

The Gentle Pressure of the Sky

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

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Laura Watermeyer

November 2014

Abstract

A collection of lyrical, imaginative prose, ranging from prose poems to more formal short stories to flash fiction. I challenge the ordinary or commonplace by exploring the realms between fiction and poetry, realism and fantasy, reality and illusion. I would like reading the collection to be a sensory experience, one that draws the reader deeper into the imaginary. Stylistically, I work elements of poetic language into the narrative in order to express the mystery and remoteness that the stories require.

Prey	7
Lion's Heart	8
Stars from the Stars	10
Main Road.....	11
Saturday	12
The Coming	13
The March.....	15
Into the Night	17
Yearning.....	18
Devoured.....	19
Farm Life	20
Gaia	21
Result	22
Repetition.....	24
Bardo.....	26
The Star Cult	28
Family Dinner	34
Frozen	35
Revolution Blues by Neil Young.....	36
Behind the Moon.....	37
Catalogue	38
The Mole.....	41
When Father Left	44
Ma	48
The Diviner	56
Service.....	59

Perennial	60
To My Mother.....	61
Plants and Animals	63
Blown.....	66
The girl wanted to be a bird	67
West of Kerith River	73
Time enough	83

Prey

When you spend your days walking the earth doesn't feel round. Rather it seems pulled flat and tight like an elastic band waiting to snap. I sit snug in its fold and land on a chug boat going down the Nile. I want to see the hippopotamuses belching, I shout and my voice disturbs the birds that gather around me. They spread broad white-tipped wings and from their beaks the deep throaty sound of kwaak and kraak as they scatter. I wish I had a beak to screech but I talk loudly instead, not in the hushed tones I used to. There is no point being quiet when even my breath echoes. I try to talk to my parents but they just stare at me, vacantly, not registering while the crows pick at their brains. I try to shoo them, my hands swing back and forth like I'm dancing some kind of ritual but their beaks are sharp and continue to pick the skin and bone until there's nothing left. So I carry on walking the too-tight earth, looking for someone or something to restore its shape and form. There are walls, which contain nothing. And grass, which has grown long from neglect, my father would say. I wish sometimes I could cut the grass and keep the beds in gardens of houses that were once beautiful but it is impossible. And again, I think of my father shaking his head in disapproval as if he still had one.

Lion's Heart

She arrives late to where Lionel should be waiting for her but isn't. No long haired hulking brown silhouette howling at the full moon, so she goes inside the show tent to wait. Its edges whip in and out in cursive patterns with the wind but the stale air won't shift, still damp with the smell of last night's cigarettes and spilt beer. She stands a while, picks her feet through the trash, through a tangle of discarded ropes and onto the stage. Her feet crack under her and her fingers grip around the tall bronze pole that keeps the tent pitched. Leaning her weight away from it she spins and her eyes close into an old theatre. Chandeliers hang from the roof leaking diamond droplets from the red velvet ceiling. People wear silk and satin, sit silent and watch her sing and she sways there with her head light and full of dreaming until someone asks her a question.

Lionel not here yet?

She opens her eyes. The red velvet ceiling is a hitched plastic dome. Chandeliers are a chain of iridescent bulbs that burst. Here people spit and jeer. Shaking her head in reply she casts a look over her shoulder to the person hunched in the corner. Toothless and crippled his long hair sticks to his face and her top lip curls up under her nose, wishes it could stretch right up over her face and swallow her.

Silence sits down between them and she thinks about Lionel. She's known him since she was eight. Her parents left her outside an orphanage and her father wrapped her in his heavy grey coat before turning and walking away. Cold buckets of water to wash. Cold food to eat. Cold bed to sleep in. Everything was damp and brown. After a few weeks she ran away, snatched up her father's coat and slept in it. It kept the rain out.

And then she lived to follow the fairgrounds, all the colours and sounds spinning circles in the sky, and that's where Lionel found her, offered her his hand. Once she took hold of it she never let go.

Where's Lion? I need his help with this, a rasping voice pulls her back. His hands struggle to work the ropes apart, one hangs limp at his side like a dead fish.

Lion because his face is covered with long brown hair, because it grows from his forehead. Lion because it hangs straight and smooth from his cheeks, reaches past his shoulders. People are afraid of him but she thinks he is beautiful.

Good question, she replies, moving past the hunched figure towards the exit.

The tent flaps close behind her as she looks out. The show is starting soon. Crowds of people are pulling in. Their voices rise and fall like the lights in the wind, sweet like sticky food that coats their chatting lips. She and Lionel share a tent on the other side of the fairground so she starts out across the field. The grass is covered in frost. It snaps under her shoes. A gust rushes up under her skirt, lifts like a cloud around her hips. Something whistles, or howls, and she tucks her head into her coat and keeps her feet moving.

The cold is making it more of an effort than it should be and something tears at her lungs as if something is slicing through the tissue. She's running. Idiot. She reminds herself in the silence that she's got to take it easy or her heart might stop beating. She walks on and finally she can see the tent in the distance. She hasn't been back all day, not since the morning when she and Lionel had a fight about getting clear of freak shows for good. He says it's all he knows, she says it's never too late.

The tent is empty and a different kind of pain starts to clutch at her chest. She swings around and walks to another tent, rips open the flaps, have you seen Lionel? Two short arms flap at her in surprise, three small stubs where his fingers should be, nah, I haven't seen him, said something about needing a drink. The tent flaps drop shut in his face.

She starts running and her fingers pull across her chest to close her jacket around her. Lionel says it probably kept her alive. It kept the rain out. It kept her. Now the pain is getting bad again, her teeth throb with it, each breath feels heavy against her chest filling up with cold damp air.

The pub is packed but a shadow waves her over from the edge of the crowd. Hunched, hair sticking to his face, his good hand wringing the damp from his hat. He grinds his lips together and his head moves toward a group of people who shift around and over one another like vultures scent death. Lionel's black boots point up at the sky. Elbows and stares and muttering. Police with clipboards and flashlights and the rush of blood to her heart thinning to a drip. She can't reach, they're all too close to him, a careless boot too near his head, his beautiful brown hair marred with the deep crimson of blood bled thick and long.

Stars from the Stars

For Jim Carroll

The night had been dark but not dark enough for either girl to hide from the other the parts of herself she didn't want seen and from then on each moved with the other endlessly as stars from the earth.

Main Road

It is after seven in Cape Town, a Thursday, and I'm having dinner at Ponchos in Observatory. Russ and I sit facing the street and Chris, bleached blonde and dimpled orange, blocks the view. We listen to him talk, he mentions a film, something about the sea and we guess they've cast him as a lifeguard again. The waitress, first name Kieran, carries plates of sour cream, salsa, fajitas: things high on chili. Fazel asks for extra tequila to add to the jugs of frozen margaritas. We eat and drink and the drinks get hot and the frost drips onto the checked tablecloth and it's about eleven when we get the bill. People stumble out and onto Main Road and home but I sit awhile, fumbling with the thought of him, watching the candles burn so slowly they feel eternal.

Saturday

It's Saturday and you're standing by the fire drinking a Castle out the can. Your t-shirt smells of varnish and grass and the grease from your lawn mower. Ouma is making the potato salad you like and she sprinkles Aromat all over it like orange dandruff on the head of a bald albino. You never shout on Saturdays except to call mom to come and fetch the meat and when she does, she complains that you've overcooked the chicken again. You shake your beer can at her and ask for another, please beauty? I stand next to you holding a spoon for the marinade, watch how you flip the sausage without breaking it and when mom brings the Castle, slurp the cold froth off the can.

The Coming

It is nearing dawn when the stars fixed above the roof begin to fade with the turning earth. From outside she enters the walls of the barn, brittle and curled up they lean against one another to shut out the cold, and as she walks clear of the shovels and spades and the waft of broken down grains and grass he begins urgently to call to her. She hears him and carries the call until the pain becomes too much to bear and from standing she stumbles, her weight falling like bricks around her ankles. She struggles alone and with heavy purpose amongst the barn animals and their eyes fall on her, their breath a warm mist in her delivery room. Most of the others are far away already, out ploughing the earth before it grows a paler brown under the sun's gaze, and she is grateful for this. It is better to not be shadowed with attention, better to know that the sounds made in her mouth and forced out past dry cracked lips will go unnoticed, smuggled away in haystacks and never found.

The call began in the lost hours between night and morning, low and clear inside her but not enough to move her legs from under her or to place her feet on the floor, not enough to rouse her body from sleep to waking, rather moving subtly inside her. Having lived so far without the knowledge of birth she now feels her way part by part and she feels her body suited to birth, steady and calm, breathing for her. It knows something is arriving soon that must be completed and her body is carried on this inevitable current, instinctively knowing all it needs to about its surface and its depth, knowing that it is time to part with the thing calling from inside her. She fumbles at her feet, stacking what she can to soften his path in a flat pile between her legs and then, carefully balanced by the wooden beams that keep the goats and pigs in their pens, she digs the tips of her feet into the dry earth.

She begins to bend and swell with the urgency of him. Each movement comes from deep inside her and she feels the force of him pressing down, tightening. But she does not watch for his coming. Her eyes are somewhere between open and shut, but not really seeing, not wanting to see the ground swimming in water and blood-red mud below her, her fleshy surface softly ripped by the crown of her coming infant. Instead, she opens her eyes only when she feels this new being complete and outside of her. Then, releasing her weight from the wooden beam, she pulls completely free of him. His own life must now continue beyond her own and what has bound him to her now lies tangled at her feet.

She watches this new life split down the centre and unfold, naked calves, thighs, legs, limbs loosening softly alongside one another as if by ropes now undone. But he makes no other

movement and she looks down at him, at first seeing only something exhumed and out of place with the life and sounds surrounding it. Outside, on a patch of felted grass between the shadow of the sun and a towering tree, its branches reaching out like ladders to the sky, a group gathers. They have heard of his birth, yet none of them care to come and look at the thing that ends at their shins, they ignore the sound coming from its mother's mouth and its small tongue kicking out petulant calls, these sounds resonating intimately only with her skin that prickles and rises to touch him. They choose not to see its eyes that water white milk tears and only her face meets his desperate horizon, his eyes barely risen from the earth.

As she stares at him, she wonders at his head, a skin balloon, tight and swollen. She sees his purple lips releasing sounds that don't breach the space between them, her heart still coming undone to him. But intuition forces her curiosity and she brings her face next to his to feel for the little puffs of breath that assure her he is alive. They carry to her quickly and she responds with a sigh made in submission and then in relief and then there is just the sound of gentle breathing that fills the space between them with peace. And in the new light that filters in strips past his face she moves him in front of her and sees his tiny shadow cast beside her. It is useless for her to wish that she could return to the creature she was, that she could leave his life tucked away in the elbow of the pen because she has become saturated with him and with her charge over him. Succumbing to it, with secret touches and looks, she watches his thin limbs stumble with movements as simple as bending, tastes the sweetness that coats his skin and wonders at what it must have taken for their bodies to exist so close to one another without either feeling any harm, and in that moment she begins to feel the first cracks of pleasure, happy for this homemade kindness.

The March

It was deep winter when Monty Hilliard found himself staring across the pearl ice blue of a pond. The mountains cut the sun in half and he watched the shadows of the birds that circled overhead. Greater numbers of them had begun to gather and they flew constantly with the men in their sight, dropping every few hundred metres to pick at the fallen bodies. He had never seen birds like this before, the width of their wings appeared twice that of a man's arms outstretched and the sounds that crawled from their beaks were closer to human than animal. One landed near to him, its wings beating soft flakes of white ice into the air, its head nodding like a spear ready to be thrust into him, and instead he turned away, looking rather at the heavy outline of his boots against the snow.

They had been walking for days and his feet strained to feel life. Everything felt damp and his clothes clung to him, heavy and black against the white land that lay dense with unmarked graves. Looking up he saw then that of the fifteen or twenty men he had been captured alongside, only himself and one other were still alive.

He roused himself enough to look over at this man who sat slumped beside him. They had fought shoulder to shoulder for the past few months and he had become a friend to Monty, but Monty had begun to notice his struggle, that his footprints were becoming more like lines in the snow. He tried to speak to him, to encourage him, but only managed to knock his elbow into the man, to rally him enough that he raised his head and met Monty's eyes. He wished then that he had not done it and again he turned his head away.

His eyes fell instead on the guards that hovered around them. Most were indistinguishable, their features hidden behind thick fringes of fur and hair and frosted breath, and each carried a rifle. He wondered what made these men so different to him, how such a distance had been created between them that they bore a closer resemblance to birds than to men, flapping, impatient for an end. And then he heard a voice from a beak, from violet-cold lips, sharp and rasping, telling them to stand up, get up, get moving.

And when they marched again, he became lost not in that day, or a day, but in day and he saw only the lines in the snow until he tripped over his friend's fallen body but he could not stop to help him and so instead he stopped and picked him up, forced him to his feet and dragged him, and when he could not drag him any longer he threw the man's weight over his shoulder and carried him, and he carried him until they reached the prison camp where he lowered him

to the ground and fell to his knees and tried to wake him, and he looked again into the man's eyes, pale blue and wide open, and saw that he was dead.

Into the Night

We're steaming high past main and crescent when John says he needs to piss. This isn't our space man, Franks grinding wheel and jaw but John's got that look that says he don't give a shit. Quick tap on the back of the head to cool it but we know he's scanning for trouble. We pull off a little way down the street and he slides out slick as grease. We follow flying on dynamite and sixty seconds aren't even up before John's spotted some roaches leaning against the wall round the back of the deli. Like a magnet and he's at them, bullshitting, pulling back his jacket to let them know he's carrying. Too much though and the main roach whips out two very shiny revolvers and suddenly we're all in it like a pack attack. John shoots off his piece and sends one of the roaches flying but not before he gets drilled hard by the main roach, one of the craziest fucking hits I ever saw anyone get. We all split, Frank and I behind those brick cigarette bins and we're firing blind. About this point the cops start blaring full force up main and we gotta get moving fast. We get John back to the car alright but he's sticky, full of holes and there's no time at all before things get heated. Cops pour out of the cracks like hot shiny liquid, right on us. Bullets hit the blue metal, take out the windows, glass explodes and I splinter. I'm yelling at Frank to drive, fucking drive but he keeps looking over his shoulder slamming the gears around like he's playing the claw machine at the old pier arcade, pedals like a game of pin ball. Finally the shrill grind of rubber on tar and we're blazing, one of those tiny metal balls flung forward into the night.

Yearning

Her lips travel over and trace the mountains. They flurry past the wet sloping dunes of his mouth. His edge is rocky and she places her body carefully next to his. Furtive at first, her thirst soon drives her to drink from the secret dripping tip of all four seasons. Her tongue licks the salt from the round flat rocks that have gathered there and as they lie together under the shade of their woven fingers they touch and skip stones across the wet tight lake. A small yarn is thread between them, reeled into places that neither can feel but which frays at their touch when rubbed too hastily or without enough care. Luminary moon, white tipped peaks and small tents upon the breast ridge around which he places his mouth to rest at night. And white magnolias, pouting at the vacant stars that only come out in the summer time.

Devoured

Throughout the summer the birds creaked at the coming rain. They clustered in trees, hundreds of them hanging from branches not wanting to touch the earth. They looked like children afraid to touch death. They knew the rain was coming, that it would pour without ever letting up, pour until it reached past the windows of the humans, past their shoulders, until it drowned them. And then all their bodies grew a lime green mould and the water melted them into the wooden floors until they became a river bed of human feet. Fish flowed from the water's set pathways into new ones and made their way into the mouths of the humans, picking food out from between their teeth. They swam down their throats and ate tunnels through their flesh and made their homes in the swollen wet bellies of the humans. It made sense that it should end this way, that the humans should return to the place from which they once crawled. So now, at the bottom of the sea, which has almost become the earth, you can see a few different things – it depends how deep into the water you go. My favourite part is right near the last remaining bits of shore. If you stand still you can hear the water coming. Listen, the way it rips and curls and rolls around your toes, lapping against your skin like cool, smooth tongues all touching together and at once. If you hold your head under water, you can hear the ocean, the way it roars, like the sand is its bottom lip and the sky its top lip and all the in between is it calling and roaring and singing into everything. And the top of the ocean, where all the smooth white ripples frost along the waves is its tongue and the ocean is just eating the world up in waves.

Farm Life

What did they tell you about what we do up here...did they tell you it's easy...why am I even asking, of course they did, but there's nothing easy about it, not the way we do it...mind you, maybe it is now, more than it used to be...you'd first have to catch the thing, back then...now it's all different, but back then, we'd take that truck out into the forest where the trees get real dense and you don't know what time it is, track the land and chase the thing down before you could skin it...but, no time for that anymore so we breed them here, over there...smell it...that stinks theirs, too...you get used to that stink though, just them pissing all over themselves and climbing around scared out of their skins....you think they fear it...a knife moving past their eye or up their shaking belly...I'll tell you a thing or two about skinning...first you've got to kill it or get it still...most men use the metal rods a few times to the head...I've seen some guys take the legs, beat the thing against a wall or crush it with their foot...doesn't really matter as long as it's still otherwise they move around too much, kick and squirm all over the place...you can't get a clean cut like that and you just end up wasting...clean it all off, legs, tail, face, there should be nothing left but glistening white fat and bleeding muscle...that's how you know it's a good clean cut...when you're done, chuck it in the pile with the rest of them...sometimes they're still squirming a bit, I even saw one lift its head at me from the top of that pile, blinked a few times too...we waited about ten minutes before it stopped fighting...anyway, there's Moes now...he'll show you how it's done.

Gaia

She piles rocks on rocks and climbs to sit atop, her shoes just touching the earth. Her skin is sheer light and movement and the occasional bird's wing flaps through her head and lands on her hair. Her hair is knotted high and shines wet and wide like a pond with ducks swimming round and round the curls. One hand rests on her lap, long clean fingernails and rings on every finger, the other pinches a thin black tube with a lit cigarette coming out the end. With each breath she drags time down, smoke drifting in and out like clouds as she opens her mouth to speak. A butterfly lands on her tongue, flaps around inside her mouth and flies out through her nose which makes her laugh a little at first but then she begins to cry and with each sob small pink petals float free from her throat and flutter past on the wind that nudges her apart. It begins to rain and her hair drips down her face and back, the ducks now swimming round and round in the puddle of her lap. She watches them for a while, quite still, before peeling off her stockings and high heels and spreading them out onto the earth below her. Then with a smile she throws her head back to laugh as flowers burst into bloom from her neck.

Result

He took the skin and pinched it between the metal tips of his tweezers. It stuck to the tissue and he heaved a little more, pulling it further from the bone and nearer to his face. Why that colour? Why the smell of fruit? But it wasn't his job to ask questions. His tongue rested on his lips, his breath tasted like sweet preserve. In a minute, he'd look again in a minute, right then, he had to rest.

He'd been working in the lab for years, Roodeplaat Research Laboratories, RRL, chrome, cold metal and dead lights. Twice a day they brought in the bags, left them on tables around the room. The bags were never marked and they always smelt of too-ripe fruit. It started as small cuts, jellied-flesh soaked in a fruity concentrate. Then they brought organs, chopped and blended at first, then heart-bean-flattened football-sausage-shaped. Limbs, too, feet and hands, pale, white tendons. Nothing quite human.

But it wasn't his job to ask questions and so he filled in the forms they required of him, ran the tests they asked him to, made the mixtures, filled syringes and tubes, all products to be collected by faceless men. There were no windows and the only breeze came from a small fan. Once there, they kept him locked up, a small white door in, a small white door out. He didn't know what happened next door, didn't know what they did with his research

Then the parts were replaced by something larger, something that took form, something not in a bag, but on a metal stretcher. When it first came in it was shivering. Faceless men put it on his table like no one wanted to admit to it. They stepped back like no one wanted the job of pulling back the sheet they had carelessly tossed to cover it.

He grabbed at one of them, pulled them back in and shook them. What is it, he asked, what is it? Where did you find it? But no answer came. They kept the shutters of their masks pulled down across their faces, their mouths a row of metal teeth clamped shut.

And then a hand was around his wrist and dragging him closer to the thing and he was looking at the man in front of him, the only other man near him then, and looking at the hand that was pulling him closer to the thing and he was counting the hands again and again in his head, one, two, three, four, five, but there were only two men and then one man, the mask shaken free of him and through the white door that kept him shut in and the closing of the door, the turning of the lock and him and this thing and its hand on his wrist, its fingers

overlapping twice like a Chinese bangle, pulling him closer and closer until he could smell the sweet, rotting stink of its fruity flesh.

What colour was it and why it smelt like figs, the sticky suction of it to his flesh, his other hand in front of him, trying to peel the thing off but not wanting to touch it, grabbing for a scalpel, rubbing the steel between his fingers, getting ready to stab the thing, moving the blade closer, taking the tip and dipping it in to flesh and bone that singed and dropped like dead leaves to the floor and the thing shivering and shivering and the cloth slipping past it and off it and it looking more and more like something familiar and so he shut his eyes, kept sticking the blade in and the smell grew even sweeter and more powerful and he felt his mouth water because it reminded him of the fruit trees around the back of his childhood home and he saw himself climbing those trees, swinging from those trees on the small, wooden plank his father had tied to the tallest and thickest branch and he imagined the summer time, the sun sets, the sweet trickle of juice that touched his lips and he felt the pain and freedom all at once and he opened his eyes and saw that the liquid that dripped down his wrist was red and sticky and warm like strawberry syrup and that there was no other hand around his wrist anymore, just his own cutting deeper.

Repetition

He scratched the grainy dirt with broken nails, hands like desperate paws on the wood, day shifting between the slits of light and dark. Fingers like paper thin bones, he could wiggle them through, part of him outside, curving back, around the wooden slits, taking hold of them and pulling and pushing, the wood warping like his lungs struggling to breathe against his chest, rising and falling in short quick breaths.

He kept his eyes forward, listening for the sound of falling feet and heavy breathing.

Warping, heaving, warping and then the snap of wood splintering in his hands. Almost frantic in his delight, his fingers moved to the next beam, and the next, each snap of wood like a bone being realigned somewhere deep inside him. He split into light and dark, his body into the day, arms free and raking at the grass, his feet kicking like a desperate swimmer trying to reach the surface, trying to break clear of the weight that kicked in his knees from behind, forcing him to buckle.

He kicked again. He was almost out, but something was grabbing at his ankles trying to pull him back in.

*

He had been playing with his brother in the kitchen. He was the older of the two and too old for his brother's games, but he played them nonetheless. They knelt together under the wide wooden table and clashed knives like they were having a sword fight. The floor was rough and they had to be careful for splinters, but it felt safe hidden away behind the tablecloth. Their swords clashed, their hands and elbows their shields and armour, now locked in battle for the trapped princess hidden in the cramped space of their roof. Got you, you lose an arm [tucked behind a back] I am great and powerful, you cannot defeat me [blunt stab in the stomach, practiced gurgle of playing dead, sword falling, knight defeated, neck slumped back, tongue free from pink lips and eyes closed in death, small muted laughs and then stiffening].

They both heard it, the sound of falling feet and heaving breathing. It was coming thick and fat in rage, grabbing at their wrists and necks and ankles all at once and ripping them apart, throwing bits around the house, his brother in the roof with the princess, him dragged down to the basement where it bound his wrists with rope, his body hoisted, left hanging limp metres from the ground.

He hung on the cross, his head slumped forward, tears and blood dripping down him, wetness gathering between his legs. Around him, angels wept at the sound of falling feet and heavy breathing and at the fracturing pops of things inside him.

He hung there for three days, his wrists bent stiff, his fingers turned in like claws. Around him spiders cast their webs and moved on their silver thread up and down the walls, dropping hollow as a feather to the bottom and returning coated in water and urine.

On the third day one of the ropes snapped and he swayed there, trying to find a way up or down. He dangled there until he felt teeth gnawing at the rope around his wrist and then he came loose and fell, landing flat and still on the damp cold earth. His chest was pierced by a silver fist that clutched at his heart and pumped it and he turned his head and placed his ear to the earth and heard the faint call of his brother in the walls, his voice carrying on the spiders and he heard the far away fall of feet above him, a sound he knew would never stop coming for them if he didn't get up and get away, and then he saw the faint hint of daylight boarded up behind the slits in the wall.

Bardo

Hot lips cracked against the sheet of plastic, the small triangle window of their tent, her lips cracked through. They made a tent to sleep in. Leave the tent open, she said. He said, there are windows. He did not sleep with the windows open, never in their bedroom where bushes grow dark and push against the glass. The windows are bare the bushes are so thick. The bushes grow so they cannot see the sky, they cannot see the stars or moon. They can see nothing now, her lips sucking against the plastic, trying to absorb the moon.

They pushed sand to make pillows, they knelt together pushing sand to make it soft enough to sleep. She lay down, he lay down beside her, she buried her knees into the bends behind his knees, their knees knocked. They wanted to walk when they saw it stretching out before them and never ending into grey and blue. They wanted to stay after they saw it so they made a tent to sleep in, to stay awhile in the blue.

She feels round pebbles in her back. These pebbles are precious, she thinks, pebbles can be precious, she thinks, people walk and pick them up, put them in their pockets, place their lips on them, put them in bowls around their houses, hold them in their palms, skip them across the water. They skipped pebbles across the water before the clouds came heavy and thick over the mountains, before the shock of little waves that buried them deeper. They stood together and skipped pebbles across the water and at their feet flies licked the red and white meat of things that lay rotting in the tangled seaweed.

She feels pebbles in her back, slides out the tent and ruffles the flap as she goes. He sleeps against the warmth of her, stirs when it leaves. She forgot to pile pebbles in her palm when they skipped them across the water. She forgot to pile pebbles to remind them of when they skipped pebbles across the water. She kneels and pushes her hand beneath the tent, her fingers draw closed and tight around the pebbles that she felt in her back. Kneeling, she kisses the pebbles, her lips and skin begin to crack from the cold wind that blows across the mountains.

They saw the black that curled over the mountain with reaching hands. It is going to reach us, she said. He said, not for a while. We should make a tent to sleep in, she said. He said, not for a while. She spread her mouth wide, her teeth white against the blue. She turned her face to the mountain and made a fist in her mouth. In his mouth he made a glare and together they

faced the mountain and the black face yawned back at them and above them black clouds grew darker.

They made a tent to sleep in between the sloping dune and the water. She pushes sand and seaweed away with her feet. It lies tangled, a braided fringe of the ocean's hair chopped off and swept out on the sea, now webbed between her toes. She walks and lice jump up past her face, settle on her open eyes, between and on the lashes. They are like the lice she combed from him when his hair grew long past his shoulders, matted with salt and sand from the water. He could not brush it smooth and lice lay tangled in his hair then like lice lay tangled up with seaweed now. She pushes the seaweed away with her feet now like she pushed the lice away with her hands then.

It was the waves that had drawn them, that had washed against them, endless dunes of black birds that had called them closer to the blue. They wandered nearer to drowning, rocks hidden in tides, nearer to the scrape and pull of pebbles and into the water that washed from tide to sea to dune. He went behind her, she went in front of clouds and flying black birds that screeched amongst the scraping pebbles and she pulled her mouth wide open under the deep and swirling blue. She floated under waves, he floated under waves beside her. They held hands and floated under the waves they had skipped pebbles over.

When she lifted her head she saw the black birds flying. They are waders, she said. He said, where? She said, there, and pointed. Their beaks and eyes were red. They flapped black against the black clouds. They can live for thirty-five years, she said. He said, that long? They mate for life, she said. He said nothing more, eyes wide open watching them flap down onto the scraping pebbles of the shore beside him. Periwinkles bore through the sand thick and pointed. Outside, their shells were grey and coarse and they burrowed deeper with dark spiral bands away from the black birds.

They made a tent to sleep in. They went into the water. They were wet when it rained yet they ran from the rain, from the black clouds that blew apart, from the black birds that screeched returning to the rocks. Outside the tent she dropped to her knees and pulled a burrowing periwinkle from the sand. She held it in her hand and her hot white lips grazed and scraped the surface. She closed her fist then, now she opens her fist and empties her pockets. When she lies down, she can feel round pebbles in her back.

The Star Cult

A hawk hovered above the red sand. Below it a small crack in the earth became a valley and the hawk flew toward the bottom. It landed on a dune white beach near a flowing stream where tall reeds parted enough for it to see the water lapping through. Between the reeds a red and black snake with silver almond eyes crawled from the hawk but, missing nothing, the hawk lifted itself to fly amongst the dry grass, its talons spread.

Then the stream rose and the hawk became tangled in the reeds that twisted around its talons and legs. Its wings beat waves that washed over it and the snake rose with the clear grey water and shed its skin. Its bones washed away into the water until only its silver almond eyes floated on the surface. Then the hawk broke free of the reeds and closed its talons around the snake's eyes and flew with them away from the rising water and out of the valley until again it hovered above the red earth. The sky was a dense black and in the middle a void began to form that shined red and swollen like fire. The hawk spread its wings and soared into the flames, dropping the almond eyes into the void that exploded in silver and white light. A burning star.

He awoke to see it still before him when he opened his eyes, it stayed there when he closed them, the burning star, and immediately the man went to the keeper and received the warrior's costume. He crossed the desert and lit a fire to signal that the time had come and red smoke filled the air. In the distance the blurred shape of men became fixed on the horizon and the man became a warrior dressed in striped red and black with feathers stitched along his spine and arms. He walked with wings and when he ran he soared ahead of the men who followed him, war clubs, bows and arrows, daggers and knives to fight and capture the morning star.

*

She woke up feeling restless, her eyelids puffy and red like she had been crying and she tried quickly to remember what had kept her shifting awake during the night but it followed her into the light and vanished. She rubbed her eyes and splashed cool water over her eyelids. Her hands traced her arms and she noticed her skin dry and flaking. She woke up earlier than she was used to or perhaps something had woken her and she tried to shake the feeling of eyes on her, watching her through the sheer curtains hanging down behind her bed.

The sun was still rising cautiously behind the thick trees that spread across the garden and she heard birds calling restlessly from the between the covered branches. A deep sound caught her and she moved toward the window, pulling the curtain aside. Deep and gruff it came from the trees. Something hidden but calling out and she fumbled with the latch to push the window open. The glass was coated in morning steam, the warmth of her sleep pressed against the cool of the morning that caught long fingers, longer than her own, pressed in a shadow against the glass, pressed from the outside looking in.

*

The men walked by day, their feet carrying them further into the dusk, into the place where shapes are taken back into the night to set with the sun and the hawk-warrior pointed to the sky, gestured for the others to look at the flame burning in the distance. Under the eye of the fire they prepared for battle. They sang and danced, red and black and silver shadows cast across the earth by the light of the burning star and fire. And as their feet beat down they were absorbed into the dust and their bodies were spread across the sky in every sense and in every direction ready to begin the final journey.

*

She kept the windows shut when she left her house that morning. She closed the door behind her and fumbled to fit her key into the lock, not listening to its click or the slot of metal fitting side by side. Instead she heard the same gruff call coming from the tree across the garden. Gruff and hollow scraping across the tar. Like fingernails, she thought, and pinched her skin in the click of the lock and winced to pull her finger to her lips to soothe her. Her skin swelled red and she gripped her finger against her palm and hurried from the sound coming gruff across the garden.

Something shivered past her. Weather, she thought, and gripped her arms beside her and looked into the sky. Something burned for a moment like the sun into her eyes and she blinked as dust blew past on the wind across her cheeks like long fingers wrapping round her face and she shook her shoulders and hurried up the path towards her car. Clouds came in on the breeze. Swollen and red across the sky, she smelt fire. It burned in the distance and the sky told its story. Hot air against her lips. Dust like clay and ash against her skin. She hurried to open the door and closed herself inside.

She had to get to work. She had a date. She had shopping to do. She started the engine and pushed the button to open the wide swinging electric gate. She checked the rear-view mirror. She looked down and changed gears, pushed her foot against the clutch. She looked again into the rear-view mirror and stalled, her shoulders hunching tight against her ears and her eyes spreading wide open then shut to the heavy bird flying with its wings spread wide and black into her back window. Its beak hit the glass and she watched it splinter. Ragged claws scraped against the metal to steady its beating wings as it screeched and she saw skin shed against the glass, black feathers come loose and blood from its beating wings drip in stripes across the window.

In the sudden silence she heard her breath and turned to watch it fly into the swollen sky and she sat still and heaving clenched between the seat and the steering wheel.

*

They came to the red desert to live as guardians of the whole people and of the rivers. On earth, loneliness and disillusion settled and the guardians flew from it on the wings of black and white hawks. They had been forgotten, the half people of earth building barricades across heaven. Syringe buildings filled with blood and wasted energy punctured the sky and blocked out the stars. People forgot the deeds done for them by the guardians and instead flattened, murdered and destroyed life to build concrete shapes and breathe steel and metal.

To save the few remaining whole people, the guardians and hawk-warriors settled on the red desert where they could see the blaze and smoke that rose from earth to carry prayers to them above. And to show the whole people that they were not forgotten, the guardians and hawk-warriors preformed the ritual of the morning star.

*

That night she dreamt of a war party. She heard their war cry, three times repeated as they set out on their hunt. Those with bows and arrows shot so that the arrow would go through the heart of anyone in their way and they ran with fire sticks to light the night. She saw herself asleep in a dark space with a sheet pulled up around her, the same as the one covering her bed. It was her bedroom, this dark space but smaller.

Her roof sloped down around her like the flaps of a tent blowing loose on the wind. She stirred when she heard their feet running past her bedroom, past the window above her bed

and she felt her breath beat against her teeth to see their fire sticks lighting shadows against the flapping walls of her bedroom, to see their bodies running past the sheer fabric and their hands pressed against her windows from the outside looking in.

Then she was outside watching twenty or thirty men running in the dark along a riverbed. They could not always find their feet and some got tangled in the reeds that waved them into the water and carried them down the stream. Others tripped over the reeds and dropped their fire sticks and she heard their screams as they burnt their feet and arms and ran themselves into the water to put out the flames.

A man flew between them dressed in red and black with feathers long across his spine and he soared like a hawk above her. He shouted a war cry throughout, gruff and hissing, kee-yow-kop, as he touched upon the earth and ran alongside the men. A hawk-warrior, she thought, and she watched him search through the reeds along the riverbank until she felt the water rising past her feet and up around her ankles and smelt their burning skin and the rush of reeds against her and the hawk-warrior pulled his feathered spine around to find her and she bent to hide along the shore, slithered her body through and away but she felt his talons close around her ankles, his wings pushing the reeds aside to struggle with her, to lift her face and arms up clear of the reeds and water. When he had her in his grasp he turned her face and saw her eyes, silver like almonds, rimmed in the clear grey of the stream and from his throat he screeched the war call, shook his fire stick above his head and soared into the sky.

*

Her ankles hurt pressed against the fabric of her shoes. Her body felt dull and heavy. She fell asleep to the sound of something coming gruff and hollow through the cracks of her closed window. She woke up to that sound and felt the mist lift from her face to look outside and see hands pressed against her window, more and more, fingers growing long like leaves from a vine up across the glass. She felt something shiver along her skin, the weather, she thought, and caught the feel of something red and black shifting past. Her face was limp and drawn against black shadows cast under her eyes, pale and silver like clear water running by her feet outside.

She walked toward the water and saw an old man, his hair grew past his elbows, his nails curled from his fingers and reached past his knees to his toes. She followed him from the water and let him wrap his nails around her like a cage and push his face against her own, her

silver almond eyes fixed on his and she heard his lips part as he spoke to her in silent whispers, her body growing limp to fall.

Again she smelt fire. Its charcoal coated her lips and settled on the tips of her eyelashes. Through it shadows began to surround her, coming through the space between their world and hers. Their voices carried on the smoke from their pipes, drifted like frail but thick fingers that clutched at her throat and she turned her head away and closed her eyes.

Then came silence, black and intense, and it took hold of the air and of sound, even of breath. Long fingers undressed her, washed her, held her up as jugs of clear, cool water poured down her naked body and at her feet, muddy streams of ash and clay trickled and gathered. Long fingers patted her dry, dipped into bowls of scented-oil, honey and spice. When they were finished washing her, they purified her with smoke from fire sticks, painted her body red and dressed her in a black costume, the same worn by the hawk-warrior, and together they were led out to dance, the long fingers extending in arms and legs and floating heads that formed from dust and fire all around her to fill the red earth.

There was one whose legs were covered in white cloth that flared out around her ankles. She moved around the bonfire like a desert mermaid, her arms extended into a fan that pushed and pulled smoker closer and then away. Her breasts sloped free and she raised her arms to the void in the sky and closed her eyes. The figures watched her, their mouths slightly open, their eyes watery and wild and they moved hypnotized, their voices forming from mist into a chant that moved the dancing mermaid faster and fuller around the fire.

The figures formed lines and swayed from side to side and the old man moved through them and approached an altar, wooden beams bound together in the shape of a star and at its base, a pit lined with white and grey feathers from the wings of the hawks. Snakes crawled between the feathers and over the feet of the keeper who stepped down into the pit, chanting the songs of the morning star. The figures joined in on the singing and it became louder as the old man kneeled and then rose with the neck of a rattlesnake between his teeth. The hawk-warrior beat his wings against the red desert and hovered above the ceremony, the war call heard above the chanting and singing. Below him, the girl's silver almond eyes grew white and transparent and she shed her costume, the red paint peeling from her skin in curls that fell around her feet.

The old man led her to the altar, his nails fastened around her wrists and he tied her too the reaching point of the morning star. The hawk-warrior hovered above her and landed on the tip of the altar. He screeched hollow and gruff and pointed his wing at the burning void in the sky. They could now see the earth, swinging madly, surrounded by flames and they listened to the words that rose from the girl's mouth, silent prayers pouring from her lips, the earth consumed by fire that she felt rip into her arm pits and groin, up along her spine and her skin began to peel from her, her bones burning white like flames exposed and she screamed until the hawk-warrior spread his talons and pierced her through the breasts, lifted her heart from within her and, landing gently on the red desert above the earth, smeared her blood across his face.

Family Dinner

They stole their kisses between the slats of the wooden table their parents had bought and set up outside under the silver tree. During supper she let her wrist go limp to drop the knife that earlier cut the steak cooked on the fire. Then she dropped to her knees and knelt beside him, crawled and put her head between his legs and turned her face to see the sun and sky. She pushed her lips together and whispered to him, I found it. He pushed his knees to hug her face and bent his head to touch his forehead down onto the table. Then he pressed his lips between the slats through which her whisper reached him but only the air between their lips could reach to touch and kiss.

Frozen

They live in bubbles of trapped air deep below the surface of the frozen earth that turns in space in all directions but always further from the sun. Nothing warned them of the cold that came so suddenly to drive them underground, it merely fell and stretched across all living things but these few lucky things now burrowing deeper. They burrow into and past one another and stop to greet and exchange names in the tunnels they make. They are always certain the other is going in the wrong direction, closer to the surface and toward the shrinking sun that melts nothing. It is dim, too dim to light the space they need, too many faces press up against one another and up at it to secure life. It could never last forever, say the elders, nothing ever does but still they burrow deeper and hope to find the end.

Revolution Blues by Neil Young

We live in a trailer at the edge of town. Mother keeps a rifle under the bed. Father has fifteen others that he keeps locked away in a box on the roof. At night, Father climbs out the window and onto the roof of the trailer and shouts. His lips hang open like a zipper and he throws his life against the trees, answering them that rifles are one way to control the earth. Mother cries about the endless swirling that moves the trailer and Sister holds onto the bars of the cradle, cries that it's the trees rocking us, beating us against the edge so close to falling. When Mother moves to make something to eat she strums her drumstick breasts against the pots and pans and when Sister screams, Mother drags her nipples between the bars like the tiny edges of a tambourine. On the roof, Father lies with his neck wrung out watching the ten million dune buggies coming down the mountains.

Behind the Moon

The children went down to the river. They held hands along the stone path that took them past the high dark shadows of the cherry trees. Then they removed their shoes and shirts and placed them in a row along the edge of the river where the grass was muddy and the water washed their toes with gentle licking. The younger of the two waded out past his knees and bent his back flat, digging his hands into the river bed to scratch for crabs and snails. Then the older climbed a tree and walked along the bridge of the thickest branch to stand above the deep water. She saw the shine of the pink moon settle in the turn and watched the clouds that came as birds with silver wings...as foxes chasing rabbits...that came with crests and velvet crowns...as strings of floating lanterns...and she sang to the things behind the moon and her fingers reached to hold the long swaying branches offered to steady her while the clouds brushed slowly by. Below, her brother took up her song and hummed to the things in the water. He pulled the legs from crabs, stuck them in the fat underbellies of snails and gathered them up like flowers. Then he held their bodies up to the sky and wondered at the wriggling moon, its pincers pulling the clouds apart as they rushed past in silent shivers.

Catalogue

When the woman wakes up she sighs and deflates and her hands open from crunched fists and out from between her thighs. She is relieved by the sunlight. The night is also relieved. It is worn and limp from her tugging at its ends. And the woman is tired of tugging.

She sits alone and chews on loneliness and complains that she is full. Teeth are for chewing. Teeth come in pairs that match. Teeth go under pillows and pay for children's dreams. She puts her head under her pillow in the morning and looks for teeth to dream of things to fill her. She wonders there awhile. She is tired of sleeping alone and decides she needs a man to fill the cold spaces. All night she dreamt of warm bodies, but there is no comfort to be found in the arms of her duvet. There are cold spaces when you sleep together, but there are fewer than when you sleep apart, she says to her duvet, laying it flat to strengthen in the sunlight, its corners tucked in to rest.

At work she pages through a catalogue. She imagines things in parts, being put together or pulled apart depending on their construction. Things are made to be put together or pulled apart, she thinks, and she thinks of her duvet. Her hands click through pages. She imagines working in an assembly line, pulling the nose from one man and removing the eyes of another, pushing the parts of men together and packaging them. She imagines them being delivered in sets of six, like eggs neatly stacked in rows. Things fit neatly in rows. Things are cleaner and more convenient in rows, like buttons done up or undone. And she could recycle the container like she could recycle their parts. It is good to recycle, she thinks and she goes on circling things in the catalogue.

She orders towels, a set of three, cream, one hundred percent cotton. She has given up on colour towels. Colours are for people who need to tell their towels apart. Colours are for people whose furniture does not match. Ten years ago she might have ordered colour towels hung by wooden pegs from the washing line, their shadows wet between the sheets.

Now, she orders the biggest towels they have. She wants big soft towels to wrap around herself, she wants a towel to wrap around her now like it did when she was a child, when towels wrapped twice around her shoulders and hung down near her feet, when her bed was small and the cold spaces were fewer.

On her way home she scans a magazine rack. She chooses the ones with the most advertisements, men's health magazines, the fashion pages, and avoids any with cars or

women on the cover. When she pays the cashier she thinks of putting his hands in her pockets along with her change, they are firm and warm and she imagines they would feel good filling the cold spaces along her body. She thinks of his hands clutched between her thighs and her duvet clumped together in rest at their feet.

But she does not want his nose, too round and small on his face and she imagines cutting it off and sticking another in its place. Perhaps the nose of the man who helped her at the stationary shop whose hair was too light for his colouring, like ash fading on a fire. Nor does she want the vendor's smile, too full and fierce, his teeth set too wide apart inside his mouth, nor his frown, too heavy behind his eyebrows. She does not hear his voice. She cannot pull apart and put together his voice and she turns away. A voice is not as easily disassembled, it is not so easily recognised in parts as a mouth or nose. A voice is like trying to put together or pull apart loneliness. There are small comforts to be found in the arms of my duvet, she thinks, walking home with the corners of magazines cutting into her calf.

In her living room, she pages through the magazines and cuts the vendor's hands out with scissors. She cuts out neatly cropped arms and legs, smiling or laughing mouths, eyes and noses to pull apart and put together and she fastens them with paper clips and glue. These men are paper dolls. She makes men that are paper-thin, six neatly stacked paper men, stitched together and laid out side by side across her coffee table. Their hands string together and she inches them further apart. They do not touch. They are not relieved by touching.

She plays with their perfect limbs, returns their perfect smiles, they say all the right things and don't make a mess or leave her towels on the floor where shredded magazines lie discarded, torn away limbs and parts lie scattered, heads roll lose on pages pressed to the thighs of the before and after picture for a weight loss product. Nearby, a man with no torso picks his daughter up and swings her in a daisy field. Their bodies are light and warm with sunshine, she thinks.

And for a while her paper doll men are perfect, but then they fall apart. Their limbs come away in her hands and she has to be careful. Even when she presses them back together with glue and tape their heads and limbs pull apart. Paper dolls look perfect but they are not very warm, she thinks, they are also not very good company without their heads that fit in her palm like fragile shells. Nor can they fill the cold spaces near her feet, nor fill her hands that clutch around her duvet so she decides to recycle them, thrown in with empty wine bottles, shredded magazines and egg boxes. It is good to recycle, things pulled apart and put together,

packaged to create endless varieties. And there is greater comfort to be found in the arms of my duvet than in these paper dolls, she thinks, dumping the bag on the corner of the street.

The Mole

It appeared overnight, no bigger than a mole, brown and flat against her skin. She hardly noticed it at first but then it became raised, a little brown bump of flesh, and she could feel it rubbing against her shirt collar, hooking on the links of the silver chain she wore around her neck. Every few days she would stand in front of the mirror and cock her neck to look at it, her finger tracing over it. She quite liked it at first. It reminded her of a beauty spot, something sexy and flirty, something her boyfriend could trace his tongue over and nibble on while his hand made his way up her shirt and so she told herself to forget about it for a while, at least for the winter, hidden behind scarves and polar neck jerseys.

But that seemed to aggravate it. It started to itch and she spent a lot of time rubbing it under her forefinger and pinching it between the tips of her fingers. When she looked at it in the mirror she noticed that the shape had changed and that its colour was becoming speckled and darker in patches than before, like it was growing more attached to her. Friends warned her about it when they saw her and she flicked it nervously over cocktails and discussions of girth. She sipped on her daiquiri and thought of her parents, both dead from cancer, mother with half her face removed to get rid of the sun spots, father with blood red moles covering his back and neck, catching on his t-shirts, nicked by razors, spread across their bodies like a patchwork blanket.

They hadn't known any better, her father with his shirt off in the garden bent to the earth scratching leaves out of the drain while her mother tanned on the beach with baby oil dripping from her skin, cooking like meat in an oven, both dead with tubes for lungs, plastic pockets for breasts, inserted pipes for urethras and she promised herself she would watch it, wouldn't let it get to that while she fingered her straw nervously but she kept ignoring it and it grew a little bigger, a little rounder until one night her boyfriend joked that sucking on it was like sucking on a third nipple and the next day she made an appointment with a doctor to get it removed.

In the waiting room she sat with her neck hanging left so she could fiddle with it. On occasion she would mutter at it, sometimes fighting with it for possession of her skin and attention. People watched her with suspicion, their necks shifting to get a better look at her and at it, sometimes raising their eyebrows when they saw it, other times turning away out of politeness or in disbelief. A small child playing with a plastic train near her feet looked up and started crying and she jerked her feet at him nervously, holding her mole and muttering.

When the doctor saw her, he told her there was nothing he could do for her and recommended she see a specialist.

In his surgery, the specialist looked at it through a magnifying glass and muttered into her neck. He pinched it between his fingers and frowned before asking her if he could take a few pictures and a sample. He wasn't sure what it was, hoped it wasn't malignant but at that size and that shape there was no telling what it was and it wasn't like anything he'd seen before either. Then he took a camera out from his desk drawer, its lens as long as her forearm, and snapped off a few pictures of the mole before stashing the camera away in its drawer and dusting his hands off on his white lab coat.

Then he drew a long needle out from inside a plastic sheath and steadied himself to draw out some of the matter, to test it, he told her, find out exactly what we're dealing with. When she asked why he couldn't just cut it off and stitch her up he frowned, commenting on the vast network of veins that run through the neck, small and delicate but coursing with blood and nutrients that feed the brain, veins that spread throughout the body, that it could spread throughout her body, that it might have grown deeper into her skin, that its roots might spread deeper than either of them could tell from its speckled brown surface. Perhaps if she had come in sooner things would have been different. The specialist then injected the matter from her mole into a small clear test tube and told her he would call her in a few weeks with the results. In the meantime, he told her, she should make sure to stay out of the sun, and he edged her out the door and away.

For the next few weeks she did as she was told, keeping her neck covered with a silk scarf, soft and warm against her skin. She felt as though she was caring for the mole now, part by part becoming consumed by it, like she was waiting for a sleeping baby to wake up, and she slowly got used to sitting with her neck at an angle, tilted left to give it space and so she didn't aggravate it. She stopped her boyfriend from playing with it, no longer allowing him to flick it between his tongue and his teeth. He called her a bore and slept with his back facing her and she slept with her face turned to rest her cheek almost against her collarbone.

It was a Tuesday when the specialist called. She turned her back on her boyfriend to answer the phone and did not see him turn and walk out, the door slamming shut behind him. Instead she touched up her makeup, a little bit of powder for the mole and then headed out after him, turning left where he turned right and making her way to the specialist's office.

Inside the surgery the specialist sat her down and thanked her for coming in. He began to speak then stopped, mentioning to her that it would perhaps be better if he simply showed her what he had found, his fingers picking the edges of the envelope open before passing her the file.

She held it in her hand before opening it, working the contents out slowly, turning the pictures to hold them to her face to see the thing there magnified many times more than could be seen by the human eye and she gasped at the resemblance, at the small brown hairs growing in curls from its round surface, at the button nose just the same as her mother had, at the clear blue eyes, open and watchful, just like her father's.

When Father Left

We played it as a game. We went down in wellingtons wearing rain coats and swooshed the buckets through the water, dripping our shoes up the stairs and along the corridor down the kitchen sink. We wondered how many buckets filled the basement and we played it as a game, counting and guessing, and we guessed at who would be the better guesser as we dripped up and down the stairs.

I was quicker to carry, bigger to hold the swing of the handle and I hustled him as he dragged his bucket past the bookshelf and under the kitchen table. His wellingtons were buckets too and the water spilt from both to the floor, too little down the kitchen sink and mother rushed at him with the thick handle of her broom. There was nothing to stop the snow coming through the basement window and mother dunked her broom into the end of the icy water that lapped the steps and passed us buckets to fetch the water out the pool and down the kitchen sink.

So we played it as a game but we grew tired of counting and instead we took the fish father would have brought in before the ice settled over the pond and dropped them in the water pooling down inside the basement. The handles of our buckets knocked together as they floated past our feet and we dipped wide mouthed nets in and scooped the fish up and into the buckets that drifted apart. Then there was just the lapping of water against the walls, against our plastic shins and the flapping of fish from the pond to the pool.

Father told us that fish grow from things that live under rocks, lumping-jumping green and brown bits growing mould that slipped between our fingers when we tried to catch them. Not so much yet, so instead we scooped them up with teacups to keep under our beds. Then grown big, striped and swimming, they were too hard to hold. Their scales caught the pale show of colours in the snow and father gave us nets and knelt beside us by the pond before going on the road that curves past the windmills. Once, before the pond froze over, we went with father past the curve in the road that never changes and we drove it counting windmills. It took us six windmills there and back to get from home and to return to it.

We went with father to buy us nets to catch the fish he always caught but wouldn't when he left us. Before, father caught the fish and held them between his weaved string fingers and brought them inside like he was carrying them in a basket and dropped them in the tank where they could swim through winter without freezing. And then mother warmed his hands

between hers like she was warming hers by a fire and we wondered at the glow of them. Before, father put plastic sheets to the windows where the snow melted through so it never pooled in water around our shins or filled buckets down the kitchen sink.

That was before my brother dragged his bucket under the kitchen table and wanted to know why father had left the fish and windows forgotten, before mother padded down the corridor to cry. The fire went out and father drove the road that curved and forgot to count the windmills. Father drove the road that curved and forgot.

But before fish flapped around the basement floor, before father went past the curve of the road, there was nothing much to play with but the snow and we could not play much more other than to make shapes in it and throw it at the windows, at the grey trunk of the naked tree that was no good for climbing.

Mother told us not to climb the tree because the trunk was rotten, there was a hole where a raccoon lived and it had eaten at the flaking trunk. We watched it when the leaves were red and falling, seated on the dead grass that pinched our skin through pants and socks. Not so much yet, we sat and watched it gather and fatten in the tree until the snow fell and it snuck into the hole that housed it, quiet still and watchful there like we who watched it with the hope of catching it and bringing it in for winter.

He wanted to name it coon so we called it coon when father asked us what we were chasing and mother rapped her broom against our shins. We watched coon scurrying, seated on the thin branches near breaking and we told coon we wanted to walk it on a leash around the garden twice and mother padded around on the wooden floor creaking with the cold beating the ice from the bed linen, warning us not to climb the tree, to come away from coon before the tree came away from the earth and down on us, the thick handle of her broom beating the ice against the skin of the linen and we winced at the cold coming through our pants and at the soft padding feet of mother who went up and down the corridor beating the air with her broom.

So we hid from mother and her padding feet and played it as a game to see how far we could climb, to see how far we could stick our fingers into the wooden cave of the tree outside without getting our fingers bit or our bones broken. We went higher and higher when mother was resting her padded feet and the water lapped against her dreams to calm her. We were as quiet as the snow falling and we climbed higher and higher and rested our toes in the hollows

of the dying tree. From up there we could see the fish swimming round and round the pond busy icing and he wondered if it was time yet to get our nets to catch them and we looked down the road where our father left us and walked it with our fingers counting windmills.

With our fingers counting the fish that swam around below us. They thrashed hard like wooden spoons against our palms, hard like wooden spoons thrash against our thighs, and from behind the frosted window mother told us not to catch the fish but in the winter time when the pond begins to freeze over like father always did. Not so much yet, she spoke through the window, not so much yet, still wait awhile, still the falling leaves from the trees crack the ice that begins to run all over. The knuckles of her broom cracked against the window and she shook her head at us, steam rising past her head from the running water that filled the sink. When father left water ran from her head and caught in puddles in her hands held to her face like fishing nets to catch the fall and keep it.

And she kept her loneliness too in the padding of her socks, like coon kept its life in the hollow of the grey tree trunk. We watched both fatten over the winter. We watched both stay more and more inside but mother never hit coon with the thick handle of her broom and mother never put her elbows deep into coon's hole like she did into the water or like she did into the snow to fetch us where the branches fell and cracked on us when the tree died.

Mother sometimes put her elbows to her knees and her head into her hands to cry. Coon sometimes made small cries from the hole of his home when we put our feet inside to climb the snapping branches. Coon sometimes watched with black eyes as we bent with nets to catch the fish father left behind and in this coon was quite like mother and mother quite like coon and so he told mother from the tree that mother was like coon and mother cracked at us from behind the frosted window but she did not come to reach us. Then we saw coon rush from his hole and across the snow with padded feet and we flew out to chase him. We landed in the snow and arms and legs cracked and fell with heavy branches and mother padded her feet through the snow with her elbows around her head, her mouth gaping open and shut like the fish that flapped in our buckets.

The biggest fish was too big for the net and kept falling out to rush past our plastic shins as we screeched like ice cracking with the water filling our wellingtons and we jumped our feet to stop the fish from nipping at our toes inside. We could not hear mother then, her feet wrapped twice in socks as she padded along the corridor, up and down, not until her socks

were wet from our dripping and then she patted the floor and her tongue knocked against her palate and we heard her tapping against the walls with the thick handle of her broom.

But she could not come to reach us because I was in her wellingtons that sat like buckets around my feet. He was wearing father's wellingtons that father left behind and they sat so big he floated on his feet like boats across the water. The fish swam round and round against his ankles but mother wanted the fish back in the pond and she tried to catch our skin between the feathers of her broom.

There were four fish that swam around the pond and plopped into our nets once we caught them but there were only three now swimming round and round the buckets floating on the basement floor and mother, wet up to her elbows with the water, searched the pool for the fish too fat to fit in the net father left behind. Then mother put her face to the water pool and cried. We stood at the top of the stairs and held coon in our hands. We had tamed him with the winter. He had thawed to us like the snow that pooled and froze mother inside and we held him out to mother then like the fourth fish lost then found that winter.

Ma

Inside the shutters fall with the night from their railings and I listen with my head against the glass to the sounds that blow along the earth. I listen constantly for the sound of pa coming through the gate and for his feet along the stoep and I tighten the shutters to the dark and to the crickets clawing at their wings and to their chirping rushed by the wind through the stalks of dry grass past the glass in the windows.

I think then to stop to think of pa and think instead of the crickets caught and kept in our palms when our hands were small enough to fit between the cracks of the boarded walls and of our hands still quick enough to catch the jumping crickets, of how we pushed their thin breaking legs and brittle bodies through the walls to jump and crawl and land in slippers and behind the cups ma reached to pour her rooibos tea inside. One flew at ma's face and she screamed the plague was coming, dropped her teacups in precious pieces around her feet and ran screaming as we laughed in stitches through the cracks in the kitchen wall.

That night locusts crawled between the sheets of our beds and we huddled together on the floor with flashlights praying to the lord for forgiveness, praying all the while hearing the shells of locusts crawl across the floor, feeling their casing between our toes, many feet over the bare reaching skin of our hands, scattering against our prayers that left our lips as quick as the locusts came and went across us.

Then we thought ma had put those locusts there, ma who knew we feared the lord, but ma was too soft to handle the leaping legs of locusts, her hands too busy reaching to wash or wipe or move the things that kept us there but we looked at ma that night and feared the lord and saw ma's face tired and strained picking up the shattered pieces of porcelain from behind the door and we never again let crickets go loose through the cracks in the walls. Instead we prayed forgiveness from the lord and for ma and for the locusts in our bedding. Fat and armoured their wings clipped our faces and we found them in our room for days after, ripped wings pinched under bed posts, caught in jars gasping in the sun along the windowsill, and we slept with our shins against our chests for days after, praying each night for forgiveness from the lord.

Back then we never stopped still long enough to see the beauty of a locust, its wings kept closed to the colours hidden there. Watch a locust when it flies, watch the colours that lift from its wings closer to a rainbow reaching in pinks and yellows and purples like the quick

beating wings of a bird trapped and kept in jars gasping in the sun, trapped with those colours hidden and only seen in flight. We would have seen those colours if we had loosened the lid to lift it and to let the locusts fly but we kept them like we kept ma and her colours hidden, or maybe like ma kept her colours hidden until she was left still and gasping with her wings beating death at her side.

Back then those cracks were big enough for things bigger than crickets to fit through and I boarded up the cracks when I had to, boarded up the open frames of windows and fixed the handles on the doors that kept pulling apart in the wind. It was as though the house came apart like we came apart that night, whining in the wind that never stilled. There was nothing to stop it and the earth quivered round the house hunched worn and grey against the thick trunks of the kokerboom trees, held up by branches that gave no shade, proud and thick with only the ears of aloe leaves sprouting like warts and blades along their skin.

The shade came instead from the thick homes of weavers that stitched thin stalks of dry grass into nests. They chattered constantly, metallic against the creaking of the windmill that never stilled. The sounds were all metallic, their chicker-chicker song, the chip-chip contact calls of the crickets, the creak of windmills turning and those sounds that came through the cracks in the wall, the sound of ma when pa was gone but more when pa was present. We couldn't reach ma in the night to fetch her from pa and from her whining, the night rushing between us then like water, that same night then now vague and distant, quiet but for the wind that wakes me, quiet but for when in the night things whine and I climb from my bed to still me, to remind myself of me. Sometimes I still myself in waking and hold myself to me, back to sleep, rocking the wind and chair on the stoep built to sit above the sand, above the snakes that burrow, and I wrap myself in the thick warmth of wool knitted by the fireside and think of ma.

I think of what it was to be our mother and of what it must be to be a mother at all, with ma's confinement and our constant need that crippled her. We sought to touch her constantly, clamoured around her bed when she lay resting, pushed our necks against her neck, our noses behind her ears and in the hollows of her collarbones, our heads against her stomach to sleep with small fingers searching for her body. Ma smelt of love to me but a love that is different when you are young and when you are grown.

When I was grown I saw ma's young love for me in the way she loved my brother, gentle and constant like a stream. She wanted nothing to reach him and he floated on his back along that

constant stream of ma and I loved him in the same way ma loved a young me because it was from her that I learned to love. He wouldn't grow knowing our mother's love but I did, I caught her change, her hesitation, and although ma held it she could not look at me, she kept her eyes to the sky when pa first touched me and I felt her regret like hunger then. She wouldn't stop him even when she tried and it was as if she knew that, as if she knew what was coming because she couldn't bring herself to look on me for long and instead let her love pass over her shoulder toward me across the kitchen table and the image of my mother in my mind began to grow clearer as I grew older, the pale quiver of a flower growing paler in the sun.

But I seldom think of pa other than to look at the kokerbooms and think how pa was the same, storing liquid in his trunk, thriving even when the land dried out in drought. Pa came and went once between ma and me and luckily only to me when I was old enough to understand the kind of man pa was and hate him for it. He stood on the stoep slanting when I came out from behind the shadows of the kokerbooms, my dress frayed and my belt undone carried in my hand. He came home that night like he knew to expect something, his slanted eyes searching me and ma, but he couldn't have expected what happened, none of us could, not me or ma, definitely not pa, maybe the boy knew, maybe that was why he ran that night without ever looking back.

The boy who came in through the gate with pa, sitting on the back of pa's bakkie, with a straw hat on his head and his arms thick like the blades of an ax. I remember his teeth shone white and I thought how white white looks against black, only he wasn't black, more of a muddied brown, like burnt sweet sugar melting from the back of pa's bakkie in the heat of the sun. He came like sweet icing over the land to help pa work the farm, to help him load the sheep to take to town for slaughter. Pa told us he was going to fetch a boy from town and when the gate swung open and we came to see who'd come I felt the heat rush over my face and pass like something baking warm inside me, in the pit of me and I saw the boy completely past the rim of his hat, pa driving around the trees to the barn.

We followed pa running across the dry earth kicking dust in the air and I ran thinking quickly of ma but not stopping to look back to see her face in the window, hands red and wrung out around cotton towels in the kitchen, telling me to act a lady, telling me I wasn't a girl anymore. Instead I ran through the sand past the quiver of kokerboom trees, yelping and rearing like a horse to the barn. I was sixteen then and I wore ma's old clothes baggy on my

arms, too big past my knees, pants tied tight with pa's belts to keep them from falling. We kicked the chickens out the way and their calls rang around our ears as we ran and my brother stopped to pick one up, held it in the soft flanks under its feathers and flew with it above his head, its wings beating around his ears as we yelped like cowboys chasing feathered headdresses through the dust and to the barn.

We stood around the wooden fence on beams and watched them, pa with his voice kept low as he talked to him and pa's thumb rubbing the barrel of his gun tucked into his pants. Pa looked at us and swayed a little, his eyes slanted on us and then on the boy loading the sheep into the bakkie. I felt the heat rush from me again in waves like the sunlight lifting dust through the kitchen window and it caught the boy's eye and his eyes caught mine from underneath that straw hat and I crumpled in my baggy clothes against the wooden fence. Pa looked at me with eyes that dripped with drink and walked back toward his bakkie, drove in circles of dust through the gate and down the road, that straw hat bouncing with the bumps and holes of the road and away.

It was days later when pa returned, him and the boy, from where we didn't know. We knew better than to ask and we sat still instead as he entered through the kitchen door. We didn't greet him, just kept looking down at our toes curled around the chairs and tightened our toes when ma asked him where the boy would stay. Pa slanted his eyes at her and made his way to the wooden cabinet on the wall and opened the doors that squeaked as they spread. That was pa's cupboard, each sip of the liquid carefully measured by the sting of pa's mouth that winced and pulled apart like painful smiling. Ma never lifted those bottles, not even to clean them, that cupboard never squeaked unless pa was opening it and once it was opened it never shut till pa shut it before leaving.

Ma stood up and played with the bow of her apron, she stood between pa and the door and asked pa again where the boy would stay and pa rocked like a swinging ax and pinched his hands against my neck in gentle teasing. I felt my shoulders flinch and took my brother's hand in mine, his fingers beating like a bird's tiny heart, and I stilled my shoulders to pa's fingers still tracing the bends of my neck, tracing the hairs standing up when he laughed a wet liquid laugh and bent his breath behind my ear to kiss me. Ma shuddered, I felt her shudder because the table shuddered and the windows shook loose and the kokerboom trees quivered against the walls and everything seemed to unravel very quickly, very quickly come away

before becoming silent and still again, just ma's faint shuddering like the breeze of pa against my neck and the tiny heartbeat of my brother beating in the palm of my hand.

I held his hand as we wandered to climb on rocks, walked with the dry grass scratching our legs. We were always with the land, its dry earth that sat on us like skin, and we sat and watched the clouds turn purple like the sky was bruising with the storm and wind that came across the earth in waves, or to watch the sunsets that spread across the sky. We sat and watched the meerkat pop like moles from their burrows to watch for the shiver of pale brown and orange skin shed between the grass like ma always told us to, to watch for snakes, hanging from the low branches of the kokerbooms to pick amongst the singing weavers, their chicker-chicker song becoming more with the danger of the snake, its hood spread in rage and rattle amongst the branches. We sat with the meerkat sentinels of the snake and once we saw them fight. They spun on the earth like coils around one another, like pa around ma, his hood spread, his mouth spitting venom like the snake until the meerkat lay broken and still like ma on the stoep and we ran back to the house to tell ma and I held my brother against my chest like ma always did and rocked him.

*

I am rocked still by the earth, my bones brown and pale like the dust, the gentle pressure of the sky on my skin, its warmth by day and its power by night, held by the stars burning through the night toward me and I cannot stop to leave the hunched grey house so instead I sit and rock the wind and the chair on the stoep and watch the windmill turn its tricks. I watched it spinning as I lay on my back in the shade of the kokerboom trees, the first time was in the shade of the kokerboom trees, on the loose earth that quivered and shook and waited to settle disturbed in pleasure.

Then the boy was no longer a silhouette that lived in the shadows of the trees or fetched the sheep from the barn, he was not a star burning where I couldn't reach him, his tongue moving in a language I could not understand, he was flesh and man who smelt of earth and clay and his scent clung to the air around him and to me, the wet popping trace of my lips as I shook and left spit in the dirt. Pa had taken the bakkie, gone for days again without anyone knowing where, at first we felt mother tense when he left, padding around the kitchen and on the stoep wrestling bleached white sheets from the line, catching on the steel hooks that the shrikes hung death from, picking the flesh from off the sheets looking out past the gate for pa.

Ma was tense we wouldn't live without pa, wouldn't manage to keep the farm if pa left and never returned but when I got older we didn't tense because pa left, we tensed because we thought he might return and mother shot her head back and forward, nervous like she was living with her neck strung out against the blade of a knife. When pa left we felt our freedom and we ran and sometimes ma smiled rising downward and sinking upward in her chair on the stoep, sometimes ma laughed and told us stories of her before pa and she held my hand and rubbed it soft between her fingers and the creases of her skirt and in those moments ma loved me completely with a love free of pa.

Free to walk out past the windmill into the shade of the kokerbooms, along the shadows of the house and into the pale night where the stars spread out awake before me, out past the windmill over the fence. He was out in the air that night, the soft warmth of the evening brought him out like a black sweet mist across the dry earth and he came near to me, circled me in his shadow and I felt my skin fraying against my baggy dress to reach him, climbed over the beams and walked with him back into the cover of the kokerboom trees and felt myself come away.

I put my hands to his chest under the pale fabric of his shirt lifted past his head to drop limp in my wrist, my face into his skin. He pushed against me and there was just our breathing and the chicker-chicker song of the weavers soothed still in their nests and him slipping the frayed dress past my shoulders to the ground, our bodies on the loose earth, stomach to stomach, hips knocking against his hands lowered to pull his jeans away and inside me a sting that gave way to pleasure charged through him and he pushed against me in shudders and I breathed in the musk of him so strong it lifted my head amongst the stars where I cradled myself against the sleeping moon and clung to him.

Scent ran from him clear and sweet like sugar water and I licked my lips for the taste of him, my insides stitched, pulled in until just the seams of my lips were popping out like stuffing, everything else drawn in tight with him. He came then and I came after, after he had left already, his jeans pulled on tight across his thighs and his pale vest over his head in running and I curled myself around in dust and snapped off branches, pushed my fingers through the dry leaves that crunched like eyelids from the too-bright sun and scrambled myself up in bits of clothing and feeling to make sense of it all. That was the first time, the second time for me wouldn't be sweet, more like the taste of lead in my mouth, salt wet lips from my tears.

A time with pa who caught the quiet blush of woman in my cheeks and wiped the drool from his smile. With pa who asked me first with his eyes if I had seen the boy and then with his body raised above me, the wide hood of his neck spread with drink and spit like venom in my face to rattle the stoep before wrapping his hands around my neck to stop my cries with the press of his thumb into my throat. That was the second time, the first with the boy, the second time with pa, the second on the stoep built to sit above the sand, above the snakes that burrow, bent forward across the wooden beams that cut into my hips and pa's wet breath against my ear, pain like teeth tearing me.

But better that I didn't see pa, that instead I saw the earth quiver and the kokerboom trees beat against one another in the wind. That night the sky was black and the rain cut against my hands held in pa's hands pressed against my chest. I tried to kick back like a horse but pa kicked my legs apart and held me there, tight between the beams and him, swollen and burning red like the spoke pa used to turn the fire and then I crumpled there, pressed my face against the cold wood of the stoep. I did not think pa, his face bled sweat and he mouthed his lips at me, metallic and hollowing, pushing me with his feet, his daughter mangled and crumpled there like a dog on the stoep, desperate and howling and ma in her nightgown, fumbling with the door, cursing and swearing at pa when I couldn't.

Ma in her nightgown padding softly around the kitchen and the house completely still, the moon making its crossing through the stars and me and ma on the couch by the fire, wrapped with ma like a blanket and her soft and smelling like all seasons coming together on her skin. Gentle ma who carried me, gentle ma who stitched my hems, who picked my hems past my calves caught on thorns and the scratching grass, gentle ma who filled our baths and washed our backs and cradled us, gentle ma who I could not rise to stop. I could not fit back inside myself to rise up and stop ma coming through the door at pa and I could not rise to run. Try it to run, to rise and fit inside yourself lying crumpled on the stoep, to run to ma to stop her coming through the door at pa.

I do not try to picture it but ma came at pa and pa at ma like coils on the stoep and I heard ma's bones break, pa on top of her beating her with his fists, her face bursting open like a rind against the stoep and then pa's deep breathing, the stutter and the wheeze, then nothing. Pa ran then, quick like a snake across the dry earth and through the gate and away. We never saw pa or the boy again, the boy gone through the gate before pa, pa gone through the gate after ma and me lying crumpled on the stoep. It was easier then to move me, to lift my head

and crawl to ma and rest her broken head in my lap run red with her bleeding. It was easier than to howl and scream at pa and at me and it was easier then to forget to breathe, it was as though the house and land and silence forgot how to breathe then but for my brother who stood gently pawing at the door with his sobbing.

I think now of how I tended to him gently, rocked him still against my chest but I was not ma, buried in the sun where flowers spread far from the house and from the kokerboom trees that drink the pale earth dry. I was not his ma then where I like to think of ma now, of ma gone from here, free of her love for pa, free even of her love for me, free to be in a constant stream of ma, carried by the earth away from me and pa, enough for me. I cradled him, I scrubbed the stoep and then I stayed, simply, spread out like the earth around the house, hunched worn and grey against the thick trunks of the kokerboom trees.

The Diviner

She watches her daughter playing in the garden, dust on her feet from the red earth sloping in hills toward the gravel road. The bushes are dry and thick and her daughter plays beside them, pushes sand between her fingers like small roots into the ground. She always stays near the house, close to the white wooden door that leads into the kitchen. The paint is beginning to peel and she runs through it past the potted plants that keep the door wide open, green growth of geraniums and orange flowers that tangle out onto the ground.

A calf lies sleeping tied to a pile of firewood. Chickens at her feet out in the cool of the day, what's left of it, clouds come in on the breeze. Her mother can see her from inside the shade of the house, close enough to call her in. She isn't far, she thinks, I can almost hear her scattering across the red earth with the chickens, the soft mew of the cow. If she calls I will hear her, she thinks, reach her in a few quick strides up and onto my hip to kiss her red grazed knees.

Safely a child should be able to play in the space outside their home, pick their way along its edges, as long as they never go too far. Neighbours help here too to watch playing children as their mothers walk down sloping hills to fetch water carried home on their heads. Her daughter runs beside her, catches the dripping water with her hair, shrieks as she shrinks to duck and run up the sloping hills home. She isn't far, thinks her mother, I can almost see her through the window built into the wall kept wide enough to hear her but the glass is steamed from the heat of pots left to cook and so she gets up, potato skins falling like leaves from the pleats of her skirt around her feet and under them as she walks toward the door. Her feet are bare and hard against the rocks and dirt standing outside on the steps to watch her child play.

She hears her neighbours call from their house close on the hill. She waves back, smiles between them while their eyes touch often on the little girl playing near her feet. They have a son, her neighbours tell her, they know what it is to have a young child, to watch and care for them. They miss it, they tell her smiling at her young daughter, they miss it now their son's grown up, almost a man, almost twenty, not a child anymore they tell her while they bounce her daughter on their bended knees, kneel beside her and smile as the little girl shows them flowers picked and put together in bunches tucked by gentle hands behind her ear, their son now a man who plays with feathers, whose bones knock against one another in bags from his belt.

Her neighbours living close and visited often. Often she would rest her elbows on the half-open door, the top left wide, the bottom shut to keep the dog in while they speak. She tries to remember its name, what she calls it when it comes sniffing at her steps jumping dust around the chickens playing with her daughter outside. Then she sees their son with it, walking along the hill sloping down toward the gravel road. He walks it out into the dense bushes that rise away from the village where the wind in the trees is quieter than the wind along the gravel road now turning pebbles and coming cold with the clouds along the breeze. She does not look too long to greet him when he passes, her eyes instead on the chickens picking for seeds and grass. She feels her tongue against her teeth, her hands and fingers against her skin, kept to her while he passes by. His eyes sit on her, then on her daughter who sits up quick to smile, to run to the boy who slows his walking, to quickly pat his dog before he walks down the hill and away. She stretches her hand out to her daughter telling her to come quickly away, come here.

Lucky, she thinks, she will remember the dog's name now, lucky, lucky for the moon full that night to light the gravel road, to light the sloping hills and the pathways through the bushes rising up to meet the moon bloated in the sky, hanging like an orb about to burst and leak white paint, dripping in rivers down the hills, down the sloping gravel paths, leaking down her throat opened up to cry.

They found white paint poured thick and dripping down her throat, lucky.

She sees the arms of her daughter begin to shiver in the cool of the day, what's left of it, and she turns quickly to go inside to fetch her something warm to wear, to cover her ears from the fingers of the wind, to pull across her round child's belly. She leaves her daughter playing seated on the red earth in the space between the houses, the distant barking and her child's soft laughter coming quietly through the kitchen door, padding softly like steam against the windows where potatoes boil and shake the steel lids of pots. She thinks of her daughter seated on the red earth, blue denim jeans and a pale pink t-shirt stitched in patterns of glittered thread. She lifts small clothes from beside her bed and turns to listen for her, turns to watch her child playing between the houses, a jersey held open in her hands. She isn't far, she thinks, I can almost hear her, almost, she thinks, heading quickly with a mother's quick strides toward and out the kitchen door.

Almost.

But her daughter isn't where she left her seated on the red earth in the space between the houses, the chickens with their heads tucked in sleeping quietly near the cow, and so she starts right then to run the steps passed the peeling paint and geraniums lying tangled on the ground, across the space between the houses to knock against the neighbour's door shut to keep the dog inside, gone already with their son along the gravel path out into the bushes. She knocks and calls to them inside, have you seen my child, but they open the door just to turn her from it and say, we're painting, bristles white and dripping wet, we're painting. So she goes to search the gravel road, calling her daughter, her small jersey held open to the air.

The full moon lights the paths they walk to search for the little girl, her mother calling her, a pale wail on the wind between the trees and under bushes where she thinks of her child's small hands digging roots into the ground. I told her to stay close, she tells the men who come to help her look, she never goes too far, always stays where I can see her, where she can hear me call. She tries not to think of her child's small hands growing instead like stems from the earth, watered by the heavy clouds that wet the air to make mud of the gravel road she ran down first to look and call her daughter's name to find her when she wasn't in the garden.

Lucky, they tell her, lucky for the moon full and white to light the ground but she feels its bloated presence hanging from the sky like a curse on her and she sits on the steps leading into the kitchen and buries her face into the smell of her daughter to cry when they find her hidden in the bushes limp and cold. She wants to hold her child's fingers warm inside her own but she cannot, her child's palm cut empty like a stem having lost its bloom, her child's chest cut open to let the cold air inside. Her child is missing her heart, her mother's heart and her own.

Almost, she thinks, her daughter's still face held gently to her chest, almost.

And whose heart is left to suffer this? Her child's flesh is soft and vulnerable, it tears and bleeds onto the hands of men who pick her up to bring her to their table, it stretches and bends as they pull it apart to look inside and peel back her suffering. The little girl is gone and just her mother's flesh remains, eyelids pressed against her palms to still her gentle shuddering, her suffering a constant feeling living in her skin until her flesh grows old sitting on the kitchen steps thinking almost, how close, how they found white paint poured thick and dripping down her child's throat, lucky.

Service

The soft lull of dripping water reaches her endlessly into sleep as she stands and washes the dishes, the drizzle of the kettle steam tapping the stove plate she's left on, distracted and diffused by soapy water rinsed in the sink over plates and cups from dinner stacked but never washed in piles past her shoulders hunched from standing, tired from stirring and folding and stitched in knots around her neck. Her nightgown is pink with pale lace past her knees where skin stretches and gathers tucked into the tight elastic band of her socks cradled warm around her toes that spread flat like clothes under the weight of a steel iron. She is married to have a house and a kitchen sink to stand over and the lover's arms of her fridge to reach in cold fingers round her hips bending her down to scrub it out when things gather in its corners and she hums with it as it hums her endlessly into sleep with the bright light of the bulb above her like the one inside it flicking on and off to keep her seeing the dishes swirling round and round the kitchen sink and the soap turning down the drain with strands of meat and beans and potato skins. She breathes in steam and tired hands against her face pressed to wipe her dripping nose and the hair falling from her face so that she breathes in soap and steam and lemon and does not smell the plate turning hot or smell the drip of food turning brown then black against the plate like the dry bristles of her broom kept in the cupboard and between her fingers now sweeping patterns on the kitchen floor before she goes to bed. She sweeps in straight lines like the lines she cuts to prepare the food they eat as they stack their stomachs against the table and sweep their plates clean with their tongues and rinse their mouths with water and fold their hands across their laps and iron out their napkins over their thighs as they stir in their seats for their supper cooked and served.

Perennial

Plants lean across one another to touch the sunlight where they grow along the windowsill and I water them with care to see them bloom the subtle things that grow inside them until they reach out with colour and I stroke their petals gently and water them to keep their company in my kitchen where I sit until the winter creeps under the door and through the grates along the wall and I miss the sun curled around the fireplace licking my sorrow like a paw and I imagine the shutting down of things that comes with living and my skin tired and wearing the weather as I stand in red autumn leaves and wrinkles spread across my skin like stalks that knock against the windows to wake me and I slip away into dreaming and my skin slips away from me grainy under my nails to settle on the couch and I dust it onto the floor where dust lies forgotten and waits for me to settle when I sleep and clings to the wings of moths that flap around my face at night to settle into the creases of my skin and I remember it once moist like earth under my feet in the garden playing with the air in somersaults behind the washing line and the shade of the Eugenia tree that drops pink berries on the grass crushed under my feet as I walked my footprints up the garden wall and the grass that grows again around my ankles and the flowers that weave plaits around my wrists and in the bends of my knees and elbows where petals bloom and spread and it is past noon when sunlight comes again in through the kitchen window and I stand with my bare feet on the tiles and warm them and I pour water in the pots of plants along the windowsill that spring.

To My Mother

I will miss you. In my mind I imagine something complete where I'm going and I suppose then I couldn't think to miss you, but me, sitting here now, would miss you because I love you. I wrote once in something that a mother smelt of seasons coming together on her skin because you smell of seasons, you smell like spring come together with winter, my favourite season, wet and gentle like rain to nourish where sun has dried and made things crack. You filled there for me without hesitation, but I hesitate. You wouldn't understand, you are too gentle, too kind, too beautiful, you are who I would want to be if I could be I would be you, but I hesitate because I am not sure I can be, like this thing pressing at me is pressing me in toward myself, curling me back around myself until I simply cease to be. If you knew where or what this meant, if you had the chance to hold me to your chest that smells like summer, your hands like the little waves I let to touch my toes, you against me like that purple mountain out there cased in shadows that stir me, what would you say, what things would you talk about to keep me? Perhaps the question of what could be and what I might miss but I miss so much already living my life in the past more and more, thinking of what has been and of where I've come. I think of the future more with fear, the past with regret, the future with a fear of what it might lack and of what I might not be able to manage. I seldom live in the present anyway so the fear of what I might miss is not so much a fear as it is an acknowledgment of a debt left unpaid. I notice now that things don't scare me in the same way, I find myself driven by curiosity that moves me away in a different direction, a curiosity of what is out there, whether it is like shutting your eyes, blocking your ears, holding your breath to live? I feel myself pulled toward something already, like something tied to me and I don't really understand it, this thing that takes me further from myself each night I sleep. I fall asleep and hold myself to me and think that when I wake up everything will be better and that the sun that comes through my curtains will bring me something like the thing it brings the birds or the flowers or the leaves that open up. Even the soil bends to the sun. I suppose we all want to be a little bit like the sun, we want things to bend to us, we want to hope that things somehow come and turn and revolve some way around us or at least we want to think they do and that keeps us, even in the slightest way, we think we matter, we think things around us would stop somehow to matter in the same way if we just disappeared but I'm not so sure they would, would you stop, to think, to live? For me life is life without death, death is just a thing plainly said, and there are times I want to continue on this thing that calls itself living, to become someone or something on a path somewhere but really I just resent myself

living, I stand on the edge of a pure white dune with my head in the grey clouds of the ocean and my toes digging into the sand and my chest swelling with life and possibility and think about death, how the clouds remind me of death, how things drown in the sea, of how I might drown in the sea if I simply lay on my back where the tide washes past my toes, up past my knees, behind the curves of my thighs and in the cracks of my hands that crumple sand between my fingers to bend and push against the damp of dying and the water that washes past me into the ocean and I would float there on my back until the thing that kept me floating realised where I am and stopped a while to raise its head above the white of the sea to say stop, simply stop, and then I would drown there, in the middle of the ocean, content with what I have, wanting nothing, leaving you just a little sooner than you would have left me, just a little sooner and no more.

Plants and Animals

I wake in the middle of the night because sand is pushing into my skin, it scratches against me when I turn, along the bare skin of my calves and into my arms spread flat beside me. When I sleep again I dream that I am floating on my back under the stars before a wave comes up behind to lift me, its strength to move me at its will. First it floats me up then turns on me, wrapping around me like fabric and pulling me deep down into its throat. My feet kick back against the water and finally I am spat forward and out, washed up on shore covered in sand. Then I watch my body, I can see it and I am inside it but I cannot control it and I watch it dig itself deeper into the sand until it is buried.

When I look up I see the stars again above me, this time watching me with eyes first open then slowly shut, one by one until the sky is as black as the wave under water. My body is buried but my head is still out above the sand watching the waves coming in, creeping closer like silver snakes toward me and I remember how I got there. I remember all the details of being swallowed by the sea and of kicking back against the waves and I know where I am and who I am and so I know I must be awake but I cannot move, I cannot speak, my lips won't come apart and I cannot wriggle free of the sand pulling on me and so I think instead I must be dreaming, I think that all I need is to wake up and so I shut my eyes to shout into my mind that I am dreaming and when I wake up I wake to find myself asleep again in my bed, looking up at the ceiling but with sand under my fingers, pushing into my skin, scratching against me when I turn, along the bare skin of my calves and into my arms spread flat beside me.

For a moment I am happy to feel my body as my own again and I open my lips to breathe only for sand to begin to fill my mouth, it sits like clay under my tongue and I can no longer separate my lips to scream. When finally I will my tongue to move and work it like a wet finger out between my lips I feel it become a hand that pulls my face back, my mouth wide open and my lips apart to swallow the sand pouring down my throat and I cannot move from fear and I cannot stop the sand filling my lungs and I cannot move my arms to lift my hands to grab the fingers pulling my lips apart to stop them because my hands are already on my face, pulling my lips apart, pulling my mouth wider open to make space for the sand pouring into me and when I finally wake up I find myself limp, my body wet and covered in sand and my limbs aching from kicking and thrashing in the night yet I am relieved and cry out when I turn to see the sunlight coming under the curtains.

When I move my jaw to yawn I feel the throb of it where I clenched the muscles in my face all night to either scream or keep my lips shut tight and I wonder if I did scream at all during the night. Getting up I feel the sand again between my toes and when I walk toward the window to open the curtains I leave footprints in the carpet. I cannot see the sun and I wonder where in the sky it might have risen while I slept but I can feel its heat coming through the glass to warm my skin, to dry the sweat and water that has made my skin into mud and I stand awhile and rest my arms on the windowsill looking out into the garden. Nothing grows but weeds between the pots and I think again of the sand, that it is not fertile, not moist enough to grow the bulbs of things I've planted. Then I move to make my bed and pull the sheets away and shake the duvet out and sand lifts like dust into the air, catches the light of the sun coming through the window to fall in pink, white, blue, purple like the fragments of a broken diamond before it settles again. I hit the edges of the pillow against my shins and I pour the sand that has gathered in its creases out and onto the carpet near my feet and make patterns with my toes.

I lie awhile beside the stream of sand that becomes a flowing river and I wade out into it, past my knees, past where my thighs meet to touch, the water rising past my belly and my fingertips trailing the surface of the water like the legs of an insect grown from my hands to fly and walk on water and they lift me there a moment on their wings that grow from my arms to hold me safely above the water, swim me along it and above it so that I can fly high enough to rest my lips upon its surface and kiss the gentle stream of water running past my pillow, past my sleeping head.

When I finally do wake up, I get dressed and rest my arms along the windowsill and look out at the weeds growing from my pots out in the garden. I remember how my skin is fertile in my dream and leave my house to buy more bulbs to plant and grow, wanting to wake and see bright flowers growing in my garden, their petals turned to the sun.

When I return home I try instead to plant the bulbs not in the garden but in the moist sand of my skin. I dig my fingers deeper past my surface and sprinkle water on my skin and dig the roots and bulbs into the cracks between my elbows, in the bends of my knees, in the gentle slope of my belly but they never take, their roots crumble and crack to leave small gauges and holes that dent me. The only things that take are weeds that grow deeper into my skin and I can feel them twist between the bones and sinew of my body, around my veins to constrict the flow of blood and oxygen to my skin and heart. I tell myself quietly in my mind that

things will grow, that things will take, that I am awake and I touch my body and my surface and I know its depths and I am not afraid.

When I look finally into the mirror to trim the weeds growing from my skin I see my reflection. Brittle white stems grow out from my ears and nose and sand gathers in the corners of my mouth, pushes out between my eyelids when I blink. My skin begins to crack, long harsh lines drawn into my features set against my face in stone. I try to pull the weeds out but they will not loosen from my skin and so instead I cut them away and throw them in the bin under the sink where they spread like vines up along the walls and flowers begin to bloom hands from the vines, the petals opening up in fingers that reach for me.

I get undressed and step into the shower, hurrying to wet my skin to stop it from drying and falling from my bones to make way for the brittle roots of weeds and I am relieved for a moment by the feel of water on my skin and I run my hands over my naked body and dig my fingertips into the deep cracks of my skin. The water steams and pours past my face and down my body and I scrub my knees and elbows and thighs vigorously, the searing pain turning to pleasure, the water becoming muddied and thick at my feet that grind sand past my face down the drain and I see myself fall to my knees and watch myself push the sand down the drain, and I cannot stop from taking the exfoliator to my face or stop from pressing it harder and harder against my skin to rub my body with hands no longer my own, hands reaching from the shower walls until only a brown pile of damp wet sand remains and from it pink, white, blue, purple flowers finally in bloom.

Blown

She is wearing flaxen wheat bound together in clumps by string. They form a belt that hangs from her middle. When she moves the wheat rustles and strokes against her thin wooden thighs and she keeps her back straight and her arms wide. She turns to settle and with her ever open eyes she feels him first inside her, blown through, and she bends with him, drips wet when he blows his fingers through her hair under the weight of a full and watching sky, him pulling the cold weather in closer with his hands, the rain, the fierce winds that summon clouds and boil wet storms in the cauldrons of the sky. He is naked, bare against her skin and she feels him completely and all at once as he comes right on her, hard like a god. As he blows, red butterflies fly up from under her and settle near her ears, they fall with their feelers to her eyelashes, rest gently on her collarbones and on her fingers long like fallen branches tucked into fists. More and more begin to fly around them, first gathering like smoke rising up in a channel from the earth to swirl and pull to push to come together again as hands, now burrowing through her flaxen wheat. And as he scrambles for her, clumps of straw fly amongst the butterflies like a fierce wind has picked them up, gathered them in its palm and blown them free.

The girl wanted to be a bird

The girl wanted to be a bird. She wanted to be frail and delicate but strong enough to fly. She loved the way they chatter, the way they travel in patterns and move with one another so they are never left completely behind.

People would say she eats like a bird and she would smile into a cracker, pick through bowls of seeds taking small bites like sips of water. She wanted a collarbone you could snap. She wanted legs you could fit your fist in between. You wanted to be so light you could toss her over your shoulder and run.

She wanted men to stare at her body bent over to untie her shoes, bent to drop her toes into the water rushing past under the trees, her shorts short and tight against her long thin legs to let men look at how they catch the summer, at the sun's sweet shine between her thighs to let its light pass through. She wanted men to pat her head, her arms, push their palms into her bony backside. She imagined their lips soft like fingertips on her skin while they called her things like my bird, little chicken, baby bird, goose.

The girl always wanted to be bird but she wasn't one, and it might have been her mother's fault.

Her mother's and Poncho's, her mother's young buck love.

Her mother sweet and Poncho smooth, rolling by in a Ford Escort with silver wings down its spine. He called it his Phoenix. He breathed hair from her neck with his tongue, asked her if she wanted to ride his Phoenix and they ended up wasted, bottles of beer hitting their heads as he slid her up and down the red leather seats of his car. That night their skin stuck together, it stuck to the seats, they tasted of malt and hops licked clean off her fingers uncurled from the steel door handle of his car.

Years later she could still taste it, still feel Poncho's warm slip, still feel her stomach kick with the floating fish shedding gills and growing lungs inside her. She slept in spare rooms while she grew her bump for company. They slept together alone until her stomach swelled up past her ankles and she had nowhere else to go but home, stood along the path to the farm house sloping forward in the shadow of the sun. She stood and watched the shadows deepen until they stayed.

And she stayed there too looking for ways to make it easier once it came.

The girl's mother always said it instead of her or the baby.

I don't know how to take care of it, can't you help me? I don't know what it wants, why won't it stop crying?

I can't take it anymore.

First though, it came.

Pink and swollen shut, dripping red it came. It looked pickled, preserved, like something floating in a glass jar catching the sunlight. Except it moved and grew.

It came crawling past her feet along the kitchen floor, dusty paw prints on the wood. The tiny hands would reach just past the curl of her socks pulled up past her ankles and she would feel its fingers reaching in against her skin. The first few times it happened reflex took her. She kicked. She shook her foot free. Then she heard the crying come like a squeal that carried up her skin like hooks to pull her down to pick the baby up again to pop a sugar block inside its mouth to shush it.

Shush-shush, and her mother held the moment to her briefly before bending down again. Its cheeks shone up at her, sweet with sugar, salty sweet to kiss. Her mother could taste it on her lips, feel her stomach kick, and so she swallowed hard and turned her back on it again to tell her mother, I don't know if I can take it anymore.

Unlucky the kid couldn't understand and so it kept coming back for more. It crawled then walked constantly at its mother's feet that bustled past and down the hallway out the door. She left the mess for her mother to clean up, bent back Grandma swooshing her broom down the passage, sweeping the kid and her crumbling sugar blocks gone.

What did Grandma know?

Liver spots and swigs of gin, that nothing should go wasted. It all adds up and piles on top of one another like old hands wrung around a broom, wrung around jar necks to open them, the insides peeled out and emptied down the kid's throat.

So the kid grew up knowing how to clean a plate.

She learnt that quick when she was young, maybe five or six, pushing peas around her plate rolling patterns with her fork. Picking peas up to pinch them into a pile of mashed potatoes,

she made a smile, then a frown, grew flowers with her fingers. Grandma sat sucking gin through a straw then through her teeth when she saw the kid playing with her food.

It happened quick then, like a fly squatter coming down to wake you. Grandma picked her up and dragged her by whatever she could reach, her nails curling like cats claws into her skin. It probably would have been enough to lock the kid in her room, but Grandma pulled her outside instead and as the rain smacked down against the windows, grandma smacked down on the kid inside the barn. She hit her with the brush she used to groom the horses, she hit her with the bridle, she hit with the rope she used to tie the barn door shut, and eventually the kid fell onto her knees into the wet food spilled around the trough.

You want to eat like a pig and mess your food around? Then you eat with the pigs till you know better than to do that again, and the kid saw the moonshine catch Grandma's liver-spotted hands as she swung the brush up then down, swung the bridle, swung the barn door shut and tied it, the rope wrapped so tight across her palm her skin grew red then white.

She left the kid there with her salty face getting grazed clean by the tongues of pigs. They nuzzled her face up from her chest and tickled her neck with their ears. In the cold their warm breath made her sleepy and she lay amongst them in the hay until grandma came to wake her up and walk her to her bed.

And so the kid grew up looking for sugar blocks to suck on and between her mother's coming and going she became a girl who loved to watch the birds fly by. Her mind wondered in the sky, between leaves and over branches as she walked past houses stacked along the path to reach the shops. When she was a kid Grandma always let her push the trolley, thinking it would be good for her to learn her way up and down the aisles. Instead, the kid trained for a dream she didn't have yet and she would run and push the wheels to spin them round and round, jump to push her ribs up and over the handle bar and spread her arms to fly.

But later as a girl she wouldn't fly but walk and fill the trolley with packets of orange chips that coated her skin like gloves, that filled the cupboards and covered the kitchen in what looked like crisp aluminium foil wall paper. The girl kept going back for more. She kept going on soft feet along the floor between the lounge and kitchen, between the house and the shops, dropping orange dust like a trail to find her there and back again.

To find her way out into the yard to sit amongst the chickens, to sit amongst the pigs that pushed their noses through the planks of their pen, against her palm to lick the orange dust

gone. She sat in the dirt and hay, in the smell of grains and damp grass. She pressed her nose through the pig pen, rubbed it wet, felt their bristles on her face.

Her mother now gone for good Grandma came to shoo her with her foot, grain from her old hand into the girl's folded lap, into the creases of skin until she wandered back along the orange path to sit again looking out at the birds flying by.

Better there than watching Grandma with the chickens, watching those old hands bend to snap their necks back. Grandma made her try once and she readied herself remembering how to pull the bird flat against the wooden board, a broom across its neck. One hand pushed the handle of the broom down, the other took its legs to snap but the girl's hands couldn't snap like that and the chicken kept trying to turn itself free under the handle of the broom until Grandma smacked her hands away and snapped the chicken still.

But better the chickens than the pigs, the soft nuzzle and pleading squeal from their noses against her palm before Grandma pushed them into a corner with a .22 caliber barrel to the forehead. One minute they'd be backed against the barn wall swinging their heads, trying to get their feet to find a way around and out, and the next they'd be limp and dead. Afterwards the girl would coax the other pigs out from inside their pens to let them sniff her, to let them know it wasn't her that'd done it, and she would stroke them each once behind the ears.

One the girl called Big Mumma and when Grandma slung her gun over her shoulder the girl would run behind her asking, Grandma, you won't kill Big Mumma, will you? Not Big Mumma who lets her lie with her head on her tummy. One night she made the sweetest sounds like she was singing to the moon.

The girl tried more than once to tell Grandma how they looked before she killed them, how their eyes looked just like her eyes when she looked into the mirror, but Grandma just kept raising and lowering their stiff bodies in and out of the scalding water, scraping up and down the skin to get the hairs off saying don't be stupid girl, a pigs nothing like you even if you might be something like a pig, and Grandma kept turning her spoon round and round inside the pot to scrape the meat in strands from its knuckles.

The house was always filled with the smell of it and the girl sat beside Grandma three times a day. Stews, pot roasts, bacon, sausages, crackling of hairs shaved close to the skin, chicken wings and legs coated in toasted oats and honey, deep-fried, dripping fat down their chins. It

leaked out between their fingers, their lips thick with grease and shine. The girl sucked on the bones, on the marrow, on the limp white fat cut loose from the skin.

She let nothing go to waste just like Grandma taught her until she doubled up in size.

On her way to school she kept her head in the sky as she walked down the street, pale dusty brown with brittle sticks for trees, the sun beating so hot it dissolved the shadows. Her shorts bunched between her thighs, chaffed against one another, caught every drip of sweat and absorbed it deeper and darker until her pants chocked wet with v-shapes like underwear. She carried her bag in front of her down the corridor, her head now bent to watch her shoes while the others stared and spoke in whispers behind her back. Whispers loud enough to reach her, to make the fine blonde hairs on her neck rise like bristles, to feel her eyelids pinch tight to keep the tears inside, and as she walked her chaffing shorts came like a beat to lead their chirping.

Over time the thin hair on top of her head, white blonde in the light coming through the window, began to moult, falling near her feet like silver worms between her toes. From her scalp new hair began to grow and she felt it prickle, watched it twist. It grew thick like whiskers in the folds of skin along her cheeks, past her ears and down the pickled flesh of her neck.

Her nose turned round and flat toward the roof as if a spider was pulling it by its thread, casting its fragile web around her as her face widened and spread and her ears crawled up her head, flat squirming leeches, then stopped and flapped loose against her skin like roots sprouting leaves from her skull, her swelling belly pressing her skin too tight against her dress.

Nothing shook the sight away. She tried to call out but her language gave way to squeals and grunts. She tried to stand but her stomach kept her stuck to the floor.

Down the hall Grandma heard a flapping through her gin and came bent-back down the corridor to see it lying there, kicking fat and squirming on its belly round and round the bedroom floor. She dropped her gin in pieces at her feet screaming for the girl. What have you done now, you and your goddamn pigs? You and your goddamn Mumma! She bent her back and pulled the pig by its feet across the room, down the corridor to shove it out the door into the dirt outside.

Then she turned her back on its squealing and walked towards the barn still cursing the girl and the gin splashed over her shoes and when she returned Grandma walked toward the pig and its shaking rose-bud belly with her gun slung over her side.

West of Kerith River

His sister was his warmth and kindness. She filled him up from empty, taught him everything she knew. She could even guess the weather, sitting in the kitchen, her body spread open to the day outside reaching in to lick the summer from her skin, the sun coming in moments between the clouds stacked grey across the sky.

Inside, the house grew dark around them.

The rain's coming, she said, her legs hung out the window, her arms across her face.

Let me show you, she said, taking his hand to wave his fingers through the air, thick and fat smelling like thunder. Then it rained so hard they could see nothing through the windows but the water pouring past outside. She edged his elbow out to taste it, licked the drops from his skin and smiled. That's how you read the weather, she said, the clouds, the rain, the wind.

He needed her to teach him and so she taught him how, how to hide so no one could find him, how to fold and stack, which corner followed which, how to put his finger to a fire to make the smoke blow so, left then right, left again on the wind, how to plait her hair into braids down her back, how to gut and skin.

He would listen to her talking behind the sheets she swept out on the wind to hang up on the line, listen to her talking while she stirred her words thick with gravy poured over suppers to fill him.

She would talk and he would listen, kneeling at her feet never flinching as the wax dripped from the candle onto his hand while they prayed, the days passing one after another, amen after amen, night after night.

They prayed for their mother.

Flat and frail upstairs she couldn't lift her head and just her eyes would roll from side to side, so they propped her up on pillows and blankets that smelt of death and dying. Back outside his sister would string the washing out across the line and he would pray the wind would take it, pray the wind would lift the life from their mother like it lifted the sheets on the line.

Still his sister smiled. Sometimes he would hear her singing hymns settled in her chair to soften by the fire, but when he came near to her she would be quiet again, like she lost the

words in his footsteps, and he would hide from her until she called him to sit beside her to stroke his hair, his head held in her lap.

Then it was as though she thought things might get better, as though being young was something that would last forever. But life never stopped for them, silent in that old house but for the wind against the windows and the creaking and the howling of their mother upstairs.

He was thirteen when she crumpled like a pile of clothes onto the kitchen floor, moaning and whimpering like a dog kicked and tied. He watched her twist her legs to crawl toward him, grabbing with her hands to reach his ankles while her nails pulled between the cracks in the floor. Later he would remember how her face peeled back to make the sounds she made. The sound of death dragged out from something living.

But still he didn't move. He just pulled his body tighter to the wall and watched her.

Their mother who believed children were born foolish, who held the Bible out to them as she beat them, saying, even if you beat a fool until they're half dead you still can't beat their foolishness out of them.

Still she tried, she took them from the world, taught them life from lessons in the Bible, how the wicked die, how the sinful are punished, that human desires are like the world of the dead – there's always room for more. She told them how to live to let the Lord be by their sides.

So he thought, *let the Lord be with you now, let the wicked die.*

His sister heard the shaking, came in to see their mother with her dress clumped wet between her thighs, her tongue thick like a slab of meat inside her mouth pushing out between her lips, and so the young girl stilled her as she stroked her greying hair. She kissed her mother on each cheek and promised to be good for her, to do the things that needed to be done.

When the doctor came he told them that the Lord had come to take their mother's legs away, to take away her arms and hands to leave her still in bed, her body turned in waiting for death to come. He couldn't tell them when and so they lived, day after day, taking turns to hold their mother's head to feed her, her body nothing but bones propped up on pillows to watch the sun go by.

Half-dead their mother filled the house more than when she was living. She grew like mould across the ceiling, between the sheets and in the cracks along the floor. She was drowning,

gurgling like an old tap opened up, breathing bubbles from her lips with her eyes rolling side to side. Her hair fell out in patches from her head, her teeth came loose, she howled and pawed at her bedding, spitting as they held her body up to clean the urine, the cracked skin, the old shit dried between her thighs, all the time praying for death to come and take her.

Still it did nothing.

So their lives went on the same. They lived alone in their house lost between the hills that rolled away from town, far away and over the footbridge west of Kerith River always dry and full of sand.

And so he lived, his sister on one side and the Lord on the other.

They shared their lives kicking dirt and turning stones with their shoes, climbing the trees outside. He used to believe the trees touched the sky, that they reached right up to heaven and he would stand and mouth his prayers against their trunks wishing them up along the branches onto the wind and away. He believed the trees were special because they never lost their leaves, even in the coolest part of winter they grew thick and green outside when everything else was curling up finding a place to die.

That was something.

Inside she played with him like a doll around their room. She dressed him, brushed his hair, brushed his tongue and teeth. They shared a bed, him tucked into her arms to help her sleep at night, the curve of his back against her belly and his feet on hers to warm them. In the morning she would kiss the night from his eyes and blow the day in breath against his cheeks to wake him.

He shared a bed with his sister until he was seventeen, by then much taller and stronger than her standing in the doorway as she lifted herself up on her toes to kiss him on each cheek, to tell him to come home quickly with something to cook into a stew.

Because of that he did.

He walked looking home over his shoulder to keep her in sight, thinking of her while he crouched under dry bush, the day hot and clear heating his skin. Sweat from his palm dripped between his fingers pressed hard into the ground. Gravel pushed into his legs and along his

elbows as the light shifted darker into night, until he saw something twitch between the grass, ear tips prick the wind.

Everything afraid of death

The first time he caught a hare he got it by its legs and fell with it, ruddy brown and flecked with white springing through the bushes. He felt it thrust and kick as he turned his grip tighter and pushed it down between his knees. His body shrunk then shook and swelled as he squeezed its flesh between his fingers and cracked into its soft white belly beating back to breathe. It turned its head toward him, its eyes wet and quick with pale rings inside pleading for its life.

He paused, then hit it once to watch it squirm, then again to get it still. He stood up, used one foot and then the other. Its skull peeled open. He had blood up to his knees, across his elbows

Then he slung its body over his shoulder and took it home to skin it.

She hesitated the first time she saw him, dizzy, like looking into the sun.

His face was wrong. His eyes took in death. They told her she'd asked for it and so she stilled herself to show him how. It didn't matter why.

She remembered what she had seen her mother do with meat brought from the butcher. She took a knife and opened the hare in a line down its stomach, pushed her hands inside and came out with a long sliver of meat, glistening white fat and muscle. It stretched and snapped. Meat poured out red and wet from inside its skin spread out on the counter. He licked his lips and wiped the blood from the knife on his pants.

She looked past his face outside.

After that he snatched anything he could, hares, foxes, birds caught and broken against stones. A few times he caught and killed stray dogs he found begging in the hills near town.

He strung the feet in bunches and hung them around their mother's bed to bring her luck, to bring her death. They knelt beside her bed each night to pray to the Lord to come and fetch her soul away.

Still his sister smiled but her smiling didn't fill him up the same as before. She never sang or hummed a song. He watched her face fall thin and grey from dragging sheets and pillows up and bunching them around the bones pooling in the bed upstairs.

He pulled flowers out the ground to give her, threaded lace between her braids, told her she was beautiful, held her between the sheets hung on the line and swayed her body wet from washing, dampening his shirt as they danced, but still he seemed to touch her less and less.

Their mother's mould was leeching through the house around them. He watched her sleep to keep it from her, licked the tears drying on her skin as she slept, her cheeks chalk white and salty.

He was big enough then to hold her, to press her back into the curve of his stomach and cradle her once she fell asleep. Still he knew she needed more. Some nights before she slept she spoke while he listened, their bed pushed up against the window to count the stars softly on her fingers.

She told him about their father.

He was a butcher. His friends called him Hog. He was tall and slow, wore a wide-brimmed hat, smoked cigarettes, spat into his hand to clean the smudges from his face. He had less use than dirt dried up and so their mother left him, sold the house, took the money and moved her children far away where he would never find them.

Then it was over. They lost nothing.

Ma always said he let life slip past him so easily he never noticed it going, she said, her voice trailing off into a whisper then to breathe before falling finally asleep.

His sister needed him to be a stronger man.

He thought kindness was a blessing but his mother turned it into a curse. His kindness made him weak and so death settled in the room around his mother like a dust they couldn't clean, hung around in shadows and sighs waiting for a fight.

His life with his sister was a stream through a field to nourish them. His mother and the death that clung to her were thorn bushes choking that stream until it ran as nothing, a brown dribble of water overgrown with weeds.

And so he prayed to the Lord like his sister taught him to. He spread the Bible out to speak, flipping pages until he saw it, simply put, telling him that if you are weak in crisis, you are weak indeed, and so he knew that the Lord was by his side, reaching out to lead him and so he took his hand.

Up the narrow stairs, past their bedroom, his feet where he knew they wouldn't creak, careful not to wake his sister as he passed her sleeping in their bed, past the bathroom, to their mother's bedroom.

He swung the door open but didn't go inside. He waited just a moment. Then he took one step and then another to hover at her bed.

He watched her breathe, traced his fingers along her windpipe, spread his hand across her throat to feel her heartbeat hum against his thumb, nothing but that frail tapping keeping her alive. So little, so quickly gone, he pressed with one hand and then the other as her eyes stuttered open. His hands choked her howling. She shook, he swelled, felt her breath shrink in his hands thinking, *let the wicked die*.

Then he let go, looked out the window and saw the sky bleed out across the sand. He went into it, higher and higher beyond the heights of the sky smiling at the piles of bones with no life left in them worth burying. He felt the cool wind, heard the stream freshly flowing, licked his lips and tasted sweetness on them.

His sister was lying round against the window with a sheet over her head. He pulled it down past her chin. It smelt of her, of him, of them. He went to kiss her on her lips dry with sleep to wake her but before he did, he held her face and felt her heat against his skin and knew that she was his.

She opened her eyes.

She went first on one foot, then another, walked to stand beside her mother's bed and saw her eyes still open. Nothing stirred and so she raised her hand to sweep them shut, to sweep away the fear she saw left behind, to put her mother back the way she was when she was sleeping and then the girl turned and walked away.

She sat in a chair in the kitchen as if she planned to sleep. She drew her knees in, shut her eyes. She tried to think but couldn't of a night when she wouldn't wake to do the same thing done each day before. The beginning and the end, all of it at once, and so she simply sat.

Her brother stood behind her, counted the hours by the light across her body coming in from outside, waited there until they went to fetch a shovel to dig a hole. No one would mind where.

There were trees down the hill past the house, the same her brother thought would carry his prayers to heaven when he was young, and so she thought, *let them carry her into her heaven or through their roots down into hell*, and they walked together, him with a shovel slung over his shoulder humming a song his sister used to sing to him to help him sleep. It was the same song her mother sang to her but never sung to him. So instead she sung it sweet and low into his ear as he drifted into dreams beside her. Her sweet doll, her baby doll brother in her arms. Sweet enough to steal a kiss on each cheek without waking him.

And when he woke, there she was.

And again to sit beside him until he was standing up to his waist in it. The morning now day, the heat a wall, a wave across the hills, slow and thick from the sun without a breeze to break it. Sweat slipped the shovel from his hand and he got out and looked down at the hole he'd dug. It was deep enough to hide anything.

They went back inside, up the narrow stairs to where the mother lay smelling like something sweet going sour. Flies sat along the windowsill licking their legs, rubbing their wings, settling in. Her mouth was still open and bruises shadowed on her skin.

We need to bury her, he said.

So he carried their mother out with a sheet bound across her face, hit her head against the doorframe as he went outside. She followed slowly on his footprints past the house. The sun watched from the sky, watched him put her roughly down. He was on his knees.

She looked into the sun and cried.

It wouldn't be long before the cold came, the days passing, time going on and on, then gone.

She felt it all at once, her skin, her hands, her face, her heart, all too old to be her own. Slowly the house took her part by part, her life worn like clothing on her skin, worn then washed then worn again until nothing was left but threads and tatters torn and tossed into the bin.

She wanted to know why, except she didn't. She did nothing for a while, then a little more or less each day.

It felt to her like waking up.

She stripped their mother's bedroom clean, scrubbed the floors, the walls, the windows, left them open through the rain to wash their mother away. They made a fire to burn the sheets and watched the embers lift, flickering lights on the wind carrying their mother away in a thousand different pieces. Softly she sang as her brother smiled. That night he came to lie beside her in their mother's bed, but she turned him gently down the hall.

We don't need to anymore, she said, ma's gone, there's nothing left to be scared of, and she kissed him on his cheek, said goodnight through the door.

She heard him walking up and down all night, more than once he stopped outside to listen for her, turned the handle of her door without coming in. He hardly slept at night, more during the day and then he only slept where he could see her.

She felt her heart beat faster when he looked at her, something turning, like the light was gone.

It kept him up all night, a trick along the breeze to taunt him. All day he let the radio play to hear music and he tried sometimes to dance with her. He swayed while her hips knocked, and she would let him for a while before she pulled away and smiled soft and said, I better put our supper on, sweep the dust the wind brought in, slow but quiet.

Time went on and on this way, one way or another.

She told herself she stayed because she promised him she would. Really she stayed because she had nowhere else to go, living in the summer heat that hung around the house, barefoot in the kitchen, her hair loose and long down her back, the dust patterned in lines along the floor.

Days passed, blazing, she stayed inside to sweep where it was cool. She thought of her brother gone more and more outside to hunt, to live between the bushes and the dry grass of

the hills. He left before the sun came up, came home once it settled, out to hunt a hare or catch a fox, to string it up and skin it.

He brought her feet and ears in bunches, hung them from hooks around the house. He lived in wild silence, quick to pause to catch a sound she couldn't hear, gone then suddenly upon her and so she lived bristling.

He lived hidden the way she taught him how, hidden where no one could find him, watching her to see what she would do when she thought he wasn't around. He saw her between the slits of wood boarded across the kitchen walls, in the shadows she made long and vague along the roof and down the passages she walked to find him.

He smelt her in the dough she rolled beneath her palms, in the pleats of her skin, smelt her in the hollow her head left pressed into her pillow, dense with sweetness.

He watched between the trees, standing on their mother's grave grown over with grass and weeds, dandelions from their mother's bones, from her flesh turned by worms to wet the soil, purple stems into yellow petals, pretty enough to pick but grown turn into silver threads that lift life across the wind and scatter. He pushed each head flat into the dirt under his feet, one by one until nothing grew.

He crawled his way up the bark between the branches, crunched his body into their bend to see her in the bathroom, something living, no longer emptied out and drifting pale across the water. Her knees rose up, sunk down. Her hair curled wet against her neck. The water clung there before dripping its way along her as she climbed up and out.

Dressed all in white cotton, circles wiped into the steam, damp towels across the washing line she hoped would dry before the rain came in, footprints wet into the wood under her feet, her skin flushed as something living, her braid caught and held a moment in the air to carry her smell downwind.

The days becoming not quite day or night, dark in storm, the shadows swinging frantic from the trees, the leaves blowing in from where the thunder came across the sky in patterns with the lightning.

There was only one way from their house into the dry country muddied brown by rain, to walk it was to walk into the wind along the road the clouds passed over. Feet pressed wet into the ground, waiting, watching, a silver wash with rain.

All the wild around them walked, along the dry banks of the river, the sand pure white left long ago by the water. Still life found its way there, in the turned bodies of things blown in and buried. Only look to find it, the layers life hid itself behind, kept in the circle of their house, in each bend and turn to take to find her sitting still inside somewhere, her legs hung out the window, her arms across her face breathing in the weather, waiting for the sun to shine.

Time enough

It was raining the day you died.

It rained each day for three days after. The water poured and pooled around the steps I walked down to carry you with me when I left. I stepped mud into the carpets spread along the hall, felt your death like damp between my toes, how it clung there.

Music came soft through the walls on a hum, no words, just guitar and chestnut castanets to lull you softly from your rigour. They served finger foods, sandwiches with the crusts cut off, pigs in a blanket, sausage balls. You hadn't eaten meat in years, that didn't matter. I stood and watched people pick between the plates, watched them blow their noses into the serviettes your mother put out on the table.

They meant to bury you.

I told them how you hated the cold, how you lived to feel your face flush and so fire seemed more fitting. That seemed to shut them up. They always wished they knew you better but at least they listened. We were lucky for a change.

Afterwards they split you up in parts, let me take some of you with me when I left. That seemed to make them happy, having some of you where they could see you, between the crystal things your mother bought and the old war medals they never knew from where.

They put you in the cabinet your grandma left behind.

Your mother said they would get to you once everything settled. *Get to you*, like you were something they needed to get done. Your father took me by the arm and smiled slow, said something about it being a chance for a trip into the country.

A trip into the country, a picnic under a parasol to watch the boats row by.

I didn't ask him where, he didn't offer.

Anywhere in the Karoo would do if they would take you.

Merino sheep, mohair country, the earth black where the sun beat down. Everything ran together in hazy shades of brown, kept changing as we went. It rained and the ground grew flowers. We didn't think it could do that, but it did, it came in colours all along the roads we drove never stopping as windmills pressed forward on the wind.

You loved to watch them turn across the earth to keep the sheep in wool. The water came up cold and clear, caught the sun blue purple in the sky. We counted windmills as we went, keeping score. We both counted close to a hundred that time.

Strange what you remember, what you forget. I wonder sometimes if I made all of you up, sweet, like the patterns a circus plane makes in the sky. You came and left just as suddenly. Still I pick through my pockets, between the clothing stacked in my drawers and I feel you in the things you left behind.

I kept the bones of something you found dead on the road once, to remember you by, and one black feather under a rock somewhere, the rest carried off on a wind.

I kept the songs we sang playing in my mind for months after, how you looked with your head out the window, your eyes mostly open looking into the sun.

I kept the ticket they stamped to let us down into the caves, to remember how high we got in the parking lot, how you looked bent down laughing in a crystal grotto, your hands against the candlewax walls wet where the water dripped through.

You said, I wonder what happens when it rains, where all the water goes?

You wouldn't let it go until they told you. You were like that. You clung to things, swung from them until they snapped. Afterwards you laughed looking at the things I kept. You thought they didn't matter, that life would nip at our heels as fast as we could move. Just you and me running restless pushing life till it ran over.

You more than me. I couldn't do what you could do. You did things just to know, just because you could.

Like when you came back blistered by the sun. You couldn't go outside again for days, sat sulking in a wicker chair. You said, never again, as you popped like bubble wrap. Next time you meant to burn just enough that your skin could still take it.

You only said never again three times in the years I knew you.

The morning after we drank two litres of sherry, woke up scratching between the sheets for our faces put on wrong somewhere the night before. That day and for days after we felt our bodies flick to forget, the hangover, not the kiss. Sticky coated in sherry to fill the space between our bodies wound around one another.

Strange that even that seemed to fit between us to make things better, more real somehow.

The next time you said it you were sitting under a fever tree, your back against the yellow bark that peeled off in pieces. You were caught up in remembering, we both were, thinking of the places we had been. Your feet were on the table, you had a beer in your hand, your body was bent from the fire. The flames creaked and popped.

We had our tent pitched to watch hyenas pass by.

They came for the bones and scraps people threw at them grazed warm from the fire. All night kids ran in front of our tent to chase them past. You said, they probably wouldn't want to stop here anyway. All we had were mielies wrapped in foil, onions cooked loose and sweet propped up between the coals.

We couldn't get how people craned and crept along the roads to watch animals alive, then came right back, bought their meat, cut and packed tight in cling wrap from freezers in the park shop.

We thought, we have that one figured out at least. To the smell of meat cooking you said, never again. You hadn't eaten meat in years, wouldn't again before you died.

That night we watched a lion being pulled apart by three hyenas. They wanted what she had and so they bit her, ripped her skin off in patches, took it in a fight. You said, that still seems fairer, at least this way they have a chance.

We stayed there for weeks, breathing in the smell of dust, of sandy dew. The clouds hazed the day steering clear of the sun, too hot too early in the morning. We woke up sweating, stayed that way until the sun set, our skin damp to stick the breeze blowing by.

We swam to try and cool us, the water warm, I hoped from the chlorine. You said, you're dreaming, pointed at the kids dropping cannon balls into the pool. You said, you know why the water's warm.

Still you swam.

Even in the driest places your body went looking for water, went into oceans, dams, streams, waterfalls, pools, naked more than once to feel the slip of it against your skin. You pulled me into dams drunk, into the waves along the wild coast with weed warm around our minds. You held your breath for a length along the bottom while I held onto the side.

I never learnt to trust it, how quickly it can pull you in and under. You said, to trust something and love it at the same time, what are the odds?

You thought you had it right once when you were in love with the beach, the whole mess bleached blonde by salt. He was the sand against your skin, rough and dry, damp where your toes dug in. His eyes were tropic turquoise. You tried to learn to surf, more on a whim than anything, but the waves kept breaking on your head.

Sex wax, cold water surf, cherry peach and salt, all the senses of that summer.

All night, every night, for months you heard the sea until it came and went, washed in then out, left you stirring. You said, no luck could come from love that felt like brittle shells beneath my feet. Still he made you happy. It even made your parents happy for a while, you and him. It was me and you they couldn't understand.

It was simple though, there was nothing to it. Lovers came and went, we stayed.

Except you didn't.

I washed myself in you once you were gone, wore the jerseys that you left behind strung out over my chair until I couldn't smell the cigarettes you smoked anymore, your hair that clung to your collar. Finally I took you off and hung you over the washing line outside to air because I needed too, to air. Then I wore you like a skin and hoped to get the smell of you again.

Now it's raining, the sea has risen up, it's eating at the sand I'm sitting on watching the clouds roll in with the waves. I can taste the salt in the mist, the storm coming closer, lifting up my skirt to kiss my skin.

There's lightning striking out. I always ran from it but you would chase it. You said, the safest place to be in a storm is where lightning has already struck.

I thought we'd live together in faraway places. Marry men and leave them for their money, spend it on building a kennel for all the strays we brought home.

Instead you struck the earth once, hard, your force against the force of thunder, a clap loud enough to wake me. All that life now light enough to fit into the palm of my hand, turned out onto the water, time enough to turn you out onto the wind.