inefficiency and corruption ahead of the election. He is a good ten years younger than most of the men under him, handpicked straight from the academy. He knows the men under him resent him for it, sees the sidelong glances, the men exchanging looks, the tension before following any command. There is nothing to be done about it, the current force is, to his mind, a bad combination of corrupt officers from the old regime and incompetents employed by the new dispensation—both groups uneducated in the latest techniques in crime scene investigation, police and forensic cooperation.

The captain frowns, shields his eyes from the glare and takes a deep breath. He's been having trouble sleeping at night, falling asleep immediately but then waking later in the night, body drenched, pulse accelerated, but unable to determine the cause. Even now his face is faintly moist, an oily sheen across his forehead and cheeks that he wipes before he steps forward. The men fall silent as he begins to speak. Talking slowly and deliberately, he explains that they have to work backwards; the body's point of departure is to be determined by its destination, its final resting position; an equation, taking into account body orientation, body mass, the impact of surface (stopping distance) and the position of the head, the shape of the blood stain, the direction of its splatter in the sand and the texture of the grit under the fingernails.

He walks to the edge, gestures with his hand. Below him the long weeds and grass shift, a slight breeze that's blown up from the west. It ruffles his hair as he turns back to the men. He uses eye contact to single out one of them, a young lieutenant. A thin nervous man who hesitates before he begins the journey down, feet sliding in the loose sand and hands grabbing at the tufts of long grass. A cloud of dust follows him to where he stands now, brushing off his trousers even though they will get dirty again on the way up.

The young lieutenant takes the established crime scene entry path out of habit, uses the police photographs supplied by the captain to locate the body's exact position within the predetermined area. The images are familiar, always the same series of angles, repeated for each murder, the long shot that gives a good indication of both position and direction. He moves his eyes from the picture

to the ground and back again. Confident that this is the spot he raises his arms and begins to wave at the men above him.

The lieutenant squints, trying to make out the captain's gestures. He is shouting something from the hilltop, indicating with his hands. But the wind diffuses his voice, delivers it to him in fragments. He shakes his head, brings his hands up to his ears, stops when he hears his phone ring, hesitates for a moment like he doesn't recognise the sound, before reaching into his pocket. It's the captain, his voice sounds far away over the receiver, further than 100 metres or so above him on the hill, where he is now frantically waving. The voice tells him to get down on the ground, assume the terminal posture, the exact position of the body, as it was found, face down. The man looks briefly up at the captain, blinking against the sun, sure that he has misheard. Sees by his body language that he means business and sighs. Lies in the dirt where the girl lay, how she laid, his face at a right angle so he can see only the tufts of grass sticking up from the sand, a single thorn tree in the distance.

Above him the men have started to argue again. They have different readings on what the position tells them. One of them puts forward a theory. He walks to the edge to demonstrate. Leaning, falling, pushing. He says this is the place. A few of the others start to disagree but then decide against it. They lift the body and carry it in a collective effort. They release at the same time, surprised by how quickly it falls, like a deadweight, goes over head down, for a moment looks to right itself then continues its headlong trajectory, then lands with a dull thud, a good five metres away from the young lieutenant, where he is lying, crumpled over, only half visible, a mound of lean thighs and buttocks.

The captain, who until now has been silent, steps forward, his eyes comparing the girl's figure with the shape of the young lieutenant's body. From where he stands, only the left side of the lieutenant's face is visible. The cheeks are gaunt, face topped by thinning hair. The mouth skews to one side, and the one eye is creased and squinting. In contrast the girl's face is on full display. Her eyes, glued shut by the morgue, have popped open, probably due to the force of impact. Her mouth is ajar.

The captain begins to speak, almost to no one, commenting on the angle of her hips, pushed out to one side as if the bones of her legs have become dislocated. His words come out softer than they should, reedier, because of his tiredness, because of the wind and the dust. He clears his throat before he commands five men down to fetch the body. The sun is high and sweat swims off the

men's faces. They are breathing heavily, unused to the heat and physical exercise, the weight of the body between them. The captain watches them drop it down in the dirt. He waits for them to get their breath back, says nothing, doesn't have to, it is there in his eyes and mouth, the cold stare and slight twitch.

This second time the body catches. Falls only a few metres before it hooks a small shrub, hangs suspended then starts to slide, rolls a few more paces before coming to a stop in the dirt. It lies splayed, almost like it has been pried open, legs spread and arms flung wide from each other. The men stare and then look away, suddenly aware of its nakedness, an absence that abruptly calls attention to itself, like there is something missing. A sharpness, an edge to the black pubes, the bruising on the breasts and belly.

The captain goes down to examine it himself. Makes his way slowly, stops before the body. Bends down to get a better idea of the position, the way it has fallen, the arms elbows bent, palms up. Sighs, starts to stand, stops, hands on knees to measure the angle of the slope. Finally, rises and surveys things, walks around the body, bending at intervals as if to discover it from each point of view, notes the subtle separation of tonalities in the bruising, the telltale cuts in the skin, the swelling of the bottom lip. Walks back, stands surveying the whole scene again, casting his eyes around like the answer is not in the body but in the landscape, in the rocks, and the soil, and the dust, the concrete expanse of underpass and overpass, the intersecting lines and planes of the highway, beyond that, in the geometry of interpersonal and power relations, the stratification or dominance patterns in the society.

The captain bends again, sits on his haunches. He touches the girl's neck and moves her face, flips it right, left, with a tenderness somehow at odds with his big hands. He stares at the hollow plains of her cheeks then lets a finger stray down past her breasts to her belly, onto on her broad her hips, into their now empty contours. It always surprises him how, after death, it looks as if something has vanished from the body. Perhaps the soul, he thinks, the capacity to achieve a state of grace. Or maybe nothing as elevated, simply that the body is no longer a body. To him, it is a piece of evidence. Something composed of coordinates in space, the vertical and parallel lines of the grid that map the search area, an x and y to indicate the body's position in it; the marks on it, a series of bruises and cuts that signify actions. These actions can be collected together, gathered up and recomposed to make a picture. The picture is called the crime. The crime is what has to be solved.

To do this it is necessary to reconstruct the events, to recreate them as if they were happening again in the present, like a movie, of which he has become the director.

He turns his face to the wind, raising his head slightly. The sky has grown further away and his view of it has expanded. He shields his eyes, walks to the edge where the men are standing, points out to the farmland and rocky hills framed by the concrete highway they travelled on. He makes them stand like that, staring at nothing for one, two, three, four, five seconds, and then he starts to talk very quickly. He says, have you considered the space between the perpetrator and the victim, the causality that strings them together, the blind gravity of chance?

He sketches a scenario, one possibility that he considers likely. He qualifies this—at least for now, under the current conditions and considering the testimony given by the boyfriend and the evidence in front of them. He tells it like a story.

The girl and her boyfriend are out walking. Usually they take the trail that first loops around the reservoir, but today they turn right instead of left, a new route—why? The captain doesn't wait for an answer. He says, the day is clear, hot despite the early hour and they pause on the part of the trail where the road diverges. They have a fight—something about their relationship. Maybe he doesn't love her enough. He's never there when she needs him. She hates him. She hates him for every word he does not say to her, every move he does not make for her, every moment he does not think of her. Or maybe it is something else entirely. Maybe he loves her too much. He is stifling her. Even now—the way he puts his arms around her, very slowly, first one then the other. There's no way of knowing. Maybe all possibilities are correct. Maybe the sadness after you get what you want is even worse than the sadness when you couldn't get what you want?

The captain pauses, stares into the distance. Shakes his head and glances back at the men. Clears his throat then continues. Maybe she feels as if she can't breathe. Stop! she orders, she shoves him off and starts to walk away, quickly, of course, because she is tall and bony, her strides are long, her shoulders roll. The boy watches her go, maybe he thinks to follow, maybe he even starts, but she's walking fast and he knows how she is when she's like this.

The captain hesitates then picks up where he left off: the boy on the path, watching the girl go; the girl going, alone now. She slows her pace. The route is unfamiliar. Behind her, the sky is blue, a glare of white from the sun. The path has become rocky. Her shadow is losing its legs. Maybe she starts to panic, looks around her and recognises nothing, not the cluster of thorn trees or the broken

wire fence or the corrugated iron shacks. She is at the foot of the koppie now. She looks up and thinks if she climbs it she will be able to see the path she has come on, where it is leading her. Probably this thought revives her, she feels a fresh burst of energy and starts to climb very quickly.

The captain squints upwards as if he can see her; a tiny speck trying to climb the rock that has now become a mountain. She is almost at the top when it happens, her body twists around and her foot gets caught between the boulders on which she has paused. She tries to catch her balance, throws her arms up, thinks for a moment she has it, but then her foot breaks free, a sudden jerk that sends her flying.

The captain brings his hand up, makes an arch to indicate the line on which her body has travelled. He explains that it is not so much a throw as a drop. They have to hold the body, as if to prevent it from falling, then let it tip and go careening down. He singles out two men for the job; the others watch. The tension builds until it is taut, almost unbearable, then the men let go and the body disappears over the ledge. They follow it to the edge. Below them the scene is frozen, as if it has always been that way. The body is face-down, less than a metre away from the young lieutenant, so close that he has shifted, pulled his legs up and flipped over so he is looking at it like it's a ghost, something fallen from heaven.

The men laugh. One of them starts to clap softly then louder. The others join in. They laugh and slap hands. They pat the captain on the back. This time they jostle to retrieve the body. They all want in, want to admire their handiwork from close up. Together with the young lieutenant, they carry the body up, all talking noisily, trailing dust. They drop it and stand staring at the bruised face, at the open mouth with its broken teeth and the fresh abrasions on the forehead.

The captain doesn't join them. He turns his back and starts to walk. He is half way to his car when a voice pulls him back—one of the men. He wants to do it again. To rule out coincidence, he says. He reaches in his pocket and takes out a cigarette, lights it and blows smoke. A few others nod in agreement. The captain hesitates, sizing up the smoker's interest. He knows the man, an officer with 15 years experience, a history of corruption, no charges laid, but allegations. It is said that he was involved in several gangs responsible for drug-running and multiple murders in the townships. There are stories of accomplices high up in the police force but nothing was ever proved. The man holds his gaze, looks away only to take another drag of his cigarette, offers it to the captain who shakes his head, pauses and then nods quickly.

The sun is at its zenith, the captain mops his brow as two men move in. They lift the body. Repeat the motions, the balancing and tilting, the holding suspended then letting go. The remaining men join them. They are all standing on the edge now, shielding eyes against the sun. They lift their hands when the body lands as it did, almost exactly the same position. A roar goes up. The men are laughing. They are sweating and clapping. The sun is high. It beats down on them, on the scene, on the body of the girl as they move to collect it, now experts at climbing the hill. The body sways between them. The body flops and drops. The men laugh.

The captain watches, something has happened, a subtle change in the atmosphere. The quality of the light is different. The air seems heavier. The men are sweating, sweat congealing, turning into a grit-sweat, everything exuding rankness. The captain searches for his handkerchief. In the centre of his spine his shirt is damp and he shakes it loose, letting air in. He tries to focus, to catch what the men are saying; now talking fast, over each other. One of them has started to laugh. He sees them lift the body, notes its slump, the way the head falls forward, how the feet drag in the dust behind them. It takes him a moment to realise they are about to do it again. He steps forward, or rather tries to step, trips at the same moment as the men drop the girl's body over the edge, so they go down together.

The body is badly bruised now, dirty beyond recognition. Almost a different body from the one they started with, a different girl, her hair matted and coated with dirt. Some of the blood has dried, clotted with sand and dust from the multiple falls. The captain remains slightly crouched. He squints into the light. A layer of dust covers his clothes. Not quite dust, he realises: stickier. Behind him, the men have grown silent, suddenly uncertain about what they have done, how they have done it. They start to argue but it is too late, the damage is done, the body damaged beyond recognition, no longer same body they brought here. No longer the same crime, new wounds have been opened, bones broken and fractured in multiple places, fresh contusions on the face. One eye has been popped or poked out. The socket, stuffed with blood and dirt, stares emptily at them.

The captain stands slowly, brushes himself off. He wipes his hands on the back of his pants then steps forward. He doesn't say anything, simply looks at the men to let them know that they are in this together—if there is an inquest they go down before he does. They hang their heads, don't wait for his command to pack up the equipment. They do not drive back in convoy, as they came. They

deliberately distance themselves from each other, allow gaps and spaces to open between their cars. Arrive at the station in the dribs and drabs.

The body has to be transferred to the morgue. The elevator reaches the second floor and stops. As the doors open, there is a sudden hush. There are papers to be signed that no one wants to take responsibility for. The captain is forced to call in favours—a friend in forensics that he studied overseas with.

The morgue says nothing. But the family is not happy, the mother in particular. She does not want to believe that her daughter's body looks the way it looks from an accident, a simple fall. How is it possible? She suspects the boyfriend, always has. The state of the body confirms her hunch. She submits an official complaint including a list of the visible injuries: cuts on her face with bruises on her upper jaw, near her right ear; the right eye missing, possibly gouged out; severe bruising to the chest and abdomen; tears and abrasions on the arms and legs, including deep lacerations to the left thigh and tumefaction that could indicate fractures. She wants an inquest, demands an independent pathologist's report.

There is a lot of noise for a while, allegations of police incompetence, even corruption. The captain submits his report and keeps a low profile. Three days later the independent pathologist's report comes in, concurring with the police coroner. It confirms that death is due to fatal injuries obtained through a fall from height, corroborates the orientation of body at the moment of flight and on impact and nature of surface impacted. In addition, soil, vegetation, and other trace evidence found on the body match with the police findings to confirm the site of the accident. The captain reads the report and then files it together with the other papers.

The mother doesn't cry at the funeral. There is a closed coffin because the girl's face is damaged beyond repair. The mother stands very still and straight at the side of the grave as the coffin is lowered. The captain watches from a few metres away. He wears a suit, the one suit he wears for such occasions. The captain rocks on his toes. He has started to sweat again, the way he does at night, it pours off him.

He doesn't wait for the end of the service. He slips away while the family is singing the last hymn. Within ten minutes he has returned to his small flat. After bolting the door, he sits in the kitchen drinking a beer and smelling his own odour, recognising parts of his body—his feet and genitalia,

the dank smell that issues from his armpits. He finishes the beer and crushes the can down on the table. Strips off his clothes in the bedroom, throws his suit and tie into the bottom of the cupboard and puts on the same sweat-stained sports shirt and trousers he was wearing earlier.

Carrion

The forensic pathologist lies in the shallow grave, her body already in the first stages of decomposition. She still wears the black dress from the night before but its thin straps are torn. Stocking and shoes, missing. She does not know what happened to them – not exactly, her memories of the events are hazy. She remembers the man—pieces of the man. She saw him only in only parts. She remembers the pain—not the pain itself because one cannot remember pain as a sensation, but rather its effect—how it worked on her body. How it throbbed and beat and reduced her body to one tight spot behind her eyes.

She does that now. Her training taught her to create distance and distil information, make things manageable. You observe the body, its muscular and chemical properties, you observe the patterns that emerge. She can tell that she has been murdered by the unmistakable signs of strangulation, the severe bruising to the neck and the angle of her head, which seems to suggest a fracture of the hyoid. In addition, there is the tumefaction of the wrists, as if they have been bound. Similarly, both ankles present lacerations, by which she deduces that her feet were tied as well. She can also tell, even without an internal exam, that she has been raped repeatedly. Her vagina is torn; her vulva and inner thighs showed clear signs of a struggle. The presence of multiple haematomas on her legs testify to the excessive violence employed against her.

She pushes these facts out of mind. What has happened to her is of less concern than what is about to happen, what is already happening, the process of decay that started only moments after her heart stopped beating—before, even. By its rapid advance, she can guess that her grave is shallow, the soil around her moist and muddy, almost too soft to support a heavy body. A forest, she imagines, somewhere with thick cover, overgrowth. Or near a river, a bank sunk in sludge, stagnant brown pools of water. She can feel the mud in her mouth, on her hands, on her skin. Her ears and eyes are completely submerged and she is certain that the blood bubbles in her nostrils are the only reason she can't smell the putrefaction; the stench of death that she now knows engulfed her.

The smell means that at least forty-eight hours have passed; maybe as many as seventy-two, and with each day that passes her chances of being discovered decrease exponentially. With every hour more of her is lost, evidence destroyed, so that even if she is found, if she is buried someplace that makes discovery likely—near to a road or industrial area—the probability of police identifying her or her attackers is limited. She pictures them digging her up years later, peeling back layers of mud to reveal a crooked knee joint, a decayed hand, a slender black wrist and the fragments of fingers.

Touch, she thinks, is the only sense we cannot lose, because losing it means ceasing to be a person and becoming mere flesh.

She still remembers her first case as a young pathologist, it was a Jane Doe that had arrived thirty minutes before the end of her shift. A succession of gloved fingers and swabs and instruments. And afterwards, peeling off the gloves and disposing them in the bin. How her fingers felt numb when she typed the report. In that instance the killer or killers didn't bother to dig a grave, not even a shallow one. They didn't even take the trouble to drag her out into the veld, just dumped the body down on the concrete shoulder of the N2 highway and drove away. That detail struck her. It seemed too suggestive, ripe, compared to the fresh state of the body—it opened up to something deeper, a suppuration on a societal level. She doesn't know what became of the investigation. She guesses she must have filed her. To every body: an envelope, licked, sealed, filed.

She lies very still, hoping to catch an echo of machinery or the hum of cars in the distance, but all she can hear is the now familiar fluttering whirr of necrophagous feeding insects. Hear is the wrong word as her ears are blocked up, filled with maggots. Her eyes are gone. From the holes of her sockets she imagines flesh seething with blowfly larvae, full grown beetles, ripe with eggs, feeding. She see hordes of voracious ants and butterflies and carnivorous birds swoop down on her. Insects that enter the body, that leave the body.

She thinks of the greenbottle flies trapped against the glass in her bedroom window in summer, too fat to escape through the slight crack. She wonders how long before all her organs are gone, all hair, all nails. At what hour does the flesh forget? When is it soft enough? Who ordains when a murdered girl becomes something to plant seeds in? Who decided what gets planted?

She watches her body disappear and thinks about the thing her professor in medical school always said about death and eternal return. She tries to focus, to unravel the strands of her younger life and review the detritus of learning. What is digestion? It is the ability to assimilate proteins. What is a protein? I don't know. Isn't everything inside the body a kind of liquid, a way of taking information from site to site? She gives up. All she can remember is a joke that did the rounds amongst the students—the one about the existentialist and the maggots. It isn't funny, but now she laughs anyway, longer and harder than she has ever laughed. She laughs until she can't anymore because of how it shakes her innards, sends shivers through her internal organs that threaten to reduce them to early liquefaction.

She forces herself to stop, to lie very still. She pushes her mind into the maggots, tries to map their feasting. She follows their progress through orifices and tears in her dermis, into vital organs, favouring the squishy tissues over harder ones. She feels them march across her head, tickling as they eat their way underneath the scalp tissue. In a few days they will hatch and crawl out—tiny black legs that will cling to her chest, her face, so many that the mass of their transparent wings will be opaque. Finally they will leave her; fly off in a green metallic swarm to seek out the next corpse.

She doesn't factor in the hyenas, they are so unlikely. To the best of her knowledge, they are only found in the north of the country and then mostly in game parks. Could it be that she is there, up north, lying in some deserted river bed? Water in dank low pools and sand broken by the current and drifting into patterns. But how has she gotten there and why would her assailants go to such lengths, especially considering all the spots only a few kilometres away from the crime scene — churning oceans and dark lagoons, thick forests and concealed groves, ideal for concealing a body.

At first she thinks she is imagining it, that the maniacal giggle she hears is her own laugh, filtered through death and dirt and echoed back to her. But no, it is unmistakable now, the sound of paws and claws breaking through mud and twigs. From the noise, she guesses, about six or seven of them. Then, a dozen, a clan, a cackle. She can hear it in the laughter, in the digging. They are growing bigger. Every one of them is huge. By the shrieking squeals and the sounds of tearing she knows they were making off with parts of her cadaver. She knows that hyenas thrive on rotten carrion, their digestive tracts so robust that they can consume even anthrax-infected flesh. She remembers as a student she admired this feed pattern as a superb evolutionary advantage, something that enhanced their competition for food in the animal kingdom.

But her hyenas aren't just wolfing down her rotting flesh, they are rubbing themselves on it, laughing and squirming, rolling in it like cats with catnip. Suddenly the forensic pathologist feels ecstatic. Her body is bound for investigation but her mind leaps. She has never been sociable really. Not a party person. She shies away from celebration and gatherings. But this is different. For the first time she is at the centre. The life of the party! A weight has lifted. Her body is inert, but exhilarated. It is rocking, bouncing, shaking as the hyenas tear into it. Through the mud and sand, the hollows of her eye sockets, she can make out a roiling mass, whooping and writhing. Then very suddenly, a close up, directly above her: just a muzzle covered in blood, black eyes almost glued shut and a piece of rotting flesh hanging from its grinning teeth.

An Archaeology of Holes

I join a new feminist group who believe all women are linked by holes, on the outside as well as on the inside. I don't understand the theory exactly. It is very complicated, combining quantum physics and speculative philosophy with feminist theory. A lot of it is based around new discoveries related to dark matter and black holes, the idea of a black hole as a process—a progression that appears differently, or not at all, from various perspectives. A lacuna that allows space for change and indeterminacy. Despite my inability to comprehend the specifics, I get the main thrust of what they are saying almost instinctually, on a sort of cellular level. It's like I can feel it in my stomach, a sucking, not a queasiness so much as a churning, a new opening.

The group is practical about it. They advocate that new recruits start with something simple. They suggest digging a hole; that the elementary process of excavation might lead to a deeper understanding. I buy a small spade from the gardening shop. It is nondescript, modest in size and grey in colour. I choose a spot in the back garden and dig close to the fence. Winter has come early this year and already the grass is a thin angry yellow. I pull it up and set to work on the black earth below.

At first, I dig at night so as to keep my hole a secret. In the dark the garden seems bigger, there is the sound of crickets, and then there is the familiar smell of the soil, dark and fertile. I soon discover that my clandestine efforts are unnecessary. Nobody blinks twice at a woman digging a hole. It is the most natural thing. They imagine flowers and vegetables, fertility and gardens and bloomings.

I start to work on my hole daily. I am not so interested in depth, as in circumference. I want the walls of my hole to be smooth and resilient. I work carefully, trying not to disturb the edges. I kneel above it and it opens. I am afraid of how big it's getting. Half of my time is now consumed by maintenance. A hole has so many enemies. I watch the weather closely, every pattern, every warning. Rain forms and drops. The soil is sodden and slippery. At night the wind blows. I fear avalanches as the granules of sand come undone and fall into the centre. Sometimes I hear things: the scratch of a beetle, the steady slide of an earthworm. Often, I get out of bed and slip outside. The grass is cold and dead beneath my feet. The earth trembles. My hole is waiting. It quivers unsteady in the moonlight.

As I go deeper, things become precarious. My spade is a weapon, a blade that reflects the sunlight; every shovel of sand is weighted with imminent collapse. The sand keeps opening up like little graves beneath my feet. I realise that I myself have become the enemy. There is dirt in my shoes, on my shirt and beneath my fingernails. I go to the kitchen and scrub my hands under the faucet. I stop digging, ban myself from the garden. Confined to the inside of the house, I watch the hole from my window—not the hole itself, but the mound of dirt that has grown up around it. Sometimes I think the mound is growing. But how can that be? I am terrified, overwhelmed by possibilities.

At night, I wrap a cardigan around me. I push my hands deep into the pockets. One has a small hole at the bottom, something easily fixed with stitches or darning. Holed up for days, I start to realise that there are holes everywhere. A dustbin bag is a black hole ringed on all sides by plastic. The wall socket is three holes that appear empty but are filled with electricity. The peephole in the door opens and closes—a kind of gaping sphincter or a startled mouth. The air vent in the bathroom is a glory hole. When I bring my ear close, I hear whispers.

I lower my head and part my lips. I am looking at the circular rim on the drain in the kitchen sink. My skin is drawn, my fingers feel for it, my mouth knows—it is the round hole the world uses to trickle into me. I fetch the pliers and remove the metal filter. The drain's walls are slippery, deceptive. I push my fingers deeper. I imagine my drain hole connected by pipes to a complicated drainage network that branches and diverges for millions of miles.

The city that I live in is built on holes. My forefathers were miners, European migrants who journeyed to the colony to make their fortune. There are archival photos of people digging a deep, wide hole in the sun-scorched ground. Their clothes are wrinkled, sweat-caked, their eyes hooded with resignation. There are graves; bones are buried deep beneath my feet. In death my forefathers share the earth with the black miners who came after. Cheap labour imported from rural areas. Male bodies dropped down the shafts, tunnels drilled and dug out. At night they were extracted along with the ore that had been blasted, hoisted up in an elevator cage, and then jammed together into cheap hostels built by the mines to house workers.

The hostels still stand. We still call them hostels. A news headline reads: Alexandra hostel raided in weapons search. There are pictures. Long corridors, badly lit by yellow lights, walls that recede into shadow. The beds are unmade, sleep interrupted. The men wear underwear. The police carry automatic weapons and wear blue helmets. The pictures are too beautiful for what they contain. The

light is soft, smouldering. The men's bodies are taut, at attention, hands behind head, stomach muscles locked in fists. Skin is chocolate, shades of mauve and ochre, the bruised shine of too many accidents. The photographer is obviously invited, embedded. He has time to frame each shot, to manipulate the aperture, refine the focus. The final shot shows the police standing triumphant over bags of dagga and pangas. The photograph is taken from overhead. I imagine the photographer balanced on one of the metal bunk beds to take it. Someone's bed. A mattress and sheets torn suddenly open.

In the centre of the city there is a building with a hole in the centre. All the way up like a mine shaft. I am told that the hole was conceived of as a meeting place, its circular shape inviting congregation, the coming together of neighbours from the flats above. At the time, it was considered the latest thing in urban living. The city has changed. The building has fallen into disrepair. Its white inhabitants have fled to the suburbs, opening spaces for the migrant workers to take up residence. The building is run by a slumlord. Maintenance is neglected, services suspended. The hole collects things. Rubbish piles up in the centre. I am not welcome. When I visit, the residents throw things at me. Bones, potato peels, cans, packages in various phases of decay, more or less intact bottles and jars rain down from the balconies. It is impossible to dodge them. When I look up I feel dizzy. The walls seem to curve inwards and the sky sways, a bright blue circle that wavers above me.

Driving back, I pass through the old downtown district. People congregate in doorways, conducting transactions. They watch me pass out of the corner of their eyes, indifferent. Most of the buildings are rundown. Shadows eroding the facades, riddled with the holes of what were once windows. A hollow of smashed pavement, a puddle of stagnant water studded with detritus that sparkles under the street lights.

At a poetry reading in a small bar, I listen to a famous poet read about the violence of our history. The place is shitty, a dirty carpet covered in holes, burned through by cigarettes. Afterwards the poet lifts his t-shirt to show the audience his bullet wound. He invites us to come up to the front and touch it. No one stands. No one moves. The poet waits. Long, terrible minutes. I become intensely aware of the sounds: the creaking of chairs, the wheezing of the ceiling fan, the traffic outside. In the front row someone coughs softly. I look around me and feel the wine I drank earlier start to bubble then boil, to burn holes through my stomach lining. Still no one gets up. I start to panic. Everyone is sitting. It is like the room has been frozen. I am about to leap to my feet when a young woman rises. She walks slowly to the front. She gives the poet her hand and he puts her finger on

the hole, as though to stop the bleeding. After that everyone claps. More people stand. They form a line in front of the poet. In front of the hole. So many fingers. I sit in my seat as the wine grows cold and stale in my stomach.

I buy sushi from a takeout place that advertises Chinese and Japanese food in the window. It is run by a Korean family who between customers watch TV on a wall-mount. They turn down the volume to greet me. I eat the sushi with a plastic fork while watching a movie streamed on the internet. It is set in a diner. The diner is called Kamome, which sounds Japanese, but the movie seems to be shot in Finland. In one scene a woman sneaks into a bakery to poke holes in the fresh loaves of bread as they emerge from the ovens. One by one, each loaf. The camera zooms to capture her face, mouth contorted with the pleasure of violating the crusty surface, sinking dirty fingers into the soft warmth under. The woman is very plain. Ugly even. Her fingers are thick, hands uncared for, carelessly used. But something happens when she penetrates the bread. Something changes. Her hands become precise, fingers fluid, her face glows with a strange, youthful beauty.

At night, I dream of men making holes in bread. Not with their fingers. They are fucking the loaves, dicks erect, drilling into the soft dough centres. There are lots of them—the men, fucking, each with a different type of loaf depending on their dick size, its length and thickness. A tall man with a French loaf jutting upward like a strap-on dildo, just his arse muscles moving. Another has penetrated an oval Portuguese loaf—his penis, both testicles, and the two little fingers of his left hand are jammed inside it. A large black man fucks what seems to be some kind of flat bread or dosa. His crotch hair is wet and his cock shines as if polished. The poet is there too, his shirt is off, like at the reading, revealing the ridge of the scar, a small hollow above the ribs. His cock throbs as he fucks a splayed rye loaf.

I awake sweating, terribly hungry. My mouth is filled with saliva. In the kitchen, I spit into the basin and imagine cutting into the fucked loaves, the knife piercing the brittle surface, sinking into the doughy goo where the men ejaculated. I imagine steam rising, like bread from the baker, still oven-warm. And how nice it is when it isn't cooked all the way through so you go from crusty to soft to glutinous. And how the butter melts, slides across the surface. To be soft like that, almost round, giving, receiving.

I go to a talk at the feminist group. It's about black holes, by a female physics professor from the university. The talk is well attended, lots of new faces, a different demographic to the usual group

members. Everyone is well dressed and there is even a scattering of men. The scientist seems to be very young, in her thirties. She sits on a chair next to the stage as the audience file in. I am already seated, I watch her check the tint of her lips in a hand mirror. Before she begins she takes a sip of water from the bottle provided. She doesn't bother with a glass, unscrews the cap and lifts it. Her talk is mostly about singularity. She tells us: Once a body crosses the event horizon, it redshifts, but it never disappears completely.

After she has finished there is a Q&A session. I raise my hand and ask about collapse. As soon as I have spoken the word, I feel my face flush. I do not know what has given me the courage to pose the question but the lecturer beams as if I've put my finger right on the crux of the matter. She talks and talks until the audience becomes restless. I don't understand a word of her response but somehow this no longer matters.

In the ladies room, I walk in on a woman vomiting. The stall door is flung wide open. I try not to look but can't stop myself. Only the woman's back is visible, her head vanishes into the toilet, as if instead of throwing up she is being pulled under, sucked into the bowl hole. I stand and stare, hypnotised by the heaves of her back, the long rhythmic wretches that shake her body. Her pants are on her hips and shirt untucked, unbuttoned. Finally she finishes. She reaches a hand up to flush the toilet. I turn towards the mirror, pretend to be concerned with my appearance.

I have always been too scared to have anal sex, but since joining the feminist group, I feel braver. I tell my boyfriend I want to try again. He looks at me, his brow furrowed. When we tried before, it hurt so much that I made him stop. The pain was the same as when you get something stuck in your throat, when it won't go down, or when you make yourself vomit and it all comes up too fast, a tearing that isn't really a split but a stretching. I say, it'll be different this time. I want to tell him about the fantasy I've been having recently. In it he is fucking all my holes simultaneously, down on his knees, straddling my legs, fucking me in the arse doggy style, while he uses his one hand to finger my cunt. His other hand is on my face. I am sucking his fingers one by one, skinny hot fingers, sucking and licking. His tongue is in my ear and I can hear the sound of lapping. Then he begins to rock, pushes his dick deeper.

I start to describe the sequence of these events but see my boyfriend's face and stop. A giant hole has opened between us. I don't have words. We have no shared language to talk about these things. I don't know what to call my cunt. My vagina, my thing, my hole. I don't have a word for his dick

either. Usually our sex is silent. He breathes hard and maybe grunts. Once, when we hadn't fucked for a while, he came so hard that he started to shout. But even then he just said my name over and over. It sounded strange in his mouth. The syllables all jammed together, breathless, like they were being squeezed through the slit at the top of his penis.

I think of the phrase: like a hole in the head.

In my feminist group we discuss naming and ownership. I confess I don't know what to call it, my thing, and there is a ripple. Everyone giggles. The group leader takes control of the situation. We canvas the room and I am amazed by the names that come up: cunt, pussy, gash, beaver, doos, fanny, snatch, cutie, gwarr, gwat, slit, twat, ntubi, poon-tang, vag, box, poes, punani, panty hamster, hole.

Afterwards, I stand and talk to the leader. She is striking, a tall, masculine woman wearing high boots and a tailored jacket. But more than her clothes it is how she wears her face, her mouth. I watch her purse her lips as I explain the trouble I've having sustaining the hole that I've been digging, all the maintenance and surveillance, the warding off of impending danger, my fear of finding it washed away, caved in at the centre or worse: clogged up, sad and night-soaked.

The group leader laughs at me. Her head tilts back and her mouth opens. Her teeth are tiny and very white. They dance like city lights as she speaks, leaning in so she doesn't have to raise her voice. She tells me that I have misunderstood the whole thing. She says that what I am making is a round wall. She says the hole is only revealed at the moment of collapse. It is in collapsing that the hole divulges itself to us, its potential and its mysteries. She says, first, you must picture a hole. There is none. You will have to use your imagination.

Back at home, I go out to the garden. It is early evening. A pink happy light. The lawn looks brighter than usual. I walk to the fence and kick my hole in. I am dismayed by how easily it is. One stomp launches an avalanche. Nothing remains but a small indentation.

At the supermarket I buy seeds to grow flowers. The packaging is very helpful. It has pictures of the flowers and all the details on the correct season to in which to plant. So many options: arum lilies, strelizias, vygies, yellow clivias, foxgloves, daisies, impala lilies, African violets, everlastings. I spend all day planting even though it's a simple operation. All you have to do is stick your finger in

the dirt and drop the seed in. The ground is soft and loose where my hole had been, moist beneath me. I push my fingers in. Lift them, sniffing. The dirt is dark, raw. My blonde hair is stringy with sweat. My vest top is clinging to my body and I am trembling. I try to feel for the hole itself but it always burrows deeper, worming and whorling, in circles that elude me.

The Wound

At the hospital they told her how to treat her wound. They taught her how to clean it and change the dressing, to check for increased redness or swelling and a bad odour. They said to pay attention to the colour and amount of drainage—had it become darker or thicker? They demonstrated by placing the sterile gauze dressing.

Mornings, they came to wake her, carrying antimicrobial ointments and balms. She sat on the bed with her hands on her knees so she could see the wound. She didn't like to let it out of her sight. At night she fell asleep with her fingers curled around it. She liked to touch it even though the hospital discouraged that. A wound, they told her, is very sensitive. For a wound, a sterile environment is essential. She nodded seriously but still she didn't stop. It was like something compelled her, not so much an urge as a burning itch, something that emanated from the wound itself and spread through her body.

From the booklets the nurses gave her, she learned there were different kinds of wounds: a small incision, a cut, a wound sealed with invisible stitches, a record of an accident and of precision. Wounds caused by falls and bashes, by cutting or bumping and knocking. Open wounds and weeping wounds, a record of breaching, a boundary crossed. The kitchen is sprung like an army knife: the jagged edge of a can opener, the stove, a knife.

Her wound was deep and gaping, it pierced below the dermis, through the subcutaneous layer and into her flesh beneath it. It suggested hidden things, covert entrances and exits, smuggling tunnels and defensive ones, trenches. She became evasive, secretive in her excavation, did it at night or under the blankets during the day. She slid her hand down, peeled back the dressing, ran her fingers into the wound's edges. Sometimes she did it with nurses right there in the room. She'd poke or jab at the wound, cup and caress it. She was sure that the wound enjoyed the attention. It seemed to quiver beneath her touch. Sometimes it throbbed, emitted a low pulsing heat like it was trying to communicate. When she took her hand away, the skin around it was always flushed and rosy.

Once released from hospital, she became braver in her excursions. It was quiet in her bedroom in the evening; her parents were watching TV, it was past her brother's bedtime. She pushed down the clean white sheets and brought her knees up. The bandage always fell away so easily. The wound smiled as she pried the corners and pushed her fingers. She stuck in two, then three, and finally

four. She thrust them in and out and wiggled the tips. She liked the sudden flush of pain and the empty feeling that came after.

In the days that followed she started to bring the wound gifts. She limped through the house casting eyes around, picked up things that might fit: buttons and marbles; her mother's gold chain with the tiny clasp; loose coins from a pile on the dresser. Crouching down on the bed, her legs shaking, she slid them in. It was like loading tokens into a video game. The wound opened to take them; the flesh around made soft by infection. She felt skin give, the slit slide, then a bolt of pain that flashed through her, as if a button had been pressed, lighting up her body. A fleeting, intense sensation: a blind immersion into a colour—crimson and red and yellow. She sat on her bed breathing, gave herself over to the rush in her head, the numbness in her toes that lasted for hours.

She found the soldiers in the spare room, packed in a box in the cupboard. There were forty-eight in total. A full army. Tiny fighting men rendered in green plastic. Their uniforms and weapons seemed to indicate that they had belonged to her father, not her brother but perhaps they were part of the current trend for historically authentic toys, sparked by online multi-player war games like Battlefield Europe. Most of the soldiers were identical but a few had manufacturing flaws, their limbs and bodies odd and misshapen as if they'd been damaged in some prior battle. She counted them out, putting those damaged to one side. A small battalion of men with arms fused to the body or legs that split into two halfway down. Others had missing arms or legs that were webbed together with extra plastic skin. Injuries that seemed to point to the use of non-traditional weapons, biological or chemical.

She quickly collected the soldiers up. Lifted them in fistfuls, pushed them back in the box with the others, closed the lid and shook it so the injured were mixed up with the able-bodied again. She slid the box back in the cupboard, thinking the soldiers too big and unwieldy for her purposes. But as time passed the wound grew deeper, the flesh around it took on a dull yellow tinge, became soft and suppurating so it seemed to suck on her fingers.

She waited until her parents were asleep then slowly made her way to the cupboard. She retrieved the box and unpacked her army. She sent the fighter pilots in first because she knew that's how it happened in modern warfare; the bombers to unleash terror from the sky, then the infantry, her twenty small green foot-soldiers. She was careful to insert them all facing the same direction, heads up and assault rifles thrust forward. She waited until they were all in formation, then commanded

them to fire at once. She felt the bullet holes erupt across her chest and abdomen, felt her ribs flare and chest contract. She stood unsteadily, took a step, then fell back, legs twisted beneath her and the floor slick with fresh blood.

Evolution

Alya has just downloaded a pirate copy of Evolution. It's the new big thing, the latest life simulation game from Antenna Research. Like other life simulations, Evolution is about maintaining and growing a population of organisms. But unlike other games, Evolution works in increments, a constant reiteration, again and again, in which small aberrations allow you to arrive at a whole super-species. This makes the game painfully slow and methodical.

Alya claims she likes it anyway because it literally demonstrates how God and evolution are not mutually exclusive. She can play it for hours on end, days even. I'm not convinced. To me the game seems more about manipulation than creation, or even structural coincidences.

She tugs her hair back into a ponytail, lets it out again, says I don't like it because I'm no good at it playing. She's right, actually. My species always end up as freakish sad mutants that last only a few hundred years—a blink of the eye in evolutionary timescales—and then die out. Or else they reach a certain point and then begin to atrophy, devolving back into invertebrates that gradually wither, dry out then evaporate.

This time I've birthed a community of androgynous beings, milky in tone, greyish or white as if having germinated in a lightless place. Their eyes either protrude, bloodshot and tuberos, enlarged by paranoia or else hang back, deep-set and anaemic as if shrunken by tears. The skin around their eyes is puffy and pink-tinged like their other extremities—nipples, fingertips, noses and knees. A common feature is a strange protrusion, an elongated stinger. A few also have giant worn down tusks, or bent horns and long claws, or the blunt stub of a scaled tail.

I glance over at Alya sitting crossed-legged in front of the computer. I admire her concentration, how her eyes disappear into the screen, her lips spread in a smile that lights up her sharp features. I'm envious of the perfectly formed super-species of sequential hermaphrodites she is evolving. Alya's programmed them to start as males and then change to females when it's time to breed. I'm not sure how it works exactly, if they cross genders based on an inner impetus or due to wanting to attract a mate. Alya has that same aspect about her, an ability to switch unexpectedly from feminine languor, to masculine virility at the click of a button. Even now, how her body lurches as her hands work the keyboard.

My creatures are frigid. Many of them have strange seams in their skin, joins at the neck and wrists, or a line between the chest and back, lips fused together as if they have been assembled, built out of other things instead of birthed organically. No matter how many times I try to teach them, they still fail at the most basic things. If I'm not around to feed and clean them, they wander around hungry and dirty, lower limbs soiled with excrement.

Alya says my problem is my liberal arts training. I keep viewing the game as an art project instead of a scientific one. She says I need to use logic, logical progressions that allow me to get from point A to point B. She says I need to learn patience. Alya is like that. She is completing a BSc in engineering. I've been living with her since I graduated. I'm meant to be looking for a job but mostly, while she's at varsity, I surf the internet or stare out the window.

Alya keeps the blinds drawn because she always on her computer, but the glare from outside bleeds in. I do not dare to take the blinds down or open them, but I do peep out. The flat is on the fifth floor and I have a view of the city. Everything is tar, cement or concrete. I watch the cars in the morning and the buses.

In front of other people I wear an I-don't-care expression and I say I'm doing research but the truth is I am paralysed. Things go too quick for my mind. Everything is too fast and too big for me—too quick to study. It's as if I am seeing one picture one minute and another picture the next. Things get blurred and I just stop and watch my feet. Often during the day I panic. I pick up the phone and push Alya's number into it. Always, I hang up before she answers, and just wait for her to come home. My life is hesitation. It is suspended animation.

Sometimes I think I'm waiting for her to throw me out, but she never does. She gets back and we eat and then play game. Already, my virtual creatures are showing signs of degeneration. Initially the incidents are small, negligible—fights that break out amongst them, small acts of random violence like pinching and biting. Some of them exhibit self-destructive behaviours—hair pulling and tongue biting, repeatedly running blunt claws over the skin until they break its surface.

More recently their behaviours have become more extreme. Some of them have taken to chronic masturbation, spending hours rubbing their genitals or dry humping inanimate objects without ever seeming to reach release. By this stage the fighting is ferocious, punching and kicking, tearing and ripping pieces from the back and neck.

Finally, one of the horned creatures repeatedly rapes another member of his species, a tall and willowy one with a large wet mouth. I am talking to Alya when it happens so I only see the aftermath. It's not difficult to put the pieces together: the victim's thighs, bruised blue and black and bleeding; the bloodied horn of the perpetrator. Its face is alarmed, eyes bloodshot, shining and sullenly evil, staring at me from inside the screen as if pleading.

Captivity

Helen is a bear. To be specific she is a polar bear, meaning she is class mammalia, carnivora, genus ursus, species ursus maritimu. She is having tea with Leila the bird, Susie the impala and Claudia the crocodile. It is ridiculous to see them together. Such things do not happen in nature. Even in a zoo or a museum, animals are ordered. The polar bear would be in a bear pit alongside black bear, brown bear, giant panda and grizzly. Maybe, if the zoo's curator was adventurous, it might be housed alongside other animals from the Arctic—fox and hare and caribou and wolverine. The birds would all be together in cages, usually near the recreation or restaurant area, mostly likely because their song is pretty, creates a pleasing atmosphere, but also because of all the animals, birds are the least smelly. Their droppings are small and inoffensive; they smell only vaguely mossy like the floor of a forest or the patina of rusty surfaces. The impala requires an abundance of space, while the crocodile needs a stretch of water. It is only in children's stories that the species mix freely.

But this is not a children's story. Helen and Claudia and Susie and Leila are all grown-ups. They are drinking tea and laughing. Helen laughs softly. She looks pretty in her pert white dress and neat bangs. At a first glance you would never guess that of all of them she is the most dangerous. Capable of taking an enemy down with a casual swat of her paw, she slays in an instant, eats men for breakfast. But today that is not on her mind. Today she is sad. She is drowning. She is like the polar bear in that Al Gore video that swims and swims but cannot find solid land, a piece of rock or ice to get its claws into. Helen takes a sip of tea and stares off into the distance.

Leila cocks her head—that stupid thing birds do that makes them look both elegant and quizzical, distant but curious. It is a look only birds get right, a look which combines contradictions. What choice do they have with their fat little bellies and stick legs? Leila stirs her tea then puts the spoon down with a clink. You seem sad these days, Helen, she says. She is not afraid to speak her mind. She is not afraid of Helen, birds have no need to fear bears. A polar bear has no interest in killing a bird. It would provide no real sustenance, not even touch sides, like a supper of a single pea or a square of skin off a roast chicken.

Susie and Claudia are silent. They do not quite know what to make of Helen. A bear is something altogether new to them, something foreign. They can see a bear could be dangerous. It has claws like a lion and a face like a giant meerkat. But it's the colour that throws them. Nothing is white in Africa. To be white would be silly, like wearing a sign saying Eat Me. It couldn't last. The white would reflect the sun in a luminous brilliance. It would act as a beacon; attract hunters and poachers

and other wild animals. Hyenas would pack together and follow it, slowly, tracing its footfall, keeping steady pace, thrusting forward then pulling back, waiting for the inevitable. And even if it didn't get eaten, if it survived the heat and successfully swatted away hyenas and flies, the white wouldn't last. It would soon succumb, to the dust and the dirt and the thorns and little burrs that litter the landscape. It would begin to turn. First a pale beige then poo coloured. Susie wonders if that's what happened to her. If she started white then became brown. She looks down at her tawny arm and tries to discern the trace of a hidden pallor. She spits on her napkin and rubs but she sees none and goes back to staring at Helen.

The table is silent. Everyone is waiting for her answer. Claudia is practised at waiting. Her entire survival depends on the ability to lie for days in silence. How else would she capture her prey with her flat languid body, her tiny stubs of legs, how else but to wait with the patience of a thousand years, then at the perfect moment, to muster all her energy, to pull it up through her tail, down the length of her body, to gather it as a tight knot in her belly; centuries of accumulated force, stored and then released in a thrash of crocodile skin and teeth and tail. It only takes a second, so fast that the unsuspecting impala is seized, shaken and swallowed before it knows it. After the acceleration of the kill, the process of digestion is about extreme patience. The impala lives inside the crocodile for days, weeks, months even.

Sometimes Susie has nightmares about this, waking up suddenly and finding oneself in a croc's belly. In the dream it is always the same, very dark and hot, she is trapped, body hemmed in. She tries to move her legs, to kick against the walls that confine, but always it is the same, her legs have become paralysed, she kicks and kicks but finds no relief. It's as if the message doesn't travel, a disjoint between brain and muscle that leaves her frozen. Always the panic sets in. It is the panic of nothing to be done, no option but to wait, to feel one's self, over the length of days, weeks, months, eaten away by powerful juices and enzymes. In the dream this process is not painful only very scary, the terror of disappearing bit by bit over a very long time. It is the hair that goes first. It simply falls away in chunks and tufts, revealing a pale skin, bruised and criss-crossed with spider veins and capillaries. Next is the skin. This comes off in layers, like runny glue that you dry on your palm then peel away. With each peel, the veins become more visible. The muscle shows through, then the internal organs. After that things become hazy, washed in red. Susie shakes her head and glances sidelong at Claudia. She does not want to think about the dream now. She takes a sip of tea and clears her throat.

Helen looks up at her. Her eyes pleading, as if she hopes that Susie will offer her a way out. It is a role that impalas are known for. They are the sentries, radar ears alert. Navigators capable of discerning danger and reacting, of going from stasis to springing, changing direction mid-stride, bopping left then right, and spronging away. But Susie has no intention of raising her tail. She is enjoying seeing the bear flounder, watching her weight shift, back and forth, from one foot to the other. She says, Take your time Helen, trying to sound kind. She smiles, bends her neck forward, pours tea, steeped and hot, and sips satisfied.

Helen laughs—at least makes a sound that she hopes is like a laugh. She glances around her as if looking for somewhere to hide—an absurd idea considering her bulk, considering her context. Where would a polar bear hide in a coffee bar? Suddenly she realises that it was a horrible mistake to come out for tea. She longs for the Arctic landscape, its silence and distance, its endless snow like a field of cardboard eggboxes stifling all sound and vibration. She thinks about camouflage in the animal kingdom. She has read that there are twig insects that transform into a leaf or the branch of a tree. There is a moth in Central America that looks like a wasp. It even has a fake stinger made of hair, which twists and curls just like a wasp's stinger, it has the same markings and even though its body is soft, it is coloured to appear shiny and armoured. She has heard of birds that can mimic the calls of other birds or even man-made sounds—a parrot that can beep like a microwave oven, a lyrebird capable of disguising itself as a truck or a fire engine. But Helen is not an insect or a wasp or a bird. She is a bear, constrained by her bigness, her beariness, her bulk and stillness. Even now she feels herself expanding, outgrowing the chair. Its legs bend, threaten to splinter. The table shakes and tea cups jiggle in their saucers.

The waitron stills things. She arrives carrying the cake, four neat slices of velvety inside topped by brittle frosting. Claudia opens her eyes, yawns and smiles. Susie cranes her neck forward. Even Leila twitters with excitement. Only Helen is unmoveable, ripe and round like a cow. She stares at the cake as if it is something dangerous. In truth she is aware of her bulk. She longs to be skinny. She wants to be all skin and bone and paw like Al Gore's starved cartoons. She says no thanks but Leila calls out to her, cooing, oh come on, just a little bite. She looks from bird to cake, sullenly pulls the plate forward, ignoring the knife offered her, extends a single claw from her right paw, and splits the cake sideways into pieces. She lifts one on a claw and holds it up to the bird, her chocolate brown eyes intent, demanding.

Leila hesitates. There is something menacing in the gesture that she can't place. She twitters and hops some more, to buy time. Susie looks from Helen to Leila. She senses tension and feels her muscles flex in accordance, growing taut and itchy. She forces herself to hold as only the impala can, a tethered stillness that extends towards a snap. Claudia takes advantage of the flex. Clamps her jaw over the cake, swallows then sits back, satisfied. Cake always reminds her of sex. The same coilingness, the same wet weight and awkward heave. Leila and Helen and Susie stare at her. She thinks of saying something about cake and fucking, but changes her mind. The others wouldn't get it, especially not Susie. She has seen impalas mate, how they rut and chuff, the male, skin twitching, forelegs thrust forward over the female in a failed jump. Leila twitters, hops this way, that, to shake the discomfort. Susie sits, head held high, eye on stalks that dart around the table. Smacking of lips, nervous twitches, general rustling. Feathers to be straightened.

Only Helen is perfectly still. She doesn't feel the silence stretched beyond comfort. Her time is already frozen. She is lost in her memories, in the icy landscapes of northern territories. The light is white. She is alone, eyes squinting from the glare of the snow and laced tight against an invisible wind. There are no impala or crocodile here. Even birds can't survive for any stretch of time. Those that don't starve are trapped by the cold. The ice catches them, sometimes in mid-flight so they are stuck curved in the sky. A few escape, unfixed by a sudden wind, only to have their bones snapped by the shock of sudden flight.

Common Rabbit Diseases

All night we are kept awake by the angoras, their racket, their whistle and futter, wheeking and oinking, honking even. They go at it non-stop until morning. Thumping and rolling, chasing after each other and doubling over. By the time the sun rises we are exhausted. Still we get up; driven by the needs of the few remaining rabbits.

Starved from the night's activity we find them hunkered in their cages, hucked up on their haunches, watching us with beady eyes. Always the mess is terrible. During the night the angoras shed. Their fur sloughs off bit by bit, coats the floor, and floats in the air, filling the cages with a haze that sticks in our mouths and scratches our noses.

Once a month we shear them. The regulations on the angora fur trade are very specific. There are lengths stipulated in centimetres. All classifying papers should be in order, and should be certified for accuracy. The administration is enormous. The market is volatile. Subject to demand, whimsy, to trade winds. To get it right requires us to work together, one to hold and one to cut.

We try to work very quickly because once we get started on one, the other ones cause a ruckus, charging in circles and hurling themselves against the cage bars, sometimes with such violence that they inflict damage, tears in their skin, bruised noses and bloodied mouths and whiskers. By the time we get to them with the shears the angoras are often so full of cuts and scratches that the wool comes away bloody, a puff of white with a bright red blotch. Cotton ball after cotton ball, all stained, all useless. In the end there's nothing to do but sweep it away in handfuls.

With the angora it's almost impossible to tell if they're fucking or fighting. The act of mating is very physical and includes all kinds of violence: lunging, mounting, spraying and boxing. So far we've observed several primary angora fucking positions, each with infinite variations and sub-positions. What they all have in common is the raucous foreplay. This often involves biting and tumbling, which can get quite aggressive. So much so that when we first heard them go at it, we rushed out of bed, sure the angoras were in terrible danger.

In the cages the angoras were going at it, snapping and ripping. It has been this way for almost a year now, yet in all that time the angoras haven't managed to yield any offspring. Not even a solitary one. Over the months we toyed with different theories about why. We've considered

environment. Our summers are searing, heat that starts in the morning and reaches a zenith by late afternoon, the nights cooling by only a few degrees. Our food lacks variety. Nothing much grows here. There is enough, and also too little, a deficit that hangs over everything.

The angoras come from England. When they first arrived it was like tearing open a whole cotton-wool packet. They came in wooden crates, tiny pink eyes hidden beneath the fleeciast fur, like whisked clouds or something even lighter. An abundance! They were so different to the indigenous rabbits – lithe-limbed and scrub-haired, ears sprung to any movement, untouchable due to their quickness.

We pried the nails from the crates with a hammer and we stood and watched dozens on dozens exhausted from their journey, hopping weakly, making the soft chuffing sound of air escaping teeth. I bent down to touch one, ran a fingertip over the nose and stroked from its forehead to the fluffy puff of its silken back. So many, all within easy reach, armfuls of rabbits. I wanted to hold them, press them to my chest, possess them. I wanted to give them all pet names but it was impossible to tell one from one another—all the same whiteness, the same roundness.

The manual that accompanied the angoras was detailed and specific. We struggled to work through it. The language was dense, at times even archaic. The going was arduous. The facts accumulated in lists, lines welding into patterns that grew increasingly blurred and confused in my mind. Details on how to feed the rabbits, groom them. Number the rabbits, stack the rabbits, count them. Clean the cages and sweep fur-matter towards the corner.

A whole section was dedicated to rabbit feed—fruits and grains and special pellets we had never heard of. The chapter on breeding was especially difficult. Even just determining gender was a whole procedure. You had to flip the rabbit, dig through the downy stomach fluff and seek out a tiny pink slit. Even if you did locate the genitals, the sex wasn't immediately apparent. First you had to place your fingers on the little lips, gently apply pressure. Wait for the pop.

At first we were very diligent. We kept the males and the females separate. We divided them between the two cages. But soon things got mixed up. During shearing we noticed some males in amongst the females. It was as if the rabbits had found some way of burrowing out, a secret tunnel that connected them. I sometimes wondered which was worse: to be a lone doe fucked by a herd of horny bucks or the one solitary male in amongst the throngs of ovulating females. In truth it didn't

seem to make a difference. If there weren't any females in sight the males would simply just fuck each other, going at it with one on top and the other below and then flipping under and over.

We made a joke of it. Peter said, I'm going to fuck you like an angora. His laughter shocked me. It had an edge I'd never heard before. Then he chased me screaming to the bed, wrestled me down, arms pinning me and legs clasped around my waist. I couldn't stop myself. I was giggling, honking like a rabbit in heat. He put his hooks into me, plowed my bushy fur with his nose, pushed his face close. He was kissing the back of my neck, probing my armpits with his tongue. I felt my body respond, soften then bucked hard against the pleasure. His three-day stubble was scratchy, stiff and coarse—nothing like a downy bunny. I tried to push him away but he held me. I said his name. I said it again, my voice louder, but cracking in the middle. He held me against him and continued. My legs squeezed, then flicked wide apart. Panties, fingers hooked around elastic. I jerked and wedged my elbows in his side, and then he loosened from me in surprise, like he had just woken up from a dream.

When the first rabbit died, we were stricken. I hadn't realised how the rabbits had consumed us. The cleaning, feeding, shearing. How we were going to breed them. The rabbits seemed to promise things. They carried with them the scent of opulence, something soft and expensive, a picture book we could slip into. We didn't know what to do with the dead rabbit. It lay white and crumpled on the concrete. I bent down but Peter stopped me. No, don't touch it. Neither of us said anything but we were both scared by the death.

We scooped the carcass up in a plastic bag and buried it. We stood in the back garden, which was really just a narrow strip of dirt. The sky stretched empty overhead, not a puff of cloud in sight. Peter wore rubber washing-up gloves and I carried the spade. It felt stupid and solemn, like when you find a dead baby bird as a child and hold a mock funeral. I peered into the hole. I couldn't see the bottom until he threw the rabbit in. He took the body out of the bag and placed it directly in contact with the earth so it would decompose more quickly. The rabbit looked so small and white against the black dirt; it seemed to almost float above it.

We soon got used to the rabbits dying. In the first few months we lost three. After that it was at least one a month. You could always tell which one was next. They'd stop eating; grow scraggly and bad-tempered, move to the back of the cage, not drinking, but sweating; scanty urine, piercing cries. Right near the end they became slack and listless. We stuffed the bodies in black plastic bags and

carried them to the dumpster. I grew accustomed to the weight of the dead rabbits and how they felt through the plastic. Without the fur visible, they were skeletal, long thin bones and the crest of a skull.

The rabbits were starving. We could see that but we didn't dare say it. We put the rabbit food out like we did everyday. In the morning, the bowls were still full, the rabbits empty, hunched scrawny and pitiful between the scattered pellets and clumps of excrement.

Earlier on, the rabbits were tame, but slowly they grew wilder. It got so bad that the whole herd would flee to the corners of the cage as soon as I approached, piled three or four rabbits high, climbing one another, each trying to be the farthest from me. They grew aggressive, first with us then with each other.

We started fighting too. We were so tired. We fought about stupid things. Whose turn it was to clean the cages out. The smell was overwhelming. At night especially. The accumulated heat of the day and the sulphur of rabbit urine.

Peter became furtive and evasive. He went out at night, sometimes returning only in the morning. I begged him to stay, clung to him. I hated being alone with the rabbits. Their transformation scared me. Without shearing they had started inverting. It was listed in the manual as a common problem in angoras. Angoras swallowed their own fur during feeding and cleaning. Fistfuls. It would build up in the digestive tract.

The angoras were stuffed but starving—a combination of hunger and fullness, a knot that refused to dissolve or digest. It went on for weeks. Rabbit inversion is slow, difficult. I imagined the digestive juices soaking into the fluff, into its dry nothing. The sodden fur knotting. Eventually the rabbits would fall into lethargy. Limp and rubbery, they would succumb despite the food that surrounded them.

The night was hot, windless. Peter was out; I was alone with the rabbits. There were only three of them left and probably they'd be dead soon. The signs were already there. Near the end the angoras were almost completely inverted, threadbare and scraggly outside, their bellies swollen into giant fur puffballs.

I reached into the cage and took one out, felt its bony body grow tense. The rabbit squirmed, tried to break free. It was making a sound I hadn't heard before, a whisper like wind blowing through cotton. I held it to me. I stroked it, slowly ran my fingers down its back, the curve of its spine, the nook of fur that remained between its ears. I found the wet nub of its mouth easily. I used my index finger and pushed. I thrust and there was a pop. I felt my arm growing hot and numb. I felt the rabbit's heartbeat in my wrist. It no longer moved but everything pulsed. I dug my fingers into the soft furry inside. I grabbed at threads. I was pulling. Fistfuls of sodden fluff and bloody fibers. Still I couldn't nestle into it, couldn't pull the wool around me.

What I Wanted

At first I imagined that it might be possible to put myself in the mouse, to make myself small and surreptitious, yet feral and thieving, because mice are skilled at breaking and entering. They can gnaw through wood and synthetics, bore a hole into almost any material, crawl under doorways and squirm through gaps in the roofing.

I surfed the internet, joined news feeds and Facebook lists. Received hundreds of pictures: mice in cages or splayed on their owner's hands, mice peeking out of portraits and mice group shots. Often there were babies: little pink rubbery things that resembled human embryos. I learned that these were only a day or two old. Fur comes by day five, not so much looking like hair but as a soft second skin, something stubbed, pink, wet-looking.

I paused on certain images, documentation of a baby bitten by mice, a diagram of a mouse splayed open, innards spread and carefully labelled, a clear plastic bag of frozen white mice designated snake feed.

Once, I stumbled on a youtube video—a home recording, poor quality image, high contrast and grainy. I would have clicked away if something hadn't held me. The title and how the crowd screamed. Just the sound of it; I couldn't see them because of the angle. The camera was zoomed in on the singer, close-up of his face so I only saw the mouse as he brought it to his mouth, its tail curled and legs pumping and him baring his teeth then biting, shaking his head like a dog trying to kill something.

It lasted only a few seconds—five at the most—and then he raised the body up, holding it limp in his fist, his t-shirt sprayed with blood. First, I thought the band must be American but later I wondered if they weren't one of the right wing groups that had sprung up recently. Sometimes I saw posters on the streets, half torn down, tatters of their distinct symbols and imagery. They unsettled me. It was like something was rising up, something long-sleeping had awakened.

I started to frequent places common to mice, stinking ditches and rubbish heaps. Long afternoons spent searching the patch of veld behind my block of flats, seeking out the entrances to burrows, well-hidden among rocks and low shrubs. The grass burned my ankles, glimmered white in the early evening light. I crunched it under foot and slowed my pace, pushed my eyes into shadows and

held my gaze flat to the floor. I thought if I was quiet enough, if I learned how to hold still and listen.

Once I found the neighbour's cat hunched in a clearing. It was chewing on something and I knelt beside it, held it down and pried its mouth open. The cat squirmed under my grip. Its mouth was foaming, eyes wild. Finding nothing, I released it and watched it bound away into the bushes.

On weekends I walked the path next to the highway. In the cool dark of a bridge over an intersection, I uncovered an empty concrete lot. There I saw the occasional mouse, almost always one of the smaller ones, its soft brown body always as motion, the rustle of leaves or flick of a naked tail. Then one day, a dead one. I came on it suddenly. Its body was stiff and cold on the concrete and when I kicked it, black ants swarmed out its eye sockets and anus.

After that I stayed away from the veld and the highway. I went from pet store to pet store, visited mass market pet emporiums and general dealers, specialist shops dedicated to reptiles that kept mice only for snake feed.

Soon, I became familiar. There is a specific smell: dry cardboard and sawdust mixed with the heat of animal sweat. Almost always the mice were toward the back, often sunken in darkness. I bypassed the puppies and kittens, cages containing hamsters and other domestic rodents. I stood and watched. Measured and weighted with my eyes.

Months. Sitting and waiting. Pet shops are lonely places. The puppies are sad, the kitten restless. I ignored them. I waved away the store attendant, a lanky boy in jeans and a death metal t-shirt. I didn't like how he hovered, followed me to the back and stood with his mouth twitching like he wanted to say something. I refused his suggestions. I sat by myself observing mice curled in balls, mice ferreting through litter, mice pooping small black pellets. In the end I chose by instinct, like selecting a fortune cookie. I thrust my eyes in the cage and rustled the mice. I locked down on a thin grey one, hunched at the bottom. A mouse that didn't move when I pushed my face close.

I did the operation in the bathroom because that seemed the most sterile. Stripped and washed myself with antibacterial soap, scrubbed hard up and down my legs. I walked naked and dripping to the kitchen to retrieve the box. Sat on the bathtub and opened the lid. Flinched as I lifted the mouse, its soft grey hair clumped and wet from sweat or urine. Held it, red-eyed and frothing.

I took four painkillers then held my thigh and began to cut. The scalpel drew a straight line from my knee to my hipbone. I was amazed at how easily the blade split the dermis, cleaved through fat and muscle. At first I felt no pain then it rushed through me, a hot tearing that made my jaw bite down, hands flying to steady myself on the tub. I sat with my knuckles white against the enamel, unmoving.

I retrieved the mouse from the basin and inserted it by separating the skin, pried apart the clean edges of the cut, then lowered it quickly and pushed the two sides together. The pain stabbed through me. My body doubled over, head flying forward. My jaw unhinged, slacked toward throat. I sat like that, head to knee, for a long time, until finally the mouse stopped moving, grew still inside. I collected up the needle and thread, sewed with shaking hands.

I woke to a dull ache that turned into a burning pain as soon as I tried to move. I stood unsteadily, winced at the sudden heat as the blood rushed through my legs. My foot was swollen, the dressing sodden with blood and something I couldn't identify—a clear viscous liquid.

I recovered slowly. Every moment that I slept, I fought with my body. I remembered only fragments, restless nights and clammy visions of rodents, mangled and shredded by the shards of light that cut through the open curtains. At first I thought the mouse had died; the shock of the operation too much for its tiny body. Then one morning I felt it quiver, not so much a movement as something tingling on the inside. I peeled off the dressing, put my hand on my thigh, felt it flutter and then later again, the slipping of feet where there should have been no feet.

For a while the mouse moved only intermittently, a sudden shiver, the scrabbling feeling of its body inside me. Then more frequently. It was especially active at night, often waking me with its pattering and skittering. Occasionally it seemed to try to burrow out. I would feel a sudden scour and blood would rise in the wound, break through the stitches before drying again.

Eventually the cut closed over. I watched the skin knit together. Slowly, the bruising around the scab turned purple and then brown. One day the scab dropped off, revealing a thin scar that was soft and yielding, scaled like a pink paw.

I liked to touch the mouse, to stroke it under my skin. I cupped my hand in a mouse shape and felt it thrash and writhe. I liked how my thigh wobbled and my palm buzzed. Later, I began to develop games like cat and mouse, where I would lie very still then clasp my hand over it, holding on until the scuffing of its claws became too much to bear. Other games: luring it up upwards towards my groin by clamping all other possible exist routes or pinning it below my knee so that it spun in circles. A rolling game where I overturned it so that I could feel its claws close to my skin, brittle and churning. It felt like I could tell what the mouse wanted, how to move or touch it.

A language was developing, certain signs lurched toward meaning, still uncertain, still evolving. I whispered to the mouse to encourage it. Sometimes it moved erratically, surprising me by its suddenness. But it knew how to soothe me too, to roll in slow circles or slide slowly downward. Sometimes I went out in public. I sat in movie houses and coffee bars that carried signs prohibiting animals, just for the thrill of knowing it was with me.

It was after some weeks that I noticed that the mouse was growing. What had once been a small mouse was now medium to large. Finally, so large that it became impossible to conceal it. My body had also started to undergo changes. My thigh once full and fleshy, grew reedy. A lightness spread from my legs up to my rib cage and finally into my head.

Day after day I watched how I shrunk, until I was forced to acknowledge that the mouse was feeding off me. At first the thought scared me. I imagined it gnawing its way deeper, sharp teeth scrounging in flesh. I remembered reading that mice like to bite babies because babies smell of food. But then it seemed so obvious, so much part of my plan to begin with. How else did I expect the mouse to survive without foraging?

As the weeks passed, my skin grew loose, sagging off my thigh in a way that made it even easier for the mouse to move about. I avoided my friends, refused their concerned visits and phone calls, afraid they'd notice the changes, my drawn complexion and how my flesh shivered when the mouse ran. My thigh had become frantic. Something lean and subterranean. At night I could not sleep for the scatter of feet. After dark, the mouse charged up and down, turned terrible tight circles until finally exhausted, it curled up in a small ball under my knee and slept.

That morning I woke later than usual. Something was wrong, the knee-pouch the mouse usually nested in was empty. Sitting on the toilet, I squeezed the rolls of skin around my hip-bone, cupped

my knees. All day I waited for the familiar convulsions, but felt nothing. I did a full body search. I used the same method prescribed for breast exams, the way they teach you to check for lumps, moving your hand up and down while running fingers in tight circles.

The mouse, I thought, must be burrowing deep inside me. In my dreams I imagined it swimming like a sewer rat, a slow migration through my flesh, occupying my body, the inner regions of it. Sometimes I thought I could smell it. The smell came over me suddenly, a dark and febrile taste that crouched at the back of my throat, that no amount of swallowing would get rid of. Finally, I was overcome by a violent fit of retching. I couldn't hold it back. I crouched in the bathroom. My ears hummed and my eyes burned.

I was beginning to realise how serious the situation was. I didn't fully understand what I had done. I knew too little about mice—their feeding and nesting patterns. For a moment I considered contacting the assistant in the pet shop. Then I remembered his small frame and twitchy mouth, his death metal t-shirt. I pushed the idea out of my mind. I made a doctor's appointment, sat in the overheated reception area amongst the other patients with colds or influenza or swollen ankles. I struggled with the forms the receptionist handed to me. My difficulty was in articulating the nature of my problem. In the end I wrote: mouse infestation, in a tiny, uncertain script.

The doctor was dark and very hairy. He sat at his desk with his jacket off and the sleeves on his shirt rolled up so I could see his forearms. The hair ran onto his hands, hanging in especially dark tufts at the wrists and on the tops of each finger. He read what I had written on the forms and cleared his throat. He said, why don't you rather tell me the problem?

I started and then stopped. My cheeks and my chest flushed. I didn't know how to recount precisely what had happened, to describe what I had done. It suddenly seemed hazy.

The doctor smiled, lifted his hand as if in encouragement. Then, seeing I had no intention of continuing, he said, of course I've seen all manner of similar problems... He started to tell a story about a man who had coaxed a hamster into his sphincter. I had heard the story before, or at least a variant thereof, but always believed it to be urban legend and now felt my eyes grow very big. Seeing my face, the doctor stopped and said, why don't we just take a look then?

His hands were cold on my thigh despite all the hair. He examined the scar, seemed impressed with my handiwork. A smile passed over his lips as he leaned forward, asked if I was sure I had administered the stitches myself. I nodded enthusiastically, watched him run his fingers down the furrow as if it was something delicate, easily broken. I lay back with my head slightly raised on the plastic pillows and followed the hand as it travelled. I thought it must look exactly like a small dark mouse running up my thigh, circling my chest, palliating my stomach. When the doctor finished probing, he told me to sit so he could check down my throat and in my ears.

Finally, he advised me that nothing further could be done until he had a full body x-ray. He wrote the name of the radiologist on a piece of paper, explaining that the machines they had these days allowed one to render the human body in 3D. He told me this would reveal a complex system of underground tunnels that would offer us the mouse's view of my innards. In order to trap the mouse, he said, he would need to conduct extensive research. Traps, he continued, are lethal parodies of their prey's behaviour. His face grew very red and beads of sweat collected on his lips. He pointed shakily towards the full-sized human skeleton that hung suspended on a wire in the corner of his office.

I didn't understand the relation between the mouse and the skeleton and entrapment. Did he mean we had to find a way to trap the mouse or that I was myself the trap? I traced a line running from the spine to the coccyx. Remembered the mousetraps I had seen at the pet stores with their silver springs. I pictured them in action, the tiny teeth slamming shut. I pictured the packages of mouse-poison pellets covered with drawings of mice, tiny triangles flat on their backs, tongues hanging out, feet in the air and eyes as Xs. Rodents and bugs in commercials having conversations about their fear of death. How, in cartoons, the mouse lifts the hole from the skirting-board of ink so that the chasing cat smacks into it.

I dressed while the doctor called the receptionist and told her to make a follow-up appointment. He gave me a bottle of small white pills to counter the toxicity of the mouse droppings that he said would be building up inside my body. He warned of contamination, the profligate spreading through quick-breeding, flies and fresh faeces.

At home I struggled with the pills. My mouth was dry, throat burning. Each muscle of my body was articulated. An anatomy lesson. I could feel intersections of pain, and across my chest a concavity around which I breathe uneasily. I walked to the bathroom and spat, surprised to see blood in my

saliva. Coughed and spat again and watched the blood swirl down the drain. I wondered if I should call the doctor but exhaustion overcame me.

I slipped out of my long skirt, peeled off my t-shirt. I lay in the dark and thought about the mouse scooting around inside, eating my innards. And then about the neighbour's cat, how it had jerked its head violently from side to side when I dug my fingers into its mouth. I remembered the death metal lead singer with blood running down his face and the doctor's warnings of contamination. For a moment I thought I felt something in my abdomen, a twitch on the right side.

I lay very still until I became aware of a tiny scratching sound from the corner. I knew it wasn't my mouse, couldn't be, but I let myself pretend. I reminded myself of how skilled mice were at making escapes, disappearing through surfaces or vanishing out from under. I thought about the way things got smaller as they went farther away, so they fitted inside smaller, closer things, like the slits between fingers or the folds of the labia.

I focused on the sound as if I were trying to decipher a secret message embedded within it. I felt hot; my skin started tingling. My body felt hollow. I imagined new holes opening across it, my ear canals stretched to capacity and my belly button sprung. I listened, swept my eyes across the dark floorboards. There was a constricting in my chest as I saw it, two gleaming black eyes, too big to be a mouse, too black by far, but in that moment, the instant before it bounded towards my bed, I let myself see what I wanted.

An Aesthetics of Rat Bites

Of course shark bites are more popular, all that drama! The ragged edges that tear; the multiple lacerations cause by jagged teeth, double-layered and unevenly spaced; the characteristic broken circle that carries the imprint of the jaws, its depth and circumference. This makes the bite very physical. The shark comes with it, not just as a wounding of the flesh but something material, predatory and projectile, a break in the water, a blue-grey fin that circles. And then the setting: the endless ocean that glitters. How the water churns and then closes over. The way blood mists, how it sinks into beach sand leaving only a soft pink scrim.

All this is seductive but I, for my part, still prefer the rat bite. Sometimes I am overcome by their beauty. My lungs tighten in my chest. The colour of my blood brightens. I run my hands over the markings. Bite seems to me to be the wrong word, inadequate, deficient. The skin is not broken exactly. There are no teeth marks, only a slightly scalded appearance, as if the skin has been burned or scraped, gnarled rather than pierced.

The shark is a solitary swimmer, eating is how it interacts. With the rats it is different. They are communal animals. They travel in packs. Their nests seethe. Their bites present themselves in clusters, not so much organisation as orgiastic, a clump of welts without differentiation, multiple punctures, stunted, small and hard, often scattered across the extremities, especially the upper extremities: the face, arms and hands, the feet and the ankles.

Context has a part in determining this—when and where the bites occur: largely at night and mostly in low-income areas. Those bitten are almost always children, of either sex, and often under five-years in age. It usually happens overnight, mysterious blushed birthmarks that dot a toddler's skin in the morning, especially moist areas—the mouth, the nose, the creases of the elbows, as well as the genitals.

This often leads to misidentification. Parents mistake rat bites for other harmless gripes—eczema and scabies and canker sores. The situation is exacerbated by the social conditions under which many victims live. High bite rates are recorded amongst non-whites, those groups typically oppressed and excluded from the economy of our country, but actually in all population groups amongst the ill, the elderly, among premature babies and patients recovering from surgery, and sometimes in AIDS sufferers and drug addicts.

Inhabitants of informal settlements are especially prone, because of both their financial precariousness and the shakiness of the accommodation. Housing structures which are often dilapidated or decaying, composed of cheap, untreated wood and overlapping corrugated iron sheets that leave gaping clefts in the walls and ceiling, allowing in wind, and wet. And rats.

Considering these circumstances there is a temptation to view those bitten as victims; to frame rat bites as a social problem to be analysed and eliminated. I prefer to see them as markers of our future. Here I recall Richard Dawkins's *The Ancestor's Tale* in which rodents emerge as the ultimate post-human scavengers. Like Dawkins, I picture future armies of rodents gnawing their way through our cities and slums, nesting in our accumulated human waste, birthing new generations. I imagine a time when we will all suffer from rat bites, to such an extent that society will have to learn to adapt, to integrate the bites into the general weave of our social aesthetic.

I expect there will be a period of some resistance, a time when miracle cures and concealed creams will flood the market. But eventually this will give way to new forms of inventiveness. A language will emerge, new words and expressions to replace staid medical discourse. Dark nouns and gauze-like verbs. Fabrics will appear in bold prints—rat bite herringbone and paisleys, toile and tribal weaves baring the distinctive teeth marks. Filigree patterns: urban wear performing sort of reverse camouflage, not to make the bites invisible, but hyper-visible, so that rat bites will be rendered synonymous with skin surface, no distance between the bite and those bitten.

Repetition is key here. Not just in the regularity of the attacks but the multiplicity of the wounds themselves, which mostly take the form of surface injuries, lacerations and abrasions that result in various forms of ecchymoses and haematomas. It is these that give the bites their extraordinary colours and textures. You see little pinks and long reds. Deep browns that bleed into gradations of warm honey yellow and light-pale blue-purple. At times the bites are raised in texture: macules, plaques, papules or nodules, which can range in size from a few millimetres to large confluent areas many centimetres in diameter.

Initially my documentation takes the form of field trips, expeditions into townships and urban slums, seeking out condemned and abandoned buildings in industrial neighbourhoods. One particular building. The walls are long gone, the roof has been stripped, the sun comes in through the rafters. The whole frame looks perilous, posts like skinned ribs. I walk on beneath them, climb

gingerly over slippery planks. Still, there are people. I call and they emerge from the shadows. The men do not understand my interest but I give them money and they roll their sleeves up.

My work has gained me special permissions. I have gazed behind the mask of tragedy, learned to swallow fear and pity, learned to read a secret script, seen more than anyone the scope of the marks, simplified, distorted and endlessly repeated. Always, I am amazed at how the broken, displaced and afflicted body becomes fertile ground of beauty. Each shape reveals a pattern, an abstraction into whose depths I press my hands. I have the fingers for it.

A young mother watches me examine her child. It is my first visit and she is reproachfully silent. Her eyes are fixed. There is a bottle on the ground—it's not important. I examine the toddler's elbows and knees. There are small but noticeable deficiencies. Blemishes and scratches. These are the physical attributes; the ones I can describe. There are other ones, the psychological ones, which go much deeper.

Due to ethical as well as artistic reasons, I never photograph people with whom there is no established relationship. This makes the process all the more complex, laborious. Often it is only after several visits that I will request to shoot the infant or infirm family member. And even then, I constrain my documentation to the afflicted area. Zooming in so as to capture only the lesions themselves. I lift my camera and take a picture of only the shoulders. The flash illuminates.

My collection so far includes hundreds of photographs. The pictures, strewn, curled at the edges. The limbs of children and babies, streaked with red grazes, fading to pink toward the edges; brown fretwork abrasions etched across mouths and under noses, and raised pockmarks in the cleft of an elbow.

Sometimes in the darkroom, flicking through them, I see things, shining shapes like polished rat incisors, the twirl of a tail or curve of a distended claw. I run my hands over the lacquered surface and it is almost as if I can feel a cavity, something coiled and gnawingly familiar. Always, I have to remind myself that the bites are in and of themselves mostly harmless. Unlike with a shark bite, death is not contained in the actual wounding, the shock of torn flesh or the bleeding that comes after. It is not expressed, merely suggested, in the promise of future plagues and contamination, the possibility of rat bite fever or other diseases and infections.

Usually, I transfer the photographs to sketches. I use tracing paper and follow the outlines. I am trying to find a pattern that will incorporate all the bites—the full spectrum of lacerations and abrasions. At night I often lie awake trying to remember each one, each bite inflicted on skin. I have endless images that I hold against each other, then against the light.

The decision to turn the camera on myself is less a conscious act than a logical progression. I grow tired of forever straining my eyes for traces, blinking against tricks of the light. Tired of the children, surly boys and girls with knees drawn up, staring at me with that fixed look, and the babies who confront me with their dirty faces and stained nappies.

The flat is in a low-income area. The rent is half what I used to pay. I sign the lease without seeing inside, but it turns out better than I expected. A bedroom and a bathroom and a small kitchen. My neighbours are mostly immigrant families and young people who could be students or drug dealers or both or neither. The walls are thin and I hear them more than I see them, loud music and sometimes fights in the evening.

Outside the air is heavy and dead. Rank smells, empty streets, narrow alleys and shadows. I give my life over to the chaos that surrounds me, leave dishes unwashed and let my rubbish accumulate in the passageway.

A few days after moving in, I rig up a surveillance system in my bedroom. The technician tells me he is studying computer engineering part time while he mounts cameras and runs wires from the ceiling. I see how he looks at me, my squalid living conditions versus the price of the equipment; its specific placement so as to cover the bed from every angle.

Maybe he is right, in a way. I am always surprised by the footage. The bareness of it is what snags me. The dryness especially. I notice this on the skin of my arms and legs in contrast to the tops of my breasts, where the surface is, I think, damp and gleaming against the sheer gown I sleep in. My cleavage poking precociously through the fabric, and the thin glimpse of my thighs, firm and resplendent, through the pale sheeting.

I lie, my body heavy, on the half-empty bed. Watch, I'm twisting, spinning. My mind cartwheels. I think about movement. I contemplate it. Try to imagine the smallest part of myself—my arm, my forearm, my hands rising up to protect my face, tearing off the bedding, my feet lifting.

On the screen I am dead, so still that I'm not sure if I am breathing. My eyelids flutter, a sign of life. I can blink. But I can't move my mouth. Something terrible is happening on the screen. Something devastating. But I can't do anything. It's like those bad dreams when your body is unresponsive, paralysed. I can't whisper. I can't scream. My legs feel numb, distant.

Move, I say in my head when the first rat comes. One and then two, inching towards something. And then too many to count, to keep count of because of how they are racing, their speed and dexterity, the multiple journeys of approaching and then vanishing. They swarm zigzags. Some slither. Some spring. Others hop. They amass: thronging, fervent, flexile. By then it is too late. They swirl downwards, an expanding mass that overflows, slips between the sheets, between my inner thighs, my mouth, the soft skin between the lips and my nose.

In the morning, I am thrown awake, sprung from a tangled mess of a dream. My mouth dry, the room thick with early-morning quiet. I stand slowly. I am still hungover from the sleeping pills taken the night before. Still, I am shocked by my appearance. Always it wakes me, wrenches me out of my stupor. The multiple abrasions on my thighs and forearms. They seem shocking, unclean, or overly revealing. I touch them lightly, wince at the wet of flesh, at how my fingers come away bloody. It is much worse on my face where the bites accrue. They bunch together around my lips, form twists, coiled and fretted like bruises. I go back to my bedroom to fetch some equipment. I take a selfie. Close up, zoomed to my mouth. I smile for the camera.

Animal

Hear his key in the door when he comes back. Look at your phone and see that it is late. Hear him say, I'm back. Feel how cold his hand is on your face. Hear him say, take your top off. Hear him say, unbutton your jeans. Unbutton them slowly. Unbutton them while staring at him. Step forward when he tells you to. Feel his hot breath on your neck. Pull your stomach in so that it is flat and tight. Hold your breath and feel the heat from his mouth. Scream and laugh when he sticks his tongue in your bellybutton. Laugh and say no no no no. Scream ticklish ticklish ticklish. Laugh again, more, louder. Laugh like a little girl with your mouth open.

Don't resist when he grabs your open jeans and pulls you towards him. Make your body soft and limp so it's easy for him. Lie with your legs spread. Raise them up as he pulls your jeans off. Kick so they fall at your feet. Spread your legs wide. See him crawl up between your widespread legs. See his face between your widespread legs. See how it gets soft and twisted. Resist the urge to clamp your legs together and hold his head there forever. See it change as he rises up. See his lips wet with your cunt juice. See his lips pull tight and curl up at the edges. Turn on your stomach when he tells you to turn. Lift your hips so he gets more friction. Feel his hands on your hip bones. Exhale when he slams down into you. Bounce on the bed as he reaches climax. Moan like you are coming too. Tense your cunt muscles in time with your moaning. Flop down on the bed when he lets go of your hips.

Wake up suddenly in the night and hear him breathing. Rest your head on his chest and feel it lift and fall. Feel him put his arms around your body. Burrow your face into his neck and lie there. Look up at him and see he is staring at the ceiling. Think how sad he looks suddenly. Stop yourself from asking him what he is thinking. Squeeze your eyes shut so you no longer see him. Press your body into his and fall asleep like that.

Follow him to the bedroom. Follow him to the bathroom. Watch the muscles in his butt tense as he pisses. Say his name and touch his arm. Try to make your voice soft. Try to coax the distance between you into shrinking. Sit on the floor and watch him get dressed. Watch him pull his boot laces and tie a knot. Wait until he stands then beg him not to go. Follow him to the door, begging. Hear your voice crack. Hear your voice become high pitched and whiny. See your whine grate up against him. Go to the window and watch as his car reverses then disappears down the road.

Wear his t-shirt to sleep in. Tell him you like to have the smell of him with you in the bed. Wear it around the house when he isn't there. Wear it to sleep even though it is too hot to wear anything. Wear it until your smell overpowers his.

Lie in bed with one hand between your legs. Press your legs together. Touch yourself with your hand and pretend it is his hand. Try to remember his hand. Touch your mouth with your other hand. Bite down on your fingers and close your eyes. Tilt your head back and press your legs together. Feel the bed beneath you. Feel the weight of the duvet on top of you. Curl your legs up against your body and exhale.

Wait until you can't anymore. SMS him. Send him six SMSes in a row. Tell him you are leaving and you won't come back. Dial his number and let it ring. Let it ring so long that your head rings. Sit with your ringing head in your hands. Bring it up slowly.

Snort a line of coke and feel the chemicals explode against the back of your throat. Taste the bitter kerosene taste and feel your tongue go numb. Cough and spit into the basin. See flecks of coke in your spit and push your finger into it.

Walk all the way to the shop and buy a single beer. Hold the can with both hands until your fingers feel numb. Touch a cold hand against your cheek until your cheek feels numb too. Finish the beer before you get home. Throw the can at the cat sitting on the stairs outside your building. See the can miss and bounce on the concrete. Crush it under your foot on the way up.

Look at a stained and burnt mattress. Shake the duvet out and cover the stain up.

See that it is suddenly dark. Look at the time and try to remember what you did all day. Get up to switch the light on. Stand at the window and move the curtains aside. See the lights go on in the street outside. See them flicker in the dark. Watch a pair of car lights come towards you. Feel your back muscles tense because you think it is his car. See the car drive past. Put your hands to the window. Press your palms flat and feel the cool of the glass.

Lie in bed head down, muscles arched. Listen to dogs barking in the distance. Hear how one starts and soon they all join in. Imagine a pack of them howling. Dogs with teeth.

Wake up to the sound of a phone ringing. See the missed call on the screen. See the SMS. Jump out of bed and run to the bathroom. See yourself in the mirror above the basin. See your swollen eyes and red puffy face.

Sit in bed and smoke a cigarette and wait. Stab the cigarette out when you hear the gate. Pretend to be asleep when he opens the door. Feel the cold on your arse as he lifts the duvet. Feel his cock against your back. Feel the wet at the end of his cock against your butt cheeks. Bring your hands down and spread them wider. Recoil as his cock slams against your arsehole. Let out a little cry as it plunges deeper. Bring your hand up and start to rub your clit. Rub it harder so you do not have to feel the pain of his dick plunging in and out. Wake up with your arse stuck to the come spot. Try to stand and then sit down again because your arse hurts too much. Curl in the bed and cup your hands around your cunt.

Wear sunglasses when you go to the club so everyone will know you have been crying. Feel your hips and arse bones digging into a wooden chair. Feel the burn of the alcohol against the back of your throat. Hear music blasting from speakers and then see lights spinning.

Walk down to the main road and flirt with the drug dealers. See how they look at you. See their dark faces and the whites of their eyes that the irises swim in. See how their lips peel back when they smile at you. Tell yourself it's an option. Tell yourself you have options. Walk until you are too tired to walk anymore.

Spend hours online looking at rooms to rent. Look at a place with wooden floors and big bay windows. Imagine your bare feet on the wooden floors. Imagine them padding on the wooden floors. Think of the small black pads under the cat's paws. Think how they feel like soft leather when you touch them. Think how the cat twitches then jerks away when you try to dig your fingers in the dark furry space between them.

Get mad and kick the cat. See the cat skitter. Watch how its body bunches up against itself and its ears flatten. Kick it again and again until it makes a break. Watch it leap then run up the staircase. Chase it halfway and then give up. Feel shitty about kicking the cat and follow it upstairs. Crawl around on your hands and knees saying kitty kitty kitty. Peer under the bed and see two yellow eyes. Sit on your haunches when it won't come out. Walk to the shop even though it is raining. Hold your head up so the rain and wind slap your face. Buy a half litre of milk. Catch a glimpse of

yourself in the convex mirror above the counter. See your hair plastered to your forehead. Feel afraid because of how mad you look. Walk home with your head down. Start to cry when the cat won't come out to drink the milk. Sit on the floor with the bowl between your legs. Dip your finger to show the cat how nice the milk is. Lick the milk off your finger and taste tears and milk. Start to cry harder. Bring your face down and touch the surface of the milk with your tongue. Hit your fist in the bowl so the milk spills everywhere. Go and fetch a cloth from the kitchen. Come back and watch the cat licking milk off the floor. See how pink the cat's tongue is and feel horny. Lie on the bed and masturbate slowly. Use your thumb to stroke your clit while you finger yourself. Fall asleep with your pants around your ankles. Wake to the stench of sour milk and cat shit.

Fetch a pen and paper from the bedroom. Write three words down. Write them again and again. Think how long it has been since you held a pen. Think how strange the letters look. Write the words again and again and again until your wrist cramps. Crumple up the paper. See how long you remember the words that were written on it.

Throw some things in a bag and walk out. Go back inside and fill the cat's bowl to the brim. Go out again and lock the door. Put your dark sunglasses on and walk quickly to the station. Walk down the stairs and into the tunnel that runs under the tracks. Feel the temperature change and see the graffiti on the wall. See badly drawn pictures of big dicks and scrawled initials. Don't think about the big dicks. Don't think about fucking the big dicks, about fucking his big dick. See the light at the end of the tunnel. Squint as you walk into the glare. Walk to the platform and stand and look at the tracks. See them run off to either side then diverge. Scroll through your old messages while you wait. See a train coming. Watch it stop at another platform.

Write him an SMS: I am at the train station.

Watch him laugh as he slides a cigarette from the pack and lights it. See how the smoke coils upwards.

Taste his saliva and tell him you have no money. Keep your eyes on his eyes as you go down. Taste sweat and dry piss on his crotch hair. Push both his balls in your mouth and roll them around. Suck hard on one ball and then the other. Make low moans in the back of your throat like what you are doing to him is happening to you. Rub your tongue along his arse crack. Take his penis in your mouth. Choke because of how deep he pushes it. Taste the sour wretch of his come. Feel the sting in

the back of your throat when you swallow. Retch and taste him again an hour later. Keep tasting for the rest of the night like he is still with you.

Hit at his arms with your hands. Push at his chest with the palm of your hands, push at the softening parts, at his belly. See his mouth twist and hear him laugh at you. Hit him again harder, again and again. Catch the moment when his face changes. See the anger flash in his eyes. Feel your cheeks sting. Winch against his small fast slaps. Back up against the door and start to cry. Hear your snotty, messy crying.

Reach out your hand. Flick on the light switch and hear the bulb pop. Pull your legs over the bed. Sit for a long while in the dark. Rub your eyes and feel tears build up behind them.

Walk to the store even though it's closed. Stand outside and touch your fingers to the window. Name all the products you can see from where you stand. Read the sign that says: this premise is protected by armed security. Read newspaper headlines about protests in the townships. Read a headline: Riot police fire tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters. Think you have never smelled tear gas. Think how tik addicts' sweat smells like cat piss. Look at the pictures and see the angry black faces. See clouds of smoke. Riot police with armoured vests and automatic weapons. Think of the phrase "shot down like a dog" and feel a knot form in your stomach. Say the phrase "shot down like a dog" over and over in your head while you look at the pictures. Think about the different ways people become dogs: by design and by will and against their will.

Make plans to get away. Phone your mother and tell her you don't want to be a dog anymore. Do not use those words. Do not think of that scene in *The Omen* when they dig up the mother's grave and find a dog's skeleton. Press your ear against the phone. Tell your mother you need to get away. Tell her you are tired. Use your little girl voice. Say mom I am so tired. Listen to her tell you that you need to get eight hours sleep a night. Hear her ask if you are eating properly. Hear her say you are tired because you don't eat properly. Hear her but don't listen. Don't respond. Don't call her a bitch. Hold the phone away from your ear. Hear your mother's voice become soft and far away. Remember when she used to sing to you as a child. Remember the song. Remember the words to the song. Drop the phone and walk to the bathroom singing.

Walk around the streets. Look at the pavement where your feet are. Think that this is how a dog sees the world. Think of a dog's legs and how the hind leg bends backward. Rock on your feet.

Keep rocking till your legs ache. Push your legs as far back as they will go. Push harder. Feel the tension in the kneecap. Feel the ligament pull taut. Bite down hard against the pain that travels up. See your thighs shaking. Bite until your teeth ache and your head feels dizzy. Hear the snap as the bones break and your legs give. See the pavement sway then turn white below you.

Lift your head slowly. Smell the excrement of dogs, rotting food. Smell water flowing just beyond the curb. Smell something sharp like petrol. Smell more excrement. Feel the cold cement supporting your body. Make your hands into fists and try to stand. Push your fists hard into the pavement. Push one fist then the other. Feel your legs shudder and give. See the pain turn everything white. Move blindly forward on all-fours. Feel your heart thud below your neck. Hear it slow from machine-gun rattle to a more measured beat. Feel the sun on your back and the breeze that stirs the soft hairs on the back of your neck. Pick up your pace and lift your head. Smell the rich, dark pull of dog excrement and crawl towards it.

Frequency

They do not fuck anymore. It is too hot to fuck. They do not eat. They lie on the bed, sweating, limbs splayed. His eyes are closed, chest hardly moving, breathing shallowly. Hers gaze up at the open window. Nothing shows but a piece of the cloudless sky. He says something but the heat muffles his voice so it seems far away, like a radio in the distance. It takes her a moment to realise he is talking about when they first arrived. Does she remember? She shakes her head. The truth is the first week is a blur. It all went so quickly. She remembers the fucking. How they fucked everyday, fucked like rabbits... only there aren't any rabbits here, only rock rabbits. They are fat and earless. They don't hop or spring. They hug the rocks, slide along the dark surfaces and disappear into cracks. She remembers how cool and hard his body used to be at night. How they would take blankets outside and fuck under the sky. They could see everything—all the stars and constellations. When she came she felt like an astronaut, like she was floating, a giant anti-gravity chamber opening around her.

She remembers the buzzing of insects. When they first arrived she was mesmerized by it. They were on the stoep drinking beers when the chorus started. A deep mechanical buzz, a vibration, an endless sound deeper than silence. Jesus, she held her breath and listened. What is that? Crickets? It's like they're singing. He shook his head and explained. Cicadas. They were mating. The word he used was copulating. She turned to face him. She knew nothing about insect copulation—how they did it. For all she knew they didn't. Or they did do it but via some external mechanism. Long distance fucking like fish or frogs or a solitary practice like amoebas that just split in two. She tried to imagine insects fucking, hard shiny surfaces, legs and feelers. The word was chitinous. Chi-tin-ous. Even how it felt in her mouth. Her tongue on her palette, barely touching. The word scared her. A tingling feeling ran along the hairs on her arms. How it sounded: spindly and sharp, the tone and inflection of insects rubbing up against themselves, anxious and scaly, thin legs against crispy shells.

Now she barely hears them. Her head is empty. She has lost a lot of weight but still feels heavier. She pulls herself slowly up off the bed and walks through to the kitchen. It's dark and somehow cooler. She opens the fridges and drinks water out a bottle. She wrinkles her nose at the smell. The guavas are rotten, splitting under the harsh flood of light, their skin sticky and leaking juice. She collects them up, throws them in the overflowing bin. A cloud of small black flies lifts as she closes the lid. She walks back to the room. He is in the same position as when she left. His eyes are closed

but she has no way of knowing if he is sleeping or just lying there. She flops down on the bed. She lifts her hand and touches her throat. She can feel her bones protruding. Her clavicle, the two bones, how they fold open like brittle wings.

Involution

When she first discovers the thing, she reacts with fright. It isn't just its outlandish appearance but also its proximity. Why, considering all the suitable nooks and crannies, the possible hidey holes in the vicinity, has it chosen her? In truth she might not have noticed it if it wasn't for the itch that developed suddenly. At first, barely noticeable, more like a humming, a low level vibration somewhere in her nether regions, then louder, more insistent.

Eventually she has no choice but to give herself over, to make her way to the bathroom, shut the door and strip down. She sits on the toilet—lid down—kicks off shoes and peels leggings, thrusts hips forward and bends head. Even from this position, bum balanced, legs akimbo, she has trouble discerning anything. It isn't so much that the thing is well hidden, as it is that its very form resists easy definition. Much about it is familiar, its colour, pinkish, brownish, its jowls and dugs, its convex shape, all these things are easy to describe but how they are assembled somehow evades logic.

Her first reaction is to snap shut her legs, to get dressed and pretend she has seen nothing. She tries to calm herself. To breathe. She isn't usually the type scared by strange animals or creepy-crawlies. She grew up outside the city, a semi-rural area known for its biodiversity. Her childhood was spent collecting worms and beetles, chasing after frogs and meerkats. It's only recently that she moved to the south, a coastal metropolis. She tells herself that the thing is probably like her, some poor rural animal that has strayed from its natural environment. It is nothing to be afraid of. After all, there must be all sorts of species, and subspecies she has never before encountered. Small mammals alone come in a number of varieties. There are rodents, tree shrews and the eulipotyphlans made up of moles, hedgehogs and solenodons, and each of those categories has its own variants and deviants, its smallest incarnation.

When the books and pamphlets on mammals and reptiles that she obtains from the local Parks Board office reveal nothing, she extends her search. It is altogether possible that the animal is not from these parts, not indigenous, as the books call it. That it is an alien or an immigrant. Cases are documented all the time in our global world. On the internet she reads stories of vervet monkeys and miniature hippos smuggled across borders. A rare sea snake, usually only found in the waters of Mauritius, pops up in an aquarium in a restaurant in lower Manhattan. A cat that travels aboard a research vessel all the way to the Antarctic.

She tries google but her searches yield nothing. The problem is in her search terminology. She has difficulty finding language to describe the thing. It is hairy but the hair is neither long nor soft, it isn't furry exactly but nonetheless it seems to have a sort of fuzzy quality, a kind of fluffy pertness that makes one think it could be considered cute under the right circumstances. Mostly though it is ugly. Its hair stands up in a shadowy tuft framing a sad little naked face that may have resembled a puppy had it not seemed so bunched up, so awfully scrunched. She feels almost sorry for it, a warm prickling in her stomach. No wonder the thing is hiding, a tiny lonely Frankenstein thing that has no protection from the outside world.

She clicks a link and finds herself looking at pictures of rabbits, Bugs Bunny next to the white rabbit from Alice and a man-sized cyborg rabbit ghost from some movie she doesn't recognise. The final picture isn't a rabbit but rather a man covered with bees from top to toe. The picture is titled, Beeman. She stares at the photo and then the caption. Something about it, the combination, makes her stomach knot. What is the relationship between the bees and the rabbits? And the man and the bees? Is the caption meant to suggest a new species, a coupling of man and insect into a vibrating human swarm? She thinks about evolution. Ape skulls and how human embryos have an extra jaw that fades into the skull early in development. She bites down hard, clamps her teeth shut against the memory that suddenly rises.

She considers that the thing might be a type of mole? It seems to be blind or rather, if it has eyes, she has yet to see them, at least anything that resembles the eyes she's seen on other animals: the hooded eye of the lizard, the soft brown balls on cows, the red obsidian beads of the rat, the cat eye, fish eye, eagle eye - each so distinct. But sometimes the eye is not an eye. Seeing without perceiving, for example, sight as an act of creation. In addition, there are all sorts of species that are eyeless. A quick search reveals cave wolf spiders and sea urchins and all types of shrimps and salamanders. Most of them are underwater dwellers but she is sure more will appear if she searches deeper, if she delves into underground caves and abandoned mine shafts that litter the landscape in the area.

Later, looking at a blind naked mole rat makes her think maybe the thing is a hybrid. She has read reports and seen pictures. Genetic modification is leading to all kinds of permutations. At the shops she buys cherries the size of paw paws and oranges with edible peels and a new fruit that combines a pomegranate and an apple. The fruit is expensive and ultimately disappointing. It lacks the apple's

crunch or the pop of pomegranates. She remembers a vegetarian friend who warned her that they were already breeding chickens without wings and limbless cows. Picture it, just the central mass, a cow torso or trunk, clumped and inert. Could it be that her creature is such an experiment?

She thinks of how pearls form in oysters or how a tumour grows in a body, a clump of cells without differentiation. And then her creature. She imagines it beginning life as a ball of tightly packed radioactive flesh, raising itself up from the bottom of some medical waste truck, swimming through the debris of polluted biological matter, swamps permeated with the discarded waste of every living process. Emerging, its body limp, face exposed, hauling itself onto the tarmac, the hum of the sliding liquid. The sucking sounds it makes as it drags itself towards her...

Her bladder feels hot and tight. She closes her laptop. Head throbbing, walks to the bathroom. Pees without looking, holding her legs clamped together. She listens to the sound of her piss on the water. Sits like that awhile then slowly spreads her thighs, peers downwards and gasps. The creature seems to have grown, its features are more distinct, more pronounced now. A shudder goes through her. She quickly balls up some toilet paper, touches a wad lightly to it. The paper comes away wet but she has no way of knowing if it's her pee or the creature exuding liquid. She recoils, hurriedly pulls her pants up. Flushes, holding down the handle until the paper disappears.

She considers her relationship with the thing. What is she to it? Is she a friend? A habitat? A habit? A home? Or a safehold, a place of refuge, somewhere warm and secluded away from the city, like a hole or nest? But if she is a nest then is the animal nesting? Creating a safe place so it can breed? The thought drops down to her stomach, hangs there a moment, then births a dozen small creatures, tiny replicants of their mother with pink, crinkling faces and a tuft of soft downy hair that scramble in her belly. She touches a hand to her stomach, wonders what will become of them once they are fully grown. Where will they go? She doesn't really have space to house them. The enclave between her legs is the only really private nook of her body, unless of course one counts the armpits—but surely even those are exposed countless times in everyday activity, in lifting and carrying and calling for attention.

She lies awake in bed, her senses on high alert. The room is filled with shadows, monsters hiding under the bed, ghosts that run lights across the ceiling. The shadows in the room are still when she fixates on them. But when she looks away they move subtly in the corner of her eye. They're breathing, she thinks, and closes her eyes, then opens them an instant later.

She is sure that as soon as she sleeps, the creature will awaken, begin some kind of secret nocturnal creaturely activity. She tries to lie very still, to hold her body inert. Her limbs are heavy and tacky with sweat. She listens. Finally, when nothing happens, she reaches down. Her hand gropes under the sheet, slides it inside her panties. The thing is different to the touch than to sight. It seems somehow less scary and she folds her hand over it. Initially it's warm, almost body temperature but as she presses down, she feels it swell, grow hot and distended. Immediately she pulls back, uncertain if she is somehow smothering it. She waits awhile before she slides her hand back down, this time cupping it gently so its little hairs tinkle her palm, only barely. She falls asleep like that, her hand between her legs, open mouth, saliva gathered in the corners.

In the morning the bed has a sweetly fetid smell and the sheets feel damp. She balls them up and throws them in the laundry. In the shower, she scrubs herself down. She uses the disinfectant soap that she usually reserves for the kitchen. She scrubs her armpits and her breasts. Washes her feet and behind her knees. She rubs the bar of soap between the lips of her crotch, sliding it down to the groove of her arsehole. She rubs back and forth until her arms ache from reaching and her crotch burns. She repeats the motion until her thighs are red and splotchy from rubbing. Positions her body so the hot water scalds her stomach and streams down between her legs.

She should take action. Report the animal. But to whom? Should she go to a doctor? That's where you would go to get a tapeworm removed—but her creature is not a tapeworm. She has no indication it's parasitic. It does not suck the sustenance from her body, at least as far as she can tell. She hasn't lost weight recently or experienced any undesirable symptoms. No hair-loss or broken nails to indicate a vitamin deficiency. If anything she is looking rounder since the thing arrived. Her breasts seem heavier and firmer and her cheeks have a new sheen. But if the thing isn't feeding off her, then what does it eat? The question unsettles her somehow, the idea of the thing eating. But of course it must eat! What else would be the use of the mouth? At least, what she thinks is a mouth. The thing doesn't use it for sound as far as she can tell. It is very quiet, unnaturally so. Since the initial itch she has heard or felt almost nothing. She listens intently. The silence unnerves her.

She conducts several experiments. She wets her fingers with different things: fruit juice, honey, the bloody effluence of a steak she buys at the butcher. She unbuttons her pants and rolls down her panties, slides her finger between her legs, angling along the thing's surface until she reaches the

small hole of its mouth. In each case, the response is the same: nothing, not itching or twitching, no change she can gauge in the thing's body temperature.

She pours a saucer of milk, balances it on a small bench, and, with her eyes fixed between her legs, sinks her buttocks down in the cool liquid. Sits like that a while, motionless, the pink and dark flesh of her creature submerged. Finally, she stands, the milk dripping down her thighs. She examines the saucer but there is only a small change in the liquid's level, probably caused by the displaced milk that now pools on the tiles below her.

It's cold inside the natural history museum, quiet. She spends hours wandering the hallways. Lingers in front of stuffed lions and hyenas, an ethnographic display featuring Khoisan hunters, passes snakes adrift in jars of formaldehyde, petrified insects entombed in stone. The display cases are giant aquariums emptied of water. She stares at the predatory jaw of a coelacanth, the ancient bottom-dwelling fish that was believed to be extinct until its discovery at the mouth of the Chalumna River.

One of the museum guards approaches. Can I help you? Is there something specific you're looking for? She shakes her head. Just looking, thanks. The guard's presence makes her nervous. She imagines her creature would be quite a find for a place like this, an institute or research centre. For the first time she thinks of the thing's worth. She goes to the information desk and asks about the cost of the displays in the rare animals section. The stuffed Riverine rabbit or Ethiopian wolf, say, or the hairy-eared dwarf lemur from Madagascar. The woman at the desk doesn't understand the question. She is just a help desk jockey, someone trained to dispense brochures and pinpoint areas on the map. She points the girl to the curio shop. She says, they have lots of the nice things to buy there.

The girl has no interest in curios but she walks in the direction indicated so as not to arouse suspicion. In the shop she buys a bottle of water and a plastic bat on sale as part of some special focus on cave dwelling mammals. Once outside she wonders if she chose the bat because she sees an affinity between it and her thing. She thinks about her body and its caverns and sinkholes.

She resolves to keep her thing secret. To tell no one, certainly not anyone involved in the study of science. After all, the thing doesn't seem to be doing any harm. It demands very little. It doesn't need to be fed and it makes no sound. As far as the rest of the world is concerned it doesn't even

exist. As if to prove this to herself, she phones a man she met at a party she attended when she first arrived in the city. It was one of those neighbourhood get-togethers one feels obliged to attend when one first moves to a new area, so as not to seem snobbish or standoffish. The man, if she remembers correctly, was introduced as working in wildlife conservation, some sort of research into endangered species. She dials his number and says, I don't know I was just thinking of you. He seems flattered. How about a drink sometime?

She has had little social contact since discovering the thing and is suddenly afraid that it might somehow show, be visible to others. She wears an old pair of black jeans that keeps everything neatly tucked in without riding too close to her skin, too near to the panty line. The restaurant they meet in is crowded. Finally they find a table, squashed in the corner facing each other. As it turns out she was wrong about the man's field of expertise. Yes, he is in conservation but he is mostly concerned with legislation. His background is legal. She tries to focus while he tells her about a case study he is working on, examining how recent trade agreements with Chinese shipping companies have affected the perlemoen population in local waters. He tells her about the plight of local fishing communities, the tiny motorised fishing boats that carry pirates and the armed gangs that have formed around the illegal perlemoen trade.

The word pirate catches her attention. She feels a shudder. For some reason the setting or the man or what he is saying has upset the thing. She doesn't know how she knows this. It is not so much a feeling as a sudden twitching, a sort of pull-itching that makes her slide her arms across her belly and pull them tight. She wiggles in her chair, sudden overly aware of the sucking sound her bum makes on the seat's vinyl cushion. Eventually the pressure is too much. She excuses herself and rushes to the bathroom.

Her bum hugs the toilet bowl, pants around her ankles. Her panties are slightly damp, not wet exactly, not like she peed them, but clammy, coated in a viscous substance. Her mouth is suddenly dry. Could it be there is something wrong with the creature? Is this how it bleeds or maybe it's some weird form of weeping? Suddenly, she is overcome with a flush of emotion. It starts in her stomach and radiates out until her whole body is filled with small warm fuzzy things. She reaches down her hand and gently cups the thing. She begins to stroke, very slowly at first, then faster.

The thing grows taut under her touch. She feels its warm mouth open, the liquid excretion saliva, not blood. It coats her hand, stringy tendrils that seem to pull her deeper. She slides a finger in, just

one, then another. She roots around, scratching at the top, the soft yielding sides that bulge when pried. She pushes harder, discovers a funny sound made by squishing the walls in. She starts to laugh. Her body tingles. Her skin shudders and her jaw trembles. The thing pulls tight, spasms into a hard knot and then goes slack. Everything becomes indistinct. The air is hot and thick. She sits on the toilet breathing. The thing is quiet. Her belly is flat and relaxed. She stands slowly. Her legs shaky beneath her, wipes herself off and cleans her panties with toilet paper. At the small enamel basin she avoids the mirror, washes her hands twice, dries them under the hot stream of air from an electronic hygiene drier.

At the table, the man is impatiently drumming his fingers. They sit in silence. She is sure her face is flushed and she looks down to avoid his gaze. Finally she looks up and says, do you have any pets? She doesn't know why this question. He shakes his head. He doesn't like the idea of animals being domesticated. He says something about corrupting the animal spirit. She says, and cockroaches? Cocks her head and watches his face. Obviously he doesn't get it. She tries to explain that there is no urban and rural divide any more, no pure, incorruptible nature. She says, try to imagine dogs before they were domesticated. Or rats in the wild and pigeons in jungles. Of all of them the pigeon seems the most unimaginable to her. They seem so stupid and placid. She hopes her thing never becomes like that. Docile and dependant. She likes its wildness, its skittishness. How it cowers below her, seemingly afraid of the light, the hard air. She slides her hand between her legs under the table. Her thighs are hot. When the waiter comes she orders steak. The man orders the grilled line fish. I don't eat red meat, he says, as if needing to explain.

She watches him carefully slice into his fish and take the bones out. The meat is pale and flaky, gives easily. The spine comes out clean. He impales a forkful, brings fish to his lips. Between bites he talks about problems with the Chinese shipping industry. Certain practices: sharks brought up in nets, ripped of their fins and thrown back, still living, to sink like stones. She watches him eat and thinks sharks do not have bones, only cartilage. The thought makes her seasick or at least feel a feeling like sea sickness, that same lurching. The smell of the man's dish is suddenly overpowering. She can see his jaw moving. A deafening noise around her: the sharp sound of metal and porcelain, high-pitched voices.

Outside it is raining lightly. She declines the man's offer for a lift. She wants to walk, to be outside, to feel the air and water on her face. She walks quickly. In the distance, she can see the silhouettes

of the cranes in the harbour against the sky, the lights of the ships far out at sea. The wind rips through her and blows her hair in her face. She is soaked when she gets home.

She decides not to phone the man again, pushes him out her head. That night he keeps coming back to her. She thinks of the fish dish in front of him, of him eating then talking, of his lips opening and closing. The spine left on the side of his plate, its spikes and serrated edges. She goes through to her bedroom and undresses slowly. She sits in the centre of the bed and spreads her legs. Her heart beats quickly as large red splotches spread across her thighs. She breathes, reaches down and feels a quiver. The stirring grows so strong it's like her insides are tiny animals, gnawing and scratching the walls of her body. She runs her fingers across the creature's skin. The mouth feels like a little wet cave under her touch. She wants very badly to stick her finger into it. She peels open the lips, very wet suddenly, lubricated so her index finger slides in easily. The whole thing cleaves as she penetrates it, goes in with three fingers, pushes deeper, rocking and thrusting.

In that moment she realises that her understanding of the animal has been very limited. What she took to be its body, the bulk of the thing, is really only an exterior. Buried just below that is another whole extension, an animal holed out or turned inside over. It is not clear if it's mammalian or reptilian or amphibian. It could even be fish or a plant. It has no bones, or perhaps she just can't feel them. Its muscles, or what might be muscles, are coiled in spasms that knot and loosen as her hand strokes them. Its skin is hot and wet, a mucus membrane covered in a thin layer of slime. It doesn't make a sound but as she thrusts deeper she becomes aware of a vibration, low and metallic, like the hum of insects, a soft buzz that she is sure is at a pitch that human ears shouldn't be able to hear.

She listens closely, tries to imagine the shape of what's inside her. She navigates like a bat sending signals out. Does it go on indefinitely? Does it have many parts, chambers, like a heart? Is it contiguous, or are parts of it cut off from the other parts, sealed away, unreachable and silent? Are its parts solid, defined, or do they simply take on the shape they inhabit, like liquid? In that moment she thinks she smells it, a smell like fish, like seaweed on the beach in the morning, but after a time she cannot remember that smell, or seaweed, or morning. Her ability to compare anything with anything else is slipping. There is nothing to compare. They are no longer separate creatures.