

300 GRAMS

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Rhodes University

by

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November 2019

This document consists of two (2) parts:

Part A: Thesis (Creative Work)

Part B: Portfolio

“The things that women reclaim are often their own voice, their own values, their imagination, their clairvoyance, their stories, their ancient memories. If we go for the deeper, and the darker, and the less known, we will touch the bones.”

- Clarissa Pinkola Estes

SKIN

My skin hides me, contains me, holds all the pieces together.

I don't feel like I own it, but more like my skin owns me. I can play with its elasticity and stretch it over a fat thigh, or I can pull it tight like cling wrap around an arm that lost all of its muscle. I can cover it with lines of scars, burn it with the hot orange kiss of a cigarette, and tattoo ink in many colours across its surface, scald tan lines in my back on the days I forget to untie my bikini top. But still, it owns me.

I can't live without it holding my blood, and sometimes I like to test the boundaries, play with the rules, and take a blade to the top layers of skin, to get a taste for the underneath, for the me inside, to feel something other than contained. Cutting gives me room to let the air in. Gills to the outside world, a different way of breathing.

I always feel closest to my skin in the bath. I close my eyes and blue darkness surrounds me.

The cold white of the ceramic pushes hard against my skin and I fumble for the plug so that I can turn on the tap to swarm warm water around my body. My nails are violet. Winter is in my bones.

Hands tremble around the cold edge of a scalpel. I still have the not-so-over-the-counter blade from Physiology class. When I wore a white lab coat and peeled off the skin of dead rats to splay their bones open and spike them to a wooden block with pins through their miniature hands. I was fascinated by the tiny organs, the heart barely bigger than the nail on my thumb. I used to whisper in its paper thin ear, as if it were still alive, telling it how sorry I was. I spoke about how it was better to be dead than in a cage, that sometimes breaking free meant breaking completely apart.

Talking to dead rodents made the others in white coats think I was crazy. Maybe I was.

But my madness was always in a straight line. Strategic. Planned. I was obsessive about details, the order of words I spoke to the rats, the sequence I followed when slicing a Y across their tiny chests. Always their left side first. One diagonal inch across the heart space. Measured. Precise.

I meticulously sliced out the organs and laid them in a straight line on a paper towel. The small white pelts were tossed away, considered waste, but I was intrigued by the skin the most. I would slide off my rubber gloves and run my finger along the innermost layer, the part of the skin that rested against muscle and bone. It felt smooth and wet, like a tongue or vaginal wall. Vulnerable. Exposed.

My attention returns to my own body in the bath, the scalpel in my hand, now pressing against different skin. Stroking the metal soothes me, as if holding death beneath my fingers gives me some sort of control. I never cut deep enough to bleed more than a few lines of red. Just below the surface of the skin; shallow and safe. I guide tiny scratches with the blade, proving to my skin that I can pull my will in on tight reins.

My skin believes me. It no longer flinches. Soft and supple it leans into the sharpness.

Inch-long stripes appear in rows, like days scratched off on a prison wall. Perfectly parallel lines the same length, bar-coded onto my inner thigh.

I hold the skin taut with my left hand, as my right meticulously measures each line as it glides through the surface, just deep enough to not be *too* deep.

Blood licks its tongue down my leg.

Pain speaks in seeping fluid syllables; bright red streams like wet paint into the bath water. I watch with fascination as the blood dilutes around my body, swirling in the small current between my legs; shivering, still cold.

I close my eyes into the blue darkness again, drop the scalpel into the bath, and rest my arms on the sides. This is the moment I cut for, the few seconds of ecstasy, an orgasm of

nerve endings in my mind. It's a sheer blankness of respite from the voices and sadness. Pain dissipates as my body lets go of blood. The bath fills with red thoughts and my brain finally gets a break.

I reach for the plug, to watch all the muck of my mind go down the drain. I forget the scalpel lying on the bottom of the bath, its silver lining hidden beneath the liquid clouds of red. It was always the first rule in Physiology class. Sterilise your instruments and then pack them away safely.

The weight of my body on my palm slices me into the blade so swiftly that at first I don't notice. Only when the water becomes instantly darker, the crimson of a cut too deep, do I feel the flapping of skin on my hand. I feel consciousness shift. I battle to stay awake, to keep my eyes open.

I feel myself losing so much more than blood.

I clutch my uncut hand between my legs, and feel something slide through my fingers. It disappears down the drain, and I can't stop it. Her. My thoughts return to rodents in the lab, but this isn't a rat. It's fluid and smooth and part of me. I panic in the uncertainty and confusion. I have lost something I cannot name.

Lines disappear and I feel all sense of order seep from the pores in my skin, a thin membrane to the outside, allowing my perfect rows to mingle in the water and lose their form.

I cut too deep, I let out too much blood, I made a mistake, it's all my fault. I see splayed rats come to life, airless lungs breathing again, and I become frantic. Guilt clutches at the scalpel and demands atonement.

I no longer have control of the blade. I let it stab deep. I allow it to carelessly carve jagged lines, randomly across my skin, slicing through arms, stomach and legs. Deep tissue, muscles, touching bone.

Blood sprays on white tiles.

I imagine lining up my organs on a paper towel and counting them. I don't toss away the skin, I allow myself to feel the soft jelly coating of the inside, run my finger along the lacerations and reach within, my lips searching for open ears, to say I'm sorry. This is better than the cage.

THE EVOLUTION OF HYBRID BEINGS

Skin adapts to its environment.

Over millions of years of evolution, animals have grown fur or scales, extra fat beneath the epidermis, transparent thin wings for effortless flight, or thick hide to scrape painlessly against thorn trees.

This is important.

It's the only way you will understand what happens next.

Some creatures have developed more than one type of skin on a single body. A frog with webbed toes, the skin between each one only a film, while its spotted back is slippery and gelatinous. A human being with incredibly sensitive fingertips but wrinkled elbow skin that can be tugged and stretched.

Evolution creates hybrid beings.

The same genes that develop teeth and hair in humans also create scales on the skin of sharks. Line up that snippet of fish DNA next to a person's and discerning which one has a soul is impossible. On the surface they are identical.

Every detail matters.

Man has tried to play around with this biological twirling. There are pigs that carry human DNA, mimicked in the lab by replicating the science of latticed species in nature. Parental origin becomes elusive; where one animal starts and another ends is blurred.

Chimeras are individual animals and people who develop from more than one set of genes. Their skin usually shows interesting waves of colour, as the skin cells composed of different DNA lie next to each other. Interesting patterns form on fur and scales, and in humans there are stripes that run down their back. These lines are often visible to the

naked eye, but explode in brilliance under UV light.

I'm not making this up.

Shine that same UV just below the lateral lines of a fish, and its flanks light up. A sleek skin adaptation for living underwater. Rows of sense organs run from gills to tail, lines of slightly modified epithelial cells that ensure survival in a wild and brutal ocean. These scratch marks from mother nature's nails ensure that the fish is highly sensitive to vibration and movement, which makes the most attuned the most successful predators.

That important part is coming soon.

Sharks swim at the apex of this food chain, with skin transformed into spined scales, flattened through forward movement in water. They are sleek, silent and split-second fast when attacking prey. Even when they are swimming at normal pace, their drag through the water is nearly ten percent less than other fish.

Listen.

A girl lies in a tub of water, cutting vertical lines into her skin, alive to each tiny movement, her sensitivity heightened to emotion. The subtle vibration of a scalpel falling on ceramic travels along pipes and drains leading to the ocean.

Lateral lines light up and a swift silver motion sinks below the surface, too fast for a person, but the sound its heart makes in the water is distinctly human. The rhythmic *ba boom ba boom* echoes around its body as the predator snakes downwards and disappears into the ocean's darkness.

Put your hand on your chest and feel the rhythmic drumming beneath your fingers.

It's the same heart.

It weighs approximately 300 grams.

FIELD NOTES

The flat was immaculate. Counter surfaces and floors reflected the light. Furniture was coloured in tones of pearl. Sparse.

A single shelf displayed marine biology textbooks; alphabetised and book-ended with white marble mermaids.

There was no carpet, no curtains, no warmth.

Dust-free blinds on all the windows, as if a cloth had just been wiped across each row. The windowsills were void of knick-knacks and pot plants. Stark.

- She would have washed the mug in the sink first.
- She'd have taken the empty can of Coke Light to the recycling bin downstairs.
- The book on cephalopods would not be on the bedside table, but shelved by author like the others.

If this was planned, it would have been cleaner.

Pills not blade.

Note not silence.

Sterile.

Jane's skin had blindsided her.

SLEEP

Unconscious, I can breathe underwater.

I slip through blood into clear sea, currents carrying me beneath one surface, and then the next. Layers of water within one another, a descending ripple to depths that smell like home.

When I reach the bottom I lie on the sand and look up, the sea turning into a watery sky filled with clouds of fish. They cast moving shadows on the ocean floor, tiny hermit crabs scurrying in and out of them, constantly following the shifting dark patches. Safety cannot remain in the same place for long.

I lift my arm to create a shaded spot for the crabs, but light simply travels straight through me, as if I'm not even there. I feel curiosity tapping like fingers behind my eyes, a camera lens focussing. Then, as if I thought it into being, it slips into the world I can see, swirling into form. Curiosity itself casts a shadow on the ocean floor, becoming larger the more fascinated I become. Hermit crabs scuttle into the shifting shape and I try to focus my attention to keep it more stable for them. I keep the shadow still by being content with the sensation of being inquisitive.

I watch the miniature crustaceans settle into my thoughts, as they forage in the sand for even tinier crabs and translucent plankton. Little pointed claws sifting through granules, a faint mirrored tapping behind my eyes, the same thing. As I watch them they become a part of me. Yet, when I touch their shells with my finger they don't respond. I'd expect them to immediately crawl inside to hide away, but they simply carry on, oblivious. Strangely, I can't feel the shell on my fingertips either. I become more curious and the shadow grows larger.

Larger still, enveloping mine, is that cast by the creature now right above me. I immediately recognise its beautiful form: *Enteroctopus dofleini*.

It's clearly interested in the crab activity, an easy source of food. One arm reaches for a hermit, gripping it with a suction cup, then passing it from one cup to the other up the length of its arm, until finally crunching down on the shell with its beak. The entire time, the great eye of the common octopus is focussed on me. At first I think it can see me, and then as I make small movements without it responding, I realise it's using a different sense. I may be invisible down here, but it is obvious that I can still be smelled.

I close my eyes and breathe in the sea, my lungs accepting the water like gills. The sensation blooms in my nostrils. Scent that feels like touch, travelling into my bloodstream and coating my artery walls with kelp, fish and dessicated crab. When I open my eyes again the scent has turned to colour, morphing into different shades, like the chameleon skin of the octopus. The ocean world blends from blue to red then green.

I hear the beak crunch down on another crustacean and relax back down on the sand, forming shadows with my curious mind as I watch intently. We are both being studied.

Although I know that an octopus cannot display human emotion, the sensation that clings to the water surrounding me is what I imagine a smile would feel like against the skin.

I allow the current to lull me closer to the octopus as it eats, my thoughts changing the colour of the water, and then instantly the hue of its skin. Our scents touch and begin to merge until, through the sense of smell, we appear as one beast.

Pieces of broken shell crush between my teeth.

THE BIZARRE SLEEPING BEHAVIOUR OF MARINE LIFE

When octopuses sleep, their skin remains awake. Their eyes will still be tightly shut while brainwaves associated with REM sleep spike up and down. As they dream, their colours rapidly change from milky white to muted grey and then to spots of black and brown. In these 15-minute increments of dreamlike sleep, their arms twitch involuntarily and eyes move beneath their lids.

This movement and dramatic colour change all occur deeply hidden in the octopus lair. They only allow themselves to sleep when they feel safe.

Many marine animals don't sleep this soundly, however.

Most sharks need to swim constantly to keep water moving over their gills.

They have active and restful periods, and move much slower while "sleep swimming." The shark's spinal cord, rather than the brain, is responsible for the motion of swimming. Due to this, they can switch off parts of their brains while resting.

Some species like reef sharks have spiracles, which are small openings behind each eye. These force water across the shark's gills so that it can lie still on the ocean bottom for a short while. However, they still keep their eyes open (they have no eyelids) and respond to what is going on around them.

Ocean naps are not always what they seem.

Other sharks rest during yo-yo swimming. They actively swim to the surface and then rest as they descend. They also swim close to the shore in shallow waters at night, sometimes with their mouths open. The oxygen-rich currents carry them and water still glides over their gills. In this state they appear to be almost catatonic as they sway, but the resting periods never last long.

Pelagic sharks in tremendously deep waters have even shorter periods of rest, and some

never sleep at all.

ACT I

A frightening marine beast is brutally attacked. Its limbs are ripped apart by spear and axe. Fatal wounds fill the sea with blue blood, and the creature's cries are heard for thousands of miles beneath the depths.

** Zoom camera in on a severed tentacle as the sound of screaming is amplified.*



STOMACH

I am beneath the breathing of the ocean, swells above my head, salt water gliding over my scales, a protective external skeleton, above fish flesh, human flesh, seal flesh. Beneath the layers of creature and form lies soft, white bones, pure and light, wrapped silk ropes entwined with blue sinew.

I swim as one with the sea, sliding through currents like blood through my veins

arteries

heart chambers.

The tide is strong tonight and the wild in me is rising, gaining strength to crash with the waves, always avoiding the shore.

I am in a dream and I am the dream. The water turns black and I swim down to the depths of safety, down to where it's darker still, where the ocean night holds me with its tight arms, clutching me beneath the pressure and weight of miles and miles of sea.

Memories cast images within the dream film, merging as one.

Mom went in to save me.

Her white blouse swelling like a blister in the swell, a futile protection against abrasive rocks.

I screamed at her to go back.

Although I was only eight I was a strong swimmer. I knew the currents like the pulse of my own heart.

I was letting it carry me and was unafraid.

But Mom saw me drift further and further out and panicked.

Jane!

Kick Jane, kick!

Jane!

I ignored her voice and followed my instinct, closing my eyes and allowing my head to fall backwards, floating in the flow.

Maybe when she saw me on my back, she pushed harder, went deeper, and entered the beast's belly.

I cannot be sure.

I didn't see her go down.

Later, the silence told me what I didn't want to believe.

When the sea spat me out, I walked up and down the shoreline, searching for her.

Her name curled around my neck, wringing itself into a scream.

Mom!

Mom!

Mom!

Her blouse, hidden in white froth of receding tide, wrapped around my ankles.

I clutched it against my chest and watched the ocean edge further and further away.

I waited for hours. I knew she would come back.

She had to.

It's all my fault.

I lay down, her soaked blouse beneath my cheek.

She'll come rock me to sleep soon.

She'll come back.

The night lasts for years.

Upon waking, my head is heavy like a night after drinking, the walls coming closer then drifting away, my centre of gravity ricocheting between ceiling and floor, ocean and room.

The first thing I see when I open my eyes is a fluorescent light above my head. Two glass tubes of startling white. I scrunch my eyes closed again, turn my head away from the knife-tipped glare.

I swallow my pooled saliva and gag as it slides down a plastic tube, a gutter pulled through my throat, collecting something that is pouring into my stomach.

I put my shaking hand to the tube coming out my right nostril and gingerly trace it down, and feel the end of it enter a bag attached to my bed. It's a feeding tube.

My breathing gets panicky, I'm gasping for air, trapped in the small space the fat plastic worm has left in my throat, my nose, my body. My body. Mine.

A body I can't trace and don't know and no longer feel. I am filling a foreign space of bandaged flesh, my lungs flat and hesitant to breathe. I don't recognise the sensations on my skin and the dry air is sandpaper in my throat.

I snap my eyes open.

Bandages cover the length of both my arms. I try and link my thumb and forefinger around my humerus, my daily tally, the measurement of being OK. The bandages make me fat, the fingers don't touch. Fuck. I run my cupped hand down my arm and it doesn't expand over my elbow anymore. My elbow is supposed to be wider than my upper arm, then bone must contract again into thinner ulna. Radius. But it's one straight line of white, scratchy cloth. Fat.

With rapid breaths I shove my hands under the sheets to feel for my sacred space. The deep dip between my hip bones and rib cage. That hollow velvet cave where I can rest my hands and feel safe. They shake above a straight line, a corset bound around my

waist, white and unyielding. Tears stream from the crease of my eyes into my ears onto the pillow.

I refuse to take my hands lower to feel my legs. I can feel the scratch of more bandages, more bigness. Bile rises up the side of the tube.

I clench my fingers around the stiff, coarse sheets, my nails digging into the white. Rough and dry like beach sand between my fingers, the dangerous texture of land.

I close my eyes.

There are so many foreign sensations. Unbuckled leather ties hang loosely around my wrists and ankles, scratchy bandages covering my body, a tube in my nose and down my throat, cables and needles joining my arms and chest to machines, a cold, hard sheet against my collarbones. The cotton stitching feels like ants crawling on my shoulders and I want to pull it off and scratch at my skin.

Yet, the weirdest feeling is none of these. It is a fear I have avoided for years, yet still hauntingly familiar. It isn't so much a feeling or sensation, and more the lack of one: I'm not hungry.

If I'm not hungry it means the eels have been fed, and after they have eaten their fill it is inevitable that I lose control.

I like to keep them starved in the swirling pools of my stomach. There are dozens of them, and they each have a multitude of heads. When they are hungry they smack their jaws together and slide their diamond-spined teeth down my stomach lining, a lacerating pain as calming as cutting my outside flesh with a blade. The shredding of my stomach walls, the placating ache of hunger, keeps the ocean waters calm.

The mouths in my stomach never lose their urgent desire for food.

If you feed one, you have to feed them all. You can't have just a small bite of a forbidden

chocolate. The exhilaration of one satisfied beast makes the serpentine mass squirm with greed, their heads crawling up my oesophagus, grabbing for

more more more

More of the forbidden. I compulsively consume, allow their need to overcome my own.

When they are engorged with food they fall asleep, heavy and fattened, satiated slumber coiling in my gut, an iron serpentine anchor pulling me down. The weight in my stomach becomes unbearable and I push my finger down my throat like a hook, fishing the eels out one by one. They splash into the toilet bowl, eel-shaped pieces of donuts and pretzels and pasta with gelatinous eyes. There are so many eyes floating in the putrid water. Sometimes I kneel next to the toilet for hours, pushing down the silver handle, watching water storm into the bowl and suck into the pipe, only to see another fixated eye float to the surface, judging my habit.

To avoid the eyes, the stares, the smell of my own vomit, I stopped purging. In order to do that I had to stop binging. The eels' starvation was satisfying in an entirely different way. I developed an appetite for emptiness, an addiction to hollow currents rumbling in my gut. For years I kept the snake-like gluttons restrained and hungry.

Now, against my will, while I was helpless and sedated, the bastards in white fed each and every one of the ravenous reptiles inside of me. Their cumulative sleeping weight, excessively overfed, feels like a swallowed ship sinking into my hips. I can feel the fat leak from the split hull into my flesh, expanding and stretching my skin and suffocating my bones.

I need to shove the hook down my throat and into the depths, to rip every gluttonous eel from the hidden caves containing way too many calories. But my fingers are pierced into the sheets instead, nails clawing at the fabric, shredding the throat of the mattress.

I grasp for the tube connecting my nose my stomach my body to this bed. With my other hand I rip off the plaster gluing the beast against my face. I choke on spit and blood and

pureed high glucose high fat high calories.

I throw the sheets to one side, but before I can sit up to jump off the hard, cold bed, two large uniformed women – nurses? - pound through the door and waddle like elephant seals to my bed, forcing their enormous weight against my body, pinning me like a prawn.

I scream and find I have no voice, my throat raw and bleeding, my lungs sucked closed in fright. I scrunch my eyes closed again, writhing against their sausage fingers. Feel a needle in my shoulder, hear sound sliding down to silence, and catch fear like a fly in my mouth. Vibration of its wings against my gums, my tongue, my palate. I never swallow fear. I let it buzz and bash between my teeth, trapping it like food I will spit out later.

I fall a hundred floors into a fitful sleep.

I am not weightless beneath the water anymore.

I can no longer hear the ocean.

Mom's voice has disappeared.

THE PURGING HABIT OF SHARKS

Sharks can vomit up their entire stomach, empty its contents, and suck it back in again. They are the bulimics of the sea, bingeing on more than just warm-blooded seals. Their guts are often filled with cans, bottles, clothing, feathers, and turtle shells. Dissections have revealed strange objects in the acid-filled stomachs of sharks. In 1792 it was a bible, in 1804 an iron anchor, and in 1917 a bomb that was yet to explode.

*Have you ever wondered what the inside of your stomach looks like?
Are there objects there, resistant to acid, living as part of you, year after year?*

The predators find themselves in a unique dilemma. They have heightened senses and a rather picky palate. So when the quality of their food isn't up to scratch, they would rather get rid of it and fill the gap with something more tasty.

Nature handed them the solution and gave them the ability to evert their stomachs, which is a highly advanced form of purging. Instead of sticking a finger down their throat, they just spew out their entire stomach, turn it inside out, let the salt water rinse out all the gunk, and then savour the emptiness again.

*Do you usually feel relieved after vomiting?
Has your own body saved you from poison and illness?*

Purging is the body's pepper spray in the eyes of an unwanted intruder.

All animals, humans included, may vomit when they are terrified. Sharks sometimes hurl out their stomachs again, not to get rid of an undigested whale bone, but simply because they are responding to fear and want to get the hell out of danger as quickly as possible. Pregnant sharks have even been known to instantly abort their fetuses to save their own lives.

When you weigh less you can escape faster.

Once a shark that had just consumed a seal was approached by a larger shark from behind. Instead of facing a potential threat, the small hunter regurgitated the seal and darted away. The larger shark consumed the seal, happy about its easy meal.

Would you purge yourself of something you love to give it so someone else?

Would you let them consume what was once yours?

*Would you let them consume...**you**?*

FIELD NOTES

An unidentified woman made the emergency call.

Jane was still in the process of cutting herself.

When asked for further details the woman clearly dictated the address of the apartment, that she would leave the door unlocked, and that they only had minutes before Jane died from her blood loss. Then she hung up the phone.

Paramedics arrived to an empty flat, except for the lifeless body they found in the bathroom.

Jane was rushed to the nearest hospital and investigators tried in vain to track down the only other person who was with her when she apparently attempted suicide.

The identity of the caller remained a mystery.

Even to Jane.

Yet, later when she was questioned, Jane's eyes revealed a certain recognition. She covered it up with platitudes around a random good Samaritan, but there was something more beneath her voice. A hidden truth.

The landlady mentioned occasional voices coming from the apartment late at night. She wouldn't see anyone enter or leave, almost as if Jane was alone and talking to herself. She noted that once, when entering the flat for a routine maintenance check, Jane appeared to be elsewhere in her mind. As they spoke about the mundane, things like a leak in the ceiling and a broken hinge on the cupboard door, Jane would occasionally drift off mid-sentence and stare at the octopus painting on the wall. She'd cock her head and appear to be hypnotised.

While speaking to investigators, the landlady shook her head in sympathy as she told the story.

That poor girl.

I always knew something wasn't right with her.

HEART

The heart has four rooms, lined with wallpaper of muscle, sheet upon sheet, living chambers pooling blood and then opening swivel valve doors to gush it to the adjacent room, a shared entrance, a secret exit, a solid beating house of fist-sized flesh. The walls of my heart are membrane thin, like the expanded throat of a frog, always threatening to burst, an overfull balloon, transparent curves letting too much light in. It feeds on ghosts that swim in my blood, light as air, smoky memories of nutrient-rich life, just passing through, slowly trailing door to door, a haunted crimson stream.

I am told that at any moment a door could slam shut, a wall could collapse upon itself, the entire house could implode room by room, a demolition of slow falling dominoes, which would instantaneously fill my body's skyline with death-grained dust, and stop my blood from pooling and pumping, allowing it to collect and stagnate in flattened arteries, sucking colour from my brain, shutting it down to white folds that will shrink away from my skull and become dry and brittle, a desert landscape with buried flashbacks of hip bones pushing through my skin, ribs in the shape of fingers expanding against cling wrap, a spine jutting from my back like the dorsal fin of a fish. I have prophetic bones, their defined lines a prediction of organs losing their muscular armour, of a heart transforming into confetti, congratulating me for betrothing myself to death, one less bite at a time.

My heartbeat scrawls an invisible pen across the machine next to my bed. Uneven zigzags, beeping up and down too fast, the anxious fist around it squeezing it the way I pick at the skin around my fingernails – with shaking obsessive frenzy until it bleeds and tears. The faster it beeps the quicker the fist tightens, my blood engorging the arteries and veins on my thin skin. I feel them push against my bandages like trapped trout in a river too constricted, the currents in my neck creating a visible, undulating pulse. My obsession with the lines on the screen and the uncontrollable creature in my chest distract me from the door, and I only notice the doctor when he is standing right next to me.

Good morning, Jane.

My hands clamp around the sheet and I grind my teeth, rocking my jaw in defiant silence.

He responds with his jaw in a similar way, shifting a lollipop from one side to the other, never losing the contact his eyes are making with my face, my neck, the collarbones slipping into view above the scratchy hospital gown.

In silence he pulls a curtain on its rails around my bed, enclosing us in a space too small for comfort. Walls are pushing closer together, a closing trap. The green lines on the black screen shift their zigzags closer together, with higher peaks, deeper dips.

No need to be nervous, Jane.

He smells like ice-cream.

Vanilla seeps into the air around my body. It makes the rubbery tube in my throat taste like a flavoured condom. I am disgusted by the unexpected pulse between my legs, a foreign and unwanted attraction.

I am going to remove your bandages today.

It's a statement, not a question.

Before we do that, would you like to tell me why you tried to kill yourself?

I squint my shocked eyes at him, a vertical crease in my forehead miming my confusion. My hands grip the sheet harder, my blunt bitten nails digging into the stiff cotton. I am forced to speak. My voice comes out hoarse and inaudible. I mouth the words as if I am speaking to a deaf person.

I didn't try to kill myself. Slippage. It was slippage.

Did you say slip it? I can't hear you or make out what you just said...you didn't want to die, it was...slippage? What do you mean?

My throat vibrates a moan. I shake my head. Never mind.

The doctor sighs and throws his sucker stick in the bin next to my bed.

OK Jane. Have it your way. Let's take a look at the damage, shall we?

Despite his coarse tone, his hands are surprisingly gentle. He lifts up the arm closest to him as if it were a tiny bird, resting it in his palm as he starts unwinding the first bandage.

Do you remember what you did? Are you ready for what you are about to see? You can't freak out. You know about your heart, right Jane? Don't let it get overstressed. Take some deep breaths.

I nod. I don't think he understands that I simply don't care. Not about the scars. Not about my heart. I am only anxious about the calories seeping into my stomach through the feeding tube.

As he begins to reach the end of the bandage, his hand touches my arm, warm skin against mine, igniting an electric charge down my raw nerves, ending in unwanted pulsing. My heart rate quickens.

I told you to relax, Jane. If you can't handle it, then don't look yet.

I can't tell him that it isn't the scars, I don't mind the knotted blue cotton jutting out of raw red lines, or the bulging yellow infection in some places. It's attraction pushing the green spikes up; it's his touch making the beast under my ribs claw for attention.

He moves around to the other side of the bed and begins with my left arm, being extra careful around the needles and tubes. He doesn't flinch when he sees the wounds, and keeps glancing at my face to analyse my reaction. I hope he doesn't see the desire in my eyes, the telling flush of my cheeks. He places his fingers on my wrist and counts the beats between pulses, looking up at the monitor and mentally taking notes. I steal the opportunity to look at his eyes, blue specks swirling around black circles, harder than his kind hands, steel not soft. It reminds me of other eyes I cannot place. A displaced

memory, an expression I have seen before, a coldness I recognise but cannot connect. It floats in the space between us, trying to find a foothold in my brain, but it slides away. Slippage.

I reach for the moving recognition, a faint rhythm just beyond the fingers of my memory. It's another type of room, pumping like a heart with layered walls. I see my eleven-year old fingers stroking the shiny embossing of a lionfish on wallpaper. Rows and rows of spiked bodies in bright orange and brown across four walls.

If I tilt my head to the side their eyes all face me, yet when I squint in the opposite direction they are still watching me. No matter where I am in the room, thousands of tiny animal heads are staring at me. I begin to fidget, picking at imaginary fleas on my itchy skin and in my hair.

My anxiety starts to draw blood as I dig at the crawling in my bones. To satisfy the need to scratch I push my finger more firmly against the wallpaper, pushing the raised spines of the fish against the hard surface below. A small crack appears and my nail scrapes away at the tiny edge, satisfyingly peeling the colour away. A yellowish brown wall is revealed, evidence of decades of cigarettes in the small room.

A man that smells like fish clears his throat and I jerk my hand away from the wall, returning to a clenched fist between my legs.

The urge to scratch my skin, pick at the wall, and straighten the sarong I am lying on is only a fraction weaker than my instinct to stay still. Time passes with the metronome in my chest.

I glare at the fish face I scratched open and it looks back with one eye. I clench my fist more tightly, fighting the need to reach out and pick at the wall again. To tear its fins. All of the fins. All of the eyes.

He turns over and the disturbance reaches me like a wave. The tickling of a sarong tassel, the legs of roused fleas, a brown mattress bobbing like a boat. I struggle to push an

invisible sound down my throat.

The lionfish on the wall breathe in all the air from the room, like a massive inhale of nature, a sucking back of the ocean before the tsunami storms forward.

His bark-like hand curls around my small hip. It's time to make more *don't-tell-anyones* and tuck them away in the mouldy folds of this room. I feel my heart peeling open to draw them in.

Unclenching my fist, I reach for the wall again and fold back a piece of torn orange wallpaper and push it against the sticky yellow paint, tapping it a few times to make sure it stays.

I silently apologise.

It's all my fault.

Then, with all eyes on me, I turn around to face him.

I hear the wall tear again behind me.

Feel urine spill warmth between my legs.

Fingers brush against my arm, and I sense the spiralling of my thoughts in the twist of time. I am back in the hospital room, unscrewing the hours, returning to now.

Different eyes are scrutinising me, but the fear feels the same.

I am going to lift the sheet now, Jane. And then your gown. I need to remove the bandages on your legs and stomach. Would you prefer it if a nurse took over?

I shake my head, no. I don't want the rough, unkind, sausage fingers of the nurses on my body again. I need his tenderness.

OK then.

He folds the sheet, once twice three times, to the bottom of the bed. I am instantly cold.

Can you sit up for me, Jane?

He guides my upper body gently, and for the first time I see him fight the urge to look away. The hospital gown has an open back. I know his response is to the fish spine jutting hard against my skin, my protruding ribs, the hollow curves carving my sides. He pulls the ties of my gown loose, and slides the many sizes too big fabric down my arms, exposing my bare breasts above the corset of bandages. I see his lips push tightly against each other, his jaw jutting to the side. He is forcing himself to not react, but I have seen that fight in the minds of so many others before. The discomfort of seeing me wrestles with the human conditioning to be polite, to not reveal the truth of their judgement.

His shock or disgust, I can't place which it is, has quietened my sexual response to his touch. The one-way attraction stiffens me, radiating like wire wrapping around a steel core, from the inside of spinal cord to the tips of the fine hair on my skin. The vaginal pulse clenches closed in defiance, locked against vanilla, evaporating my own fragrance of fuck you into the air. Attraction leaves my body. Slippage.

He unrolls the bandages around my waist and each of my thighs. I close my eyes so that I can't see his, and brace myself against the cold that immediately bites its teeth into my unwrapped skin. His hand brushes against the hospital-issued papery panties, and occasionally his warm fingers make contact with my stomach and legs. Even though I cannot see when he is about to touch me, my body doesn't flinch. I am a body role-playing rigor mortis, rigid and inflexible, my legs bending like a rubber Barbie's when he forces them to.

He is speaking to me but I can't make out the words. He tries a few more sentences and then his voice disappears into nothing. I hear his steps on the floor; the door opening and closing. My anger towards him is displaced, from another time. A moment with different eyes, other hands, another type of spiny creature on the walls of a room, penetrating the pulse inside of me.

I open my eyes and reach for the folded blanket, pulling it over my stiffened body, letting warmth slowly seep back through the layers of my skin. The cotton is rougher than the sarong, but the texture of shame on its surface is the same. I expect to feel fleas crawling on me, the urge to scratch, the obsessive need to fidget in the confines of discomfort. But my heart rate has slowed and sensation has remained stuck in another place.

I paste my eyes on the door so that I will see him come in next time. Being caught by surprise leaves a gap for vulnerability. I won't let it happen again.

That is what slippage is you ice-cream fuck:

The intentional loss of all feeling.

THE MYTHS OF CONSUMPTION AND STARVATION

Defiance, though seemingly bold, can be lethal.

Desire, more so.

Sirens, creatures who were half-bird and half-woman, were believed to entice sailors to shore, where they would meet their inevitable demise. They did this through an audible lure, the so-called “siren song” that was irresistible. The sailors didn’t die because they were attacked or eaten. They died because they were so enraptured they could not leave.

Circe described the Sirens in a meadow surrounded by rotting corpses with “*rags of skin shrivelling on their bones.*” These strange creatures were unable to provide food for the men who, instead of finding their own, decided to starve to death in the presence of the beings they could not pull themselves away from.

These winged beauties were soon intertwined with mermaid myths and creatures that were half-woman and half-fish. Nereus, who was the Old Man of the sea, had daughters who were called nereids. They lived in watery homes, such as wells, streams, fountains and ponds. The creatures could shape-shift and become anything they desired, including human women.

Men who were consumed by their desire for a nereid would often succumb to melancholy. Ancient documents cite that these men would have seizures and many died from “wasting illnesses.” This, in medical terms, is when a disease causes muscle and fat tissue to waste away. It is a form of involuntary malnutrition and can be caused by various infections and conditions, such as tuberculosis (ironically called the disease of consumption as the patient’s body begins to consume itself), chronic diarrhea, and AIDS. Famine is also a direct cause of wasting, and over 3 million children under the age of 5 die each year from starvation.

Anorexia Nervosa (starvation by choice) is not medically considered a wasting illness.

The physical effects of starvation are grouped together under the term *inanition*. This single word has many ways of describing itself:

- impulsivity, irritability, and hyperactivity
- atrophy of the stomach
- decreased perception of hunger
- substantial loss of adipose tissue
- decrease in muscle mass due to catabolysis
- fatigue and apathy
- dry skin and rashes
- cessation of menstruation
- dehydration
- vitamin deficiency and its aftermath: scurvy, beriberi, anemia, pellagra
- diarrhea
- edema
- heart failure

When you lose more than 40% of your normal body weight, you die.

It is not surprising that due to the terrifying nature of inanition, starvation has historically been used as a method of execution, and very often, torture.

Anorexia Nervosa is not considered a means of execution, nor suicide.

During the Middle Ages people were immured, or walled in alive, their skeletal remains discovered centuries later. Starvation has been used as punishment for slaves in North America, and prisoners in Nazi concentration camps were deliberately tortured through malnourishment and withholding of food, while being physically overworked. These *Muselmann* were often gassed or shot soon after their examination by camp doctors.

Excessive exercise performed by the anorexic is not considered torture.

The way that mermaids and sea-women tortured the ones who loved them was by a different form of starvation: returning to the ocean and being completely consumed by the water, never to return again. Abandonment is deprivation. It can feel the same, at least emotionally, to food being withheld.

What many don't know about selkies, mermaids and nereids, is that their hybrid nature is temporary. Only by keeping their ocean skin can they return to the water. If you remove the seal pelt or fish membrane, the mermaid is doomed to remain human and stuck on land.

Their rite of passage, now lost, transforms into a bodily ache, a desperate yearning to dive beneath the surface. Their hair turns grey, trying to find a way to say the body is dying. Salty blood cakes dry against veins; brittle skin screams for moisture. Flesh consumes itself, the body wastes to bone. They gaze for hours at crashing waves from their earthly prison, many choosing to plunge from cliffs and sacrifice their bodies to the water.

Remember the blood in the bath. The colour of a cut too deep.

Legend speaks of a young man in Create in the 1860's who asked an old woman for advice on how to capture a nereid for a bride. He was told to seize the girls hair just before sunrise and to hold on with all his might and not let go, no matter what he saw. When he grabbed his beloved's hair she transformed into creature after creature – a dog, snake, camel and even fire. Come dawn she was tied to him in human form. Captured. He married her and she gave birth to his son.

All knowledge of her ocean life was buried.

But her body ached and wasted.

Year after year.

Until she found a way to remember.

Perhaps by discovering a hidden pelt of skin or an item of scaled fabric locked away in a cupboard.

Clothed in wild again, her nature dictated what needed to happen:
Disappear into the depths and never return.

Anorexia Nervosa is considered, by some at least, to be an attempt to do the same.

ACT II

The body of an enormous animal washes up on the beach. Onlookers are amazed at the sight and scientists measure the creature's length. Their faces show obvious disbelief at their findings.

** The sound of thunder approaching is to accompany the shocked response of the scientists.*



HAIR

Hair is honest. The body uses it to speak when all the other parts have found a way to lie. The message wraps itself in long, loose threads between the bristles of a hairbrush, coiling thicker with every stroke. I have become afraid to brush my hair, letting it tangle messily on my shoulders. I shower with my eyes closed, and try to imagine that the strands sliding down my back and legs are just soapy water. Hair clumps on top of the drain like a drowned rodent and I'm terrified to feel the mass in my hands when I pick it up, the gauge of how much is missing. Like the discarded rat pelts stacked in the hazardous waste bin, my hair is half animal, half not. Something separate from my body. Lost. Fragmented.

My fingers that used to trace the soft inner skins of the rats now move between hair-lined folds to feel similar flesh, a different beast with coarse fur and a warm belly. Swirling into the wetness of the curves I sense a similar fragmented animal. I try and coax it back to life, stroke its hackled spine, and allow it to wrap its mouth around my finger for comfort. But the skinned creature curls in on itself and appears lifeless.

The hair discarded and shed, the drowning pelts, the vaginal fur, the starving and dead strands from my head, seem to transform and reappear elsewhere. A film of fuzz on my arms and back, a foreign velvet fabric that is two shades lighter than my natural hair colour, as if my body has been grafted with something else similar in texture to a seal, its pelt sliding over my skin, then suctioning fast. My body is protecting me against the cold, an evolutionary reflex, anticipating my dive into an icy ocean.

I stroke my fingertips across the scars on my arms, stitched welts from the night in the bath, criss-crossing beneath and through the fine hair. They look like nylon fibres that have been threaded together, a ragged fish net that hauled me from the ocean. My fingers move across the soft fur between the lines, and what at first seemed alien, now becomes eerily familiar and alive.

I trace the sensation of recollection, a glimpse of something that happened before.

Fingertips lightly touching the carpet of hair on my arms. As I start to remember I feel the hair on my head suddenly being yanked back by an invisible hand.

Memories are like a tight fist wrapped around my ponytail, fingers looped aggressively through the strands of my hair. Fighting against them make the fists grip tighter, painful flashbacks, ripping away from my scalp. Skin is peeled apart by rough stubble, and an animal claw surrounded by pubic hair, scraping out the soft flesh beneath my fur. The pelt of a seal, a selkie-woman, separated by the scalpel edge of not hearing me say no.

Tossed in a pile of other skins and voices; shadows silenced below larger shadows.

Separate.

Lost.

Fragmented.

Memories follow the pattern. Stop and start. Miss pieces. Clutch then let go of time.

There's a white lab coat. Not on a doctor. Or a nurse. This is buttoned on my own body. Doing lab work as part of my PhD. Dissecting molluscs and fish, determining their cause of death.

It's where I met Malachi. The gentle man with ebony skin and beaded dreadlocks. His soft touch making the aquarium safer, keeping *me* safer.

Together we created the best living conditions for the marine creatures we were obsessed with.

Hours beneath the water of tanks, scrubbing away algae on the glass with a blade.

Replacing filters, checking oxygen and temperature levels, weighing and chopping pilchards for feeding times.

Talking, swimming, diving.

Innocently holding wet hands.

Wringing each others hair after a day in salt water.

In this comma of time I lost pieces of truth and my hair started to fall out. I tried so hard

to be perfect, to get it all right, to stop remembering.

My future was lined up in 5-year increments. I had spreadsheets filled with data, hundreds of photographs of specimens, and clean latex gloves. A name tag, a dissection kit, a lucky marble in my pocket.

Like a single fallen hair on a page, memories still find their way into the perfection.

Sometimes it gets out of control. Flashes come in dreams and hallucinations in the space beyond my will. Lionfish eyes from the motel room invade the space in my thoughts while I sleep. Mom's panicked face appears when I take the meds, when I am no longer myself. When I am half animal. Starved. Curled in on itself.

My psyche plays dead and I refuse to eat. Like hair, hunger is honest. Not eating causes more clumps to fall out. Eventually there will be none left for memory to hold onto. Starvation shuffles time like a deck of cards. It can make seconds feel like hours. After a long enough gap without food it can make time disappear completely.

Eventually the need for nutrients begins to crawl under my skin. I try and slice lines through it, squeeze its scratching out with my blood. But the emaciated memories spiral deeper into my flesh like a bristled parasite, an animal shaped like anger; spines erect.

Yet, hidden under that façade of fierceness, there is a subtle slithering of fear. A whirlpool of shame begging for exorcism, but that clogs the drain with hair. Water rises in the catacombs of my bones.

I immerse my hands into the red of shame and let the warmth surround my skin.

Pieces of myself float through my fingers.

REGENERATION AND IMMORTALITY OF JELLYFISH

Some forms of pain remove entire parts of who we are. The amount that we eat is often a mirror image of our new size and shape. The dimensions of the psyche are measured differently. Hair grows back, skin seals into a scar, muscles rebuild themselves. But some parts of the self cannot be restored.

Jellyfish evolved millions of years ahead of us in this regard. They simply clone themselves and start from scratch. If they are torn in two, each of the pieces regenerates and forms two entirely new animals. If a jellyfish is injured it can clone itself, producing hundreds of versions of itself. Thousands of tentacles, flowing and waving like hair in the water, replicating themselves over and over again. Animals and long strands, coming together, forming a whole, finding itself in the beginning again.

What would happen if, in order to heal, you duplicated a part of yourself?

Would that part still be you?

Jellyfish have two phases of life. They start as a stationary polyp and then advance into the mobile medusa phase. These are the creatures we typically consider jellies, with tentacles cascading behind them as they pulsate through the water. From far it could be mistaken for long strands of mermaid hair. Upon closer inspection, some species, like the blue blubber jelly, don't have tentacles, but strands of oral arms. Each of these is home to hundreds of mouths.

The importance of this will become clear later.

Remember the mouths.

The *Turritopsis nutricula*, commonly known as the immortal jellyfish, technically never dies. Under stress it is able to travel backwards in time, going from medusa phase back to polyp, and then later it grows back into its mobile, tentacles-like-hair phase. Baby to adult, adult to baby, then back again.

It's interesting that the animal's instinct drives it back to an infantile stage. There are forms of therapy for anxiety and anorexia nervosa that help adults regress to an emotional age where they didn't receive nurturing they desperately needed. These forms of therapy are based on a psychoanalytic concept called attachment theory. Healthy psychological development can only occur if a child is able to securely attach to a caregiver (usually a mother) and feel safe.

In these controversial forms of therapy, some adult patients are wrapped in a blanket for comfort, and there are also extreme cases noted, made popular through the movie *To the Bone*, where adult patients with anorexia are bottle-fed by their mothers. It is seen as a form of "re-nurturing," a way of taking the body back to the time it needed this form of connection to try and repair a fractured mother-daughter bond.

When you are not held as an infant and given affection, or soothed when upset, your ability to regulate your emotions becomes a little screwed up. An eating disorder can become a way to manage feelings that cause anxiety or distress. Processing emotions like sadness, fear or anger is exceptionally difficult for children who have nobody to turn to for comfort. Those who are abused or neglected, which is on the opposite end of the nurturing spectrum, are at an even greater risk for psychological dysfunction later on in life. Their entire perception of comfort is distorted.

74 percent of women in eating disorder treatment programs are survivors of sexual abuse.

Trauma triggers the feeling of helplessness. The body remembers this emotion. Jellyfish can revert back to the polyp stage and take some time out. Humans don't have this ability and need to find another way to reconnect with their bodies. Eating, or not eating, is a form of somatic connection.

This brings us back to the mouths.

Jellyfish are predators. Their tentacles contain a multitude of cnidocytes. When these are touched they inject thousands of tiny doses of venom into their victim. We're talking

about pressure of 2000 pounds per square inch. Pound for pound, the most dangerous animal on earth is the sea wasp, the largest of box jellies. Its tentacles are over 3 metres long and it is capable of killing an adult human in under 5 minutes. Of course, in this case, it doesn't kill to eat. It's simply defending itself.

Inflicting pain on others, including the self, isn't always what it seems.

Jellyfish consume and they clone. They divide and they regress. They have arms of mouths tentacles covered in stinging cells. And they can revert back to being an infant to protect themselves. Nurture themselves. Feed.

Some are immortal.

In some ways you are like the jellyfish.

FIELD NOTES

The hospital room appeared disorganised to Jane and it made her uneasy.

There was the illogical arrangement of beds. Two one side and three the other. Each bed was accompanied by a steel cabinet on wheels. Some beds had it on the left, others on the right. Although she was the only patient in the room, there were still flowers on one cabinet, left behind by someone discharged or dead. The yellow petals were wilting, some scattered on the steel surface, not collected.

The hand cleanser dispenser was empty, and the tap by the basin in the corner dripped at random intervals. Negligence, Jane thought. It's the kind of things she would have attended to as soon as she noticed.

Sheets were skew, some were even ruffled as if someone had recently sat on the empty bed. Clipboards hung on nails on the wall next to the door. They didn't line up and some of them needed to be nudged straight.

The floor had scuff marks that couldn't be polished away, the single window reflected fingerprint smudges from where a visiting child had pressed his hands. The windowsill had a thin, but still disturbing, layer of dust.

Tiny dead insects spotted the fluorescent lights and the steel rims of the beds were starting to rust.

Although it wasn't logical, the rust made Jane think of moisture, which in turn made her terrified that there was the chance of mould. She imagined the spores entering her lungs and poisoning her. The compulsion to clean became overwhelming and she picked at her fingers until they bled.

Racing thoughts churned up energy she couldn't find a way to release. She needed a

cigarette, a blade, a scale.

Instead, she began to count the stitches in the hem of her sheet, over and over again.

BONES

It is time to be weighed.

They do us in batches, like a school of fish being herded into a net of numbers.

There is a bundle of girls sitting on plastic chairs in the corridor, waiting their turn. My slippers are too big for my feet and I try to shuffle past the nest of skeletons quietly. I don't want to disturb them. Clavicles tap against tiny wrist bones, the air too cold against their transparent skin. Smooth skulls still covered in hair lean into rib cages zipped up in hoodies. Huddled together like hollow seagulls waiting for their feeding tubes.

A wide-bottomed nurse tells me to sit down and wait, scribbling my name on a clipboard. She clicks her pen repeatedly.

I choose a chair far from the nest, in a corner where the sun is moving its fingers through the bars of a window. I hope that I am small enough to squeeze into the liminal space where I can disappear but still exist. I don't want them to stare at me from those hollow eye sockets, scrolling my frame for a number in kilograms. I pull my knees against my protruding sternum, and start to rock. Hip bones smack against the hard plastic of the chair, vibrating up my spine; a soothing beat into my skull. I tap my fingers against my thigh to the rhythm, phalanges against femur, wooden sticks against a taut-skinned drum. An ancient myth says that beating drums made of human bones call the dead. I close my eyes and listen.

My arms around my legs puts me in brackets. Separate from the living.

Minutes slide too slowly into one another. I chew at the cuticle on my ring finger until it goes white. I bring it closer to my face so I can analyse the skin, the way tiny drops of blood pool to the surface. I suck it clean again, then watch new blood scurry to the edge. Each time I stare at the freshly licked cuticle, I admire the translucence of fresh skin. It's how I imagine my bones look beneath all this heavy flesh. Crispy white. Clean.

One by one the little gulls are called in. My name remains silent.

My forefinger and thumb twist pink fluffy fabric into tiny knobs on my right slipper. I meticulously create miniature rows of woollen balls. Then I press the bulging blue vein on the top of my foot with my thumb, wait for the blood to throb and let it go, watching the worm-like tube knot and release, over and over again. I return to the wool twisting, then back to the protruding vein, keeping time entertained. Minutes laced with boredom can be a dangerous trigger. I have learned to keep time busy, to keep its attention on pink woollen balls and bulging veins. Like a child it always screams for attention.

The sun casts different shadows through the afternoon. Long lines become short ones then disappear as hours pass. It no longer rests against my skin. Thousands of tiny bumps rise in its place, most saluting a short hair to the cold. Even my scalp is goose-fleshed. It makes my head itch and I scratch it with both hands, careful to not use my nails too eagerly, afraid more strands will fall to the ground. I trace my fingers along the lines of my fresh scars, watch the shadows weave between them, imagine them forming tiny creatures, like I used to do when I looked up at trees criss-crossing the clouds as a child. The other kids saw cute maltese in white cumulus; I saw the black knuckles of the oak tree reach across cirrus, curling back fingers that turned into a wolf.

I am lulled back into the daydream of how it once was, how it felt to have grass between my toes and not worry about what they looked like. If my feet were good enough. If the way they joined my ankle which became my leg was satisfactorily carved.

My eyelids keep reaching for the tops of my cheeks, the swaying of my skull a heavy pendulum, ticking off time. In one tiny moment sleep jerks my legs from my arms and they land with the sound of skittles on white ceramic tiles. My eyes roll quickly, like blue balls across a pool table, scanning to check if anyone noticed. I exhale a long breath through my nostrils and slide my eyelids down in a moment of relief. Unseen.

I pick my bones up again and rearrange them as they were. I rock on bruised hips, bite at the cuticle on my middle finger, suck the skin, watch the blood rise to the surface. My flesh is tasteless.

The nurses go on lunch and the corridor lights dim. I am left in starving solitude.
Invisible. It is the only sensation that allows me to fall asleep soundly.

I am woken by the sound of my name, repeated louder and louder. Meaty fingers poking
my shoulder.

Wake up new girl. Time to get on the scale.

WHALE SONGS

Whales hear sound through their jawbones and they are able to hear songs of another whale up to 60 miles away.

This phenomenon, which is called bone conduction, was discovered by Ludwig von Beethoven. The 18th century composer was almost completely deaf, but could hear the music he played through his jaw. As his fingers moved across the keys he bit down on a rod that was attached to the piano. He wasn't just picking up vibration – he heard actual sound.

A thin girl sits on a chair in a hospital corridor and taps against her thigh like a drum.

Someone – or something - hears the sound.

Not the vibration.

Her song.

Call.

Plea.

Detecting another animal in the water is pretty easy for toothed whales and dolphins, even if it is pitch dark. They have the remarkable ability to echolocate. This involves emitting high-pitched sounds at an object of interest, and based on the “echo,” the cetacean can determine the shape, size, density, distance, speed of movement, and texture of the object. In other words, whether it is prey, predator or simply a rock.

Or the human skeleton of a young female.

This sound, which to us sounds like a series of clicks, is created by passing air from the bony nares (nostrils), through their phonic lips (which is like our nose), and is then reflected by the dense bone of their cranium. A large fatty organ in the front of the whale's head, called the melon, acts as a flexible acoustic lens and helps the animal figure out what it is “seeing” through sound.

The clicks are usually emitted in quick succession and form a click-train. Sometimes these exceed 600 clicks per second.

The nurse clicks her pen repetitively as she walks with her clipboard.
A compulsion she is unaware of.

The echo that bounces back from the clicks colliding with the object are picked up by the lower jawbone and then transmitted to the middle ear of the whale. By using different bones in their head, toothed whales can see their environment through sound.

Baleen whales, like humpbacks, also use sound to orientate themselves in their world, but in an entirely different way. They sing.

Across large distances their songs attract mates, communicate with other pods, help them navigate around the globe, and hunt.

*This next part is important to the girl in the hospital.
She has travelled inward, away from the noise, and the voices.
She doesn't know that silence is where she is most vulnerable.
Silence traps prey.*

Humpbacks have a particular strategy to herd large schools of fish using bubbles and sound. The pod of whales blow bubbles while swimming in circles to create a ring of up to 30 metres in diameter. Up to two dozen humpbacks co-ordinate their efforts while using bubble nets: some blow the bubbles, some dive deep to drive fish toward the surface, and others herd the fish into the net with high-pitched vocalising.

Fish are corralled within the bubble spiral and are driven to the surface. A synchronised song cue urges the entire pod of humpbacks to surface together with their mouths wide open, swallowing huge numbers of fish. They will repeat this behaviour, diving and surfacing, each whale ascending in its allocated position.

The fish congregate inside the bubble-free centre of the cylinder. For decades researchers

have been trying to determine why the fish simply do not swim through the barricade.

Or why women don't leave their abusers.

Why anorexics don't simply eat.

Why you can't just cheer up when you're depressed.

Fear.

Naturally swimming to the place of greatest comfort.

Comfort is often deceptive.

Humpbacks emit an exceptionally high-pitched feeding call when they weave their bubble nets. Some researchers say that there may be acoustical interactions between the bubble nets, creating a sound wall that traps the fish. Fish naturally school together when they are threatened or alarmed, and thus if they attempt to cross the wall of noisy bubbles, they will automatically congregate in the quiet centre of the net.

Remember, silence can be a trap.

The feeding call is intensely loud and this may also generate swim bladder resonance in the fish that will affect their swimming ability, and thus their ability to escape. Another theory is that if whales emit sound into the net from below, then the cylinder may reverberate which would startle the fish into a tight group that creates a compact target for the whales to lunge through.

Sometimes doing what comes naturally gets you killed.

The blue whale's songs are too low in frequency for humans to hear.

If we were close enough to them, however, our bones would pick up the vibration.

Your bones can alert you.

You need to listen to your bones.

As Beethoven discovered, we hear sound through both our bones and our ear drums. The latter converts sound waves to vibrations and then sends them on to the cochlea and we

hear. Sometimes, however, the inner ear picks up vibrations directly, scooting right past the ear drum. That is how the famous deaf musician heard his own compositions, how we hear our own voice (which sounds different to when we hear a recording of it or how others hear us), and also how whales hear.

To prove this theory, take a tuning fork and hit a hard surface, then hold the fork in the air and listen. You will probably barely hear anything. Now, pop some ear plugs in, do the same, and press the fork against your forehead. You will have a Beethoven experience and clearly hear the ringing.

Let's get back to the hunting part.

Before it's too late for her.

Bones are 75 percent water.

Bones conduct sound. Which travels 4.3 times faster in water than in air.

Very high intensity sounds that are focused on an object, like songs against bubble nets, or clicks that echo back, may be used to stun or disorientate prey.

Bones clatter on the hospital floor.

A scaled head swings in the direction of the sound.

The girl has been seen.

ACT III

Two scientists slice off one of the creature's tentacles to examine it in the laboratory. One stumbles backward, convinced he saw the creature twitch.

Come nightfall, the giant squid mysteriously begins to move. It creeps closer and closer to the lapping edge of the ocean. In the background, drunken sailors are unaware that the massive beast has come back to life.

- *The only sound is the gentle lull of the ocean. The emphasis is on the animal's quiet, unseen return.*



BRAIN

The clouds are shifting shadows through the trees and I reach for the hand of the wolf. I run with her, my bare feet racing through grass then sand then sea.

I am carried by nurses, by sea wolves, by clouds, by water.

Placed in a bed. Placed in a dream.

I open my eyes in a strange room, every emotion a living being. My anxiety is an apparition in the air conditioner. Its ghostly mass seeps through the vents and fills the room with cold air that smells like vomit. It takes shape between the walls like the projection from behind a lamp.

I place my hand behind the bare bulb hanging next to my bed and make rabbit ears with my fingers. A shadow so much larger than my hand forms on the wall. Two fingers join mine and become horns on a skull, a cupped hand a cracked cranium. Laughs echo off hinges of broken jaws, reflected, projected, injected into my space, the sound twitching under my nails.

Hollow eye sockets are filled with smoky hues of the feeling that lies beneath fear. The one that has no word but wrings your empty gut like strong hands twisting a wet towel. I am soaked in the sweat of this nameless feeling, as black wraithlike figures run their bones along mine, bows across violin strings, a haunting song rising like fog-tinged bile in my throat.

I notice milky liquid seeping through a thin tube into a needle in my arm. Drugs. Sedatives. Making me feel crazy. See things. Feel things. Images appearing in nightmares in flickered frame screens in my mind. Flashing monsters, repeated over and over again from haunted ships.

Magic lanterns in my mind. Glass eyes of horror projecting frightening images onto the

walls. Pictures of skeletons, demons, pirates, ghosts.

Starvation and exhaustion amplified my visions. Being hungry expands fear.

My eyes fixate on an image I know cannot be real but one that I am still cowering away from.

The smell of smoke is crouched in the curve of my brain, clicking his tongue like a metronome in the caves of my ears, a Zippo lighter flicking flame and snapping shut. Click snap.

My heart peels away from the flesh around it, beating frantic moth wings against red light bulb blood. Lungs panting, sucking dry air, the breath of ghosts.

Fear passes the baton to curiosity and I tilt my head to the side to get a better view of the upside down figures of death. Their pointed, bony hands appear to reach out to me. A wispy eclipse on the ceiling above me, gesturing, taunting, coaxing. Another skeleton joins the arm-in-arm anatomy, a familiar skull swaying to jazz. It cocks its head the same way mine is tilted. I turn my gaze the other way and it swivels on its spine simultaneously. I am on the dance floor, death's hands on my waist, looking down at my body on the bed as my feet try and follow his lead.

The door creaks open and my gaze is diverted from the limbs on the bed to a figure standing in the shadows. I slip back into my body and focus my dilated pupils on the form. A doctor. I watch him walk into the light of the room, his white vanilla lab coat buttoned only halfway. I can see his red checked shirt underneath and imagine what it would be like to undo the buttons with my fingers. If he would notice the scars on my knuckles, the nails I have bitten until they bleed, the way my hands never stop shaking. He smiles, with lips like ice-cream on the rim of a cone. I want to run my tongue along the sweet edge of what I'm not allowed.

The bones of the dancers above our heads are rubbing against each other, kneecap flint against a sparking sternum. Crumbling and crackling, the cackling of clapping fingers

without skin.

The doctor's face grows larger and larger, his body disappearing. The magic lantern is distorting the world, turning him into a massive floating head. Yet, he is still smiling, white teeth moving behind his lips as his jaw moves. He's talking, asking me how I am feeling.

Fear has asphyxiated my voice and I can only reply with widened eyes darting from bone to bone, trying to join the dots into a picture I can point at. I want to show him what I see, but he is blissfully unaware, still grinning, even as his teeth start falling from his mouth.

The fire-making bone against bone spit flames from the stage surrounding my bed, sucking the air from the room, making it difficult to breathe. I begin to hyperventilate, helplessly watching the doctor's lips start to melt in the heat. His cheeks run like paint down a wall, the creamy liquid of his face dripping to the floor and seeping into the cracks.

I watch it ebb across the smooth linoleum and then pool in the grooves made by decades of moving beds and angry elephant feet in laced up nursing shoes. His ice-cream face slides in thinner and thinner streams and I begin to panic; fear that he will disappear entirely. He will simply be a crusty, sticky residue that will be stomped off, wheeled off, taken away from me. Like a stuck, stretched piece of chewing gum.

I lurch off the bed, wires and tubes stretched taut behind me, a jelly's stinging cells pinned into my arms. I stretch my neck as far it will go, my arms held firmly behind my back by the predatory machines. I stick my tongue out like a dehydrated kudu reaching for drops of water on leaves that are just out of reach. I manage to place the tip on the ground, trying to lick away the last wetness of his remains. Grains of dirt, layers of grime from other doctor's faces, other body fluids from other patients that were never wiped clean. It all gathers on my lips and crunches between my teeth, but I cannot spit the germ-layered crusts out. The rules say I am not allowed to purge.

I swallow.

As sand-spotted saliva slides down my throat I am instantly thrown into the spiralling numbers in my head, trying to figure out how many calories are in the dirt; what desire has cost me in grams. It brings me back to a different reality, the one that finds me staring at a filthy floor with no melted face, my arms suddenly slack.

The cords attached to the electrodes on my chest have come loose in the struggle. The machine's alarms beep loudly, bouncing around in my skull. Tattle-tale tentacles that will get me into trouble again.

Two nurses rush in, cursing under their breath. They put me in restraints and tie me to the bed again. One removes my gown forcibly, a non-verbal way of telling me I am a nuisance. She slaps the electrodes back on and connects me back to the living machine; the mocking, constant tone of my heart rate in its repetitive voice.

I can still feel grains of dirt in my mouth and I being to gag, the acidic heat of vomit rising from my stomach. It tastes like the room smells, that same stinging stench of the skeletons that are still in a vapour around the air conditioner.

I beg the nurses to turn it off. That more and more dead pirates will clamber into the room. One nurse tells me that they need to leave it on. Hospital sanitary regulations. *I wouldn't be so cold if I allowed myself to eat something.*

I can hear the mocking smile in their voices, the rocking laughter of the beasts that are breathing against my neck.

The nurses leave the room. The sound of sticky gum beneath their shoes.

Anxiety strokes its snow-tipped finger across my jawbone and the tingling on my tongue is familiar. I try to remember what ice cream tastes like. I imagine it turning to fat like warm melted wax beneath my skin and grainy bile rises in my throat again.

A frustrated silhouette of a skeleton, no longer headlights shining on the deer of my attention, slashes a sharpened bone across the ceiling, blood splashing onto the sheets. I

writhe against the restraints on my wrists and ankles, my voice gargling in my throat. Brown leather burns my wrists, chains clanging like cymbals against the metal bars of my bed.

Nurses rush in again, their curses louder this time.

I shriek about the blood on my bed, the crimson splatter from so many centuries seeping into my skin. They tell me there is nothing there, that I am imagining things again, that we are the only ones in the room. They say my sheets are white, my skin is white, the walls are white. My magic lantern illness has made me lose trust in what is real. I don't know if the nurses exist, if the shackles on my limbs are actually there, if the dancing skeletons are in this room or on a ship or only in my mind. I begin to wonder if I am one of them, an observer of my fate, doing the salsa above my own body.

One nurse tries to stick a spoon in my mouth. Double cream yoghurt filled with fat oozes down my chin, my lips tightly pursed against its betrayal. She raises her voice and digs the metal piece of cutlery against my teeth beneath a thin layer of skin. *"If you consume something the projections will stop."*

Eat or hallucinate.

I don't know which is more frightening.

A new bag of fluid is attached to the tube leading to my vein. More drugs make sleep ooze into my cells, paralysing my limbs, flashing images on the lids of my eyes. Metal on metal tongue-clicking of the smoke drums in my mind.

Fingers snake through the back of my throat and slowly edge towards my open lips. They pat my tongue blindly as if it were trying to find its way in the dark, then crawls over my lips and onto my chin. An entire hand now, reaching from inside of me, strokes the pale skin of my cheek. Then, in a flirtatious move, wipes a small smudge of yoghurt from the edge of my lip, before sliding quickly back into the hole inside of me.

I sink beneath the surface as the slippery arm glides effortlessly along my membranes, like an octopus tentacle moving through water; stroking, sliding, sensing subtle

movements in response from my own body. I am submerged in the depths of my mind and yet another tide is rising involuntarily in my pelvis. It must be a dream, but my body experiences it regardless. This companion is taking up all the room in my head and in my flesh, making it difficult to breathe, impossible to find my own space.

A hand – my own – twitches under the sheet. An involuntary movement as I sink further into watery darkness. The click snap of the metronome hypnotically leads me through an underwater door to a dream.

Another hand – not my own – strokes my hair in a silent lullaby.

HOW MEMORIES BLUR AND MERGE

Dolphins occasionally choose to put themselves in a trance-like state.

It's a fun game for them to find a puffer fish, put it in their mouth and give it a squeeze, and then pass it on to another dolphin. This curious behaviour is believed to be an intentional way of getting a "high." When pressure is applied to a puffer fish it releases a small burst of neurotoxin which makes the dolphins react in a peculiar way. They have been observed relaxing with their noses at the surface of the water, perhaps fascinated by their own reflection. Essentially they are "tripping," much like human beings after taking psychedelics.

*Or after being medicated with Propofol in hospital.
Propofol is a sedative injected directly into the vein.
Patients often have hallucinations before losing consciousness.
It's also known as the "milk of amnesia."*

Much like people, dolphins remember their social interactions, and the same individuals are likely to "do drugs" together. However, memory serves a much more important role in the wild than determining who to spend recreational time with.

Bottlenose dolphins can remember whistles of other dolphins they have socialised with, even after twenty years of separation. Each signature whistle serves the same function as a name and is as unique as a fingerprint. When a dolphin hears another one underwater, they instantly remember if it is friend, foe, offspring, or sexual mate.

Dolphins exist in what is termed a fission-fusion social system. Networks of 60 to 70 individuals hunt and socialise together, and this arrangement is rather fluid. They may leave one group and join others many times across their lifespan. Remembering who's who is very important.

Complex social species such as primates, dolphins and elephants, have long-term social

recognition and memory. Naturally this leads directly to survival and reproductive advantages.

*Not remembering if someone is an enemy or a friend can be the difference between life
and death.*

The inability to recall where you saw them last is terrifying.

Especially if it was the surface of the water.

A mirror.

An ancient reflection.

Individual memories are recalled differently each time. When we pull it through our conscious mind, sometimes details are changed in the friction. Perhaps we change the colour of a lover's shirt, the specific song that was playing in the car, the brand of beer we were drinking.

We seldom make this error with smell.

If we smell the same thing, even decades later, it can take us back to an exact time.

The smell of ice-cream.

The smell of smoke.

Often, in our dreams, real memories float around with fiction. When we wake up we sometimes battle to discern the difference. Two parts of the brain are key players in this game: the amygdala and the hippocampus.

The amygdala is connected to emotional memory, and is strongly associated with those deeply rooted in fear. This is the part of the brain that remembers nearly drowning, or being captured by a predator.

The sound of a Zippo lighter clicking shut.

The amygdala will immediately recognise similar experiences in the future, helping you to respond accordingly, such as by running away.

The hippocampus is the nerdy part of the brain that deals with archives. It loves to catalogue memories and file the details. So, for example, if you think back to a party, the hippocampus is responsible for noting who was there, where it was, what you were wearing, and what time of year it was. It all comes together into one cohesive event in your mind.

A girl remembers how many lines she cut in her thigh.

How many calories are in an apple.

The size of her jeans at a party three years ago.

In the average day, these two parts of the brain work together and help us form long-term memories.

During a traumatic event, this system gets derailed. When fight-or-flight kicks in, the amygdala goes into overdrive and the hippocampus is suppressed. Your body needs to pay attention to the immediate danger and respond instantly. This means that the librarian in your brain freezes so that instinct can take over and save your life. This also means that cohesive memory is lost – those details aren't filed and catalogued as meticulously – and memory becomes jumbled, distorted, patchy.

After a rape, for example, a girl might be left with an incredibly strong and negative emotional memory, but have almost no recollection of the actual context of what happened. She may remember a specific thing like the tear in a man's shirt, the way his cologne smelled, or the sound of a train passing at the time. But she cannot put the sequence of events into any order; she battles to recall his face or where they were; how they met.

Sometimes, without knowing why, your brain associates particular sensations with danger. A smell, a sound, a visual cue.

Your amygdala jumps into gear again, responding powerfully to that sensual trigger, and straight into fight-or-flight mode. During a flashback, even if you are lying in clean, safe hospital bed, you may immediately start sweating, breathing heavily and feel your heart

pounding. Your body is being prepared to respond to a threat, even though it was just the look in a doctor's eyes.

This memory is retrieved without context. You can't remember when or where you were so terrified. It may even feel like it is happening all over again.

Maybe she really is seeing blood. Skeletons. Hands reaching for her neck.

They blame it on the Propofol.

Her dehydration. Low blood sugar.

What if the webbed hand on her face is real?

FIELD NOTES

Jane slept for 34 hours.

Her eyes twitched beneath her lids; her limbs jerked often.

Dreams and memories haunted her.

Her screams were heard two floors down.

VOICE

Malachi had a deep fascination with shipwrecks. He loved going on dives to explore nooks and crannies, and analysed multiple accounts of the wrecks, researched storms and recorded mechanical faults that resulted in carnage.

He was enthralled by ancient tales of sailors, pirates and ghost ships. I used to tease him, calling him my very own Jack Sparrow. He had the same beaded dreadlocks and obsession with old vessels. He didn't drink rum and he was hardly that crazy, but he was my Jack. I was his octopus mermaid. Marine creatures that somehow found solace in their strange union.

We sat on the beach sharing stories. My hands would stop shaking and fidgeting, as they moved into grand gesticulation about my octopus research. With animated expression I would talk about my cephalopod discoveries and journal articles I'd read and individual animals at the aquarium.

Frida.

Then he would follow with great tales and myths about haunted ships and phantasmagoria. His eyes would widen as he lingered on moments of fear, trying I expect to scare me, or maybe he was simply entranced by the legends.

Sailors returned home, sharing tales of terrifying and unearthly visions on the deep waters. They believed that these phantom ships hidden in mist were dark omens, a prophetic revelation of impending doom. They would foretell future wrecks, send warnings of danger ahead.

Some of these warnings saved vessels from certain disaster. By changing course they would later find out that they avoided a massive storm that would have certainly destroyed their ship and taken their lives.

Still, despite the potential salvation, encountering these apparitions was always frightening. Some men saw skeletal ghosts, deceased sailors perched on masts, their

hollow faces moaning for eternity. Perhaps they saw their future selves, their souls in perpetual unrest, trapped in the wild ocean forever.

Malachi took my hand, and pushed my sleeve up, then held my arm. He traced the path of ships with his fingertip along my forearm, turning it around and then running circles of storms on the soft, untanned skin of my inner arm. He stroked the protruding bones on my wrist and looked at me, questioning. I shook my head. Not a conversation I want to have.

He continued with his stories of flashes of light across the sky, the apparitions that would be shrouded in white fog, the creaking of the ghostly vessel audible for miles. It was rumoured that shifting clouds and weather often accompanied the phantoms; the bizarre, shared hallucination between seamen. Often dark clouds would rapidly move across a bright moon, usually full and large. It would cast light on the ocean surface, opening clear vision for up to 10 miles. The ship made sure it was seen and experienced.

The sound that rippled across the water resonated a haunting song, an echo that cast shadows and penetrated bone. Voices that were possessed by terror from the past would bounce like skimmed pebbles over the swells, crashing onto the wooden deck, alarming the sailors into hiding, their bodies bowed with fear.

Then, once again, I would smile broadly as I launched into my own tales of squids and octopuses and the giant Kraken. Its tremendous tentacles and suction power, how it could wrap around a man like a python, strangling all life from him. One swipe of a Kraken arm could split a vessel in two.

I poked Malachi in the ribs with my elbow.

Maybe one of my incredible creatures took down one of your historical ships.

He laughed. I laughed. We laughed. The sand beneath our feet felt happy. My toes curled into smiling lips.

We spoke about language. How the speech of ships are creaking moans, sometimes simply whispering movement of water. The octopus speaks in ink and undulation. They move and transform and translate their voice into shifting colour.

He threw a question into the damp, seaweed smelling air around us.

What is your language, Jane? How do you say things you don't really say?

What do you mean?

Well...I for example speak sometimes in silence. When I'm angry I go inwards. When I'm afraid I speak really fast. If I'm sad, I don't know. Perhaps that is when I go away for a while. Take a break. Disappear sometimes. Know what I mean?

I stared at the ocean, silently thinking about how I speak, what I am possibly trying to say sometimes. Obvious things came to mind. Rituals. Obsessions. Things that would remain unsaid.

I don't know. Maybe I work harder? I push physical limits. Go deeper and further. Look for facts, search for clues, try and find something new. I think my cephalopod research is my way of speaking when I'm feeling something I cannot put into words. Maybe.

You say 'maybe' a lot.

Maybe...I raised my eyebrow, teasing...maybe that means I am uncertain.

He was still holding my arm in his hands. He traced his finger along my ulna, a clear line of bone threatening to slice through my skin from the inside.

You speak in more ways than you know, Jane.

Don't. Don't go there. You don't know what you're talking about.

I stared at the ocean again, breaking eye contact, breaking contact in general. Slippage.
Not feeling.

He let go of my arm. Gently, but obviously.

Maybe your Kraken is bigger than you think, love.

Maybe.

Maybe your shipwrecks speak of something deeper in you too.

Maybe.

He took my hand again and silence carried the conversation for the rest of the night.

THE SUBTLE LANGUAGE OF OCTOPUSES

Octopuses don't hide their emotions.

Dynamic displays of aggression, for one, are impossible to misinterpret.

It happens suddenly, intended to startle an adversary.

The cephalopod arms extend to their maximum length and the mantle transforms into the shape of a church bell. Most of its body remains pale, but the edges burn dark red, revealing rows and rows of engorged suckers.

The pupils of its tremendously large eyes dilate, the thick black bar of the iris consuming the white ball. It stares straight ahead, piercing its target with fear.

Powerful jets of water are propelled against the enemy, as the arms are thrown suddenly to the front and then to the sides, in a display some scientists have termed a “demonic appearance.”

The octopus has lost its protective shell that evolution kept for its cousins, the Nautilus and Ammonite. This makes it vulnerable to predators.

Emotional outbursts are often responses to the fear of being hurt.

This can also express itself physically.

Fierce contortions of its body gives the octopus the element of surprise and induces terror, giving it time to take flight.

When severely threatened, however, it will launch into a full-blown attack.

FIELD NOTES

Jane didn't see it coming.

A marine demon unchained.

From the belly of the ocean.

From her own.

SPINE

My vertebrae are stacked like boxes. A clumsy tower from head to pelvis, keeping me upright, but never denying how fragile it is. I wonder what pockets of information are hidden in these odd-shaped bones that bundle nerves and radiate them out into rest of the body. What songs and stories travel along the spinal cord and echo into the boxes, lodge themselves there, and wait for the tower to fall.

The day of the wreck I broke my back. C4 and C5 snapped in half, the tenacious spinal cord hanging on like a threaded nerve through a tooth. The secrets spilled out, the bones that were meant to hold me together and standing tall, that were designed to keep the fragile parts protected; cracked their mouths open.

Memories from that day float around me like cardboard boxes bobbing in the swells and then sinking. I remember that moment most clearly. Floating alone on the surface, surrounded by our research notes leaking their ink into the sea, thousands of pages disintegrating and disappearing. There must have been pieces of the ship too, broken planks and torn sails. But I don't remember those. I only see the papers, the cardboard boxes, the fragile pieces slipping away.

I screamed for Malachi, his name a red flare into the sky. I shouted it so many times the entire world turned red above the devastation. That is one way our fragile secret bled into gossip. I didn't search for anyone else. I didn't cry out any other name. Just Malachi, Malachi, Malachi.

That which was supposed to be protected and held upright, an aligned and solid tower that belonged only to us. A spine now shattered and floating in pieces around my body and around this ocean.

When I curl in a ball in front of the mirror, my curved backbone protrudes like a dorsal fin. There are scars not formed by my own hand, the place where they cut me open to

puzzle-piece the bones back. Running my fingers along these lines feels entirely different to touching the scars I made with a scalpel myself. Theirs are thicker, less precise, and have healed in keloids – thick pink worms that feel full of something from that day. No matter how often I touch them I just can't reach what they contain. I can't feel past them to my bones. I see them, of course. I see the stacked vertebrae protruding against my skin, my thinness stabbing me from the inside. But I can't touch them through those scars, just two lines that seem to cover up so much.

That day hovers above every moment since, casting a shadow on all new memories. Not just because of the loss that day.

The boat, Malachi, the crew, our research.

Not that.

The world, before then, was structured in a certain way:

- This is the skeleton of a boat, this is what holds it together, keeps it afloat. This is the hull, the cabin, the deck.
- This is how I cut and starve myself. These are the rows and the numbers.
- This is how we arrange our research. Abstract, hypothesis, results, conclusion.
- This is how a vertebral column is stacked. C1 to C7. L1 to L5. One on top of the other.

The world, after that, had no spine.

Like the beast that took us down that day.

She rose without bones from the depths.

My first memory is one of silence.

Between the moment of making eye contact with the cephalopod, her massive iris enveloping me, and the crash of one her tentacles on the deck of the boat. Planks of wood snap like matchsticks beneath the force of her strike.

Again – silence.

Then screams of terror as another tentacle hurls towards the boat, crashing through the mast and wrapping around the hull, squeezing, as if it were a tiny mussel shell, cracking and crumbling in her grip.

One man dives overboard, into a large swell left in the wake of her raised arm. A massive eye locks on his helpless flailing and from below another of her tentacles rises up, the tip wrapping around his waist. His death is so sudden that I don't hear him scream.

Fear is shaped like silence.

And then, in a fit of rage, all eight tentacles lurch into the air, pieces of the boat flying across the sea. Screams of men dying, limbs scattered, blood and water and wood.

In a cacophony all her limbs now shudder down at once, demolishing all that is left.

I heard it before I felt it. Before the deck beneath me opened its jaws.

A shaft of wood, long and thin as a straw, sliced between my ribs. Sliced so neatly that I was almost surprised when I saw blood dripping off the end of it. Dripping onto a creature's lips sipping from the jagged edge. Sipping on the bright red blood that poured in a straight line from my chest. Lips dripping with life, framed by a grey face that I felt I should know, but didn't. Lips that weren't mine, but red that was.

Then, the sound of creaking poles, wood snapping, water pummelling. Pushing me under, holding me beneath breath. I felt my neck crack against a fist of hard metal. I stretch my mouth wide in pain and the long bands of muscle in my neck tighten. I find myself trapped in the space between the scream and its sound. Water rushes down my throat and I choke, groping with my hands for the neck of drowning, to make it stop.

I am pushed

up

up

up.

Buoyed by a tentacle longer than our boat. She lifts me out of the water as if she were

raising a living sacrifice to a god. Then I'm placed far from the wreck on a piece of debris, but close enough to see her continue the destruction. To watch those massive arms punch the boat beneath the surface.

I scan the surface, searching for life, for Malachi.

With my injured neck it is impossible to dive down and find him.

At these depths I have no chance anyway.

I can only hope that a gasp will burst through the surface. That I will see his floating dreadlocks and have a chance to save him.

But there is only paper and wood and so much red.

Fatal cuts that went deep and through.

I lost consciousness and regained it several times, too exhausted to be afraid anymore.

At first I was freezing and my limbs were numb. I knew that hypothermia would set in soon.

Yet, the next time I woke, I felt warmer.

Surrounded.

Eight massive arms, in the inverted protective position, cradling me like a fragile brood of eggs.

I lay separated from currents and predators, enveloped in a gelatinous embrace.

Aggression had shifted in the beast to a weird form of maternal instinct.

Like an injured child I was held and rocked to sleep.

I dream that my arms have multiplied, that I am free diving beneath a ship that is shaped like a man.

I feel revenge grind like sand between my teeth and lunge upwards, piercing my arms through his hull-shaped chest.

I'm surrounded by wreckage and floating corpses.

My eyes open and close as hours pass.

Dreams and visions fill the space around me.

We were attacked by a massive cephalopd. Malachi is gone.

I am the beast.

I killed them all.

The blood runs down my arms.

Two, then eight.

I pummel his wooden body and pull apart his limbs.

Then devour the heart.

Swells of water toss me back and forth, the sound of death loud inside my brain, lurking behind burst eardrums.

I put my head back and let the currents carry me.

It reminds me of the day Mom died.

How I killed her too.

When I am in the ocean I lose myself and merge with the beast.

It's the only time I feel perfect.

The massive beast that ripped apart our boat was a cephalopod with no spine. The destruction of wood and flesh and steel was random and unplanned. Memories had no beginning and no end, nothing that used to make sense made sense anymore. The real world blurred with fantasy and myth, making any research unreliable. The animal was not from a textbook and wasn't something we could define or explain. It broke my back and it drowned all that I knew to be true.

When I place my fingers on the spinal scars, I return to floating, sending up flares, bewilderment.

I can't stand up straight and steady anymore.

As if I too have no bones.

THE STRENGTH OF A CEPHALOPOD

The Giant Pacific Octopus is able to break a shark's spine with its arms, then pass the pieces of flesh to its beak. This, the largest octopus in the world, can reach up to 9 metres across and weigh nearly 300 kilograms.

It has 240 suckers on each of its eight arms, and each of these can lift a weight of 16 kilograms. Passing an object of prey from limb to limb takes no effort at all.

This particular octopus can crush small species of shark.

The tentacles wrap around their prey, preventing them from struggling, and often squeeze them to death. Their beak is the hidden danger, however. Most octopuses have venomous bites, often strong enough to paralyse prey. They continue to slice and bite their way through the animal.

The beak easily severs spinal cords, bites chunks out of brains, and carves into vital organs.

A close relative to the octopus, the squid, is another ruthless cephalopod.

The colossal squid is nearly 15 metres long and weighs up to 750 kilograms. It has the largest eyes of any animal on earth – 40 centimetres. This beast has no problem spotting its prey.

Many species of squid have sharp teeth and claws surrounding their suction cups. Each animal can have up to 35 000 teeth. This slicing power, combined with metres of constricting muscle, creates a formidable opponent.

ACT IV

The beast starts to become aware of itself, its capabilities, its strength, its transformation. It remembers who it once was and what it can become.

Slowly zoom the camera in on the large suckers on the creature's tentacles. Ensure there is continual motion, as if the animal is fearlessly approaching the cameraman.



HANDS

I used to place thirty cigarettes between my lips each day. It was always exactly thirty.
Smoking gave my hands rhythm, a beat, a way of keeping time.

Open the lid,
select a cigg,
pull it out,
close the lid,
tap the cigg three times on the box,
lift it between my middle and forefinger to my lips,
cup my hands around a lighter flame,
suck in hard.

The first inhale was always the fullest,
the longest,
the most satisfying.
Place the blue lighter on top of the box,
remove the cigg from my mouth,

exhale.

Watch the orange tip chase the black ash,
then lift it to my lips again.

Between drags I would rub the cellophane from the cigarette box between my fingers,
flip the lid open and closed, open and closed. A ritual. A prayer.

Smoking was my string of rosary beads.

I wasn't allowed to smoke when I looked after my neighbour's baby. Every Friday night

she went out with her boyfriend and begged me to sit next to her newborn and read a book. Sometimes the baby would cry and then I would either need to change her diaper or feed her a small bottle of formula. After a few weeks I learned to tell what she needed based on the pitch of her cry.

Hunger was always preceded by a moan and lots of movement in her cot. She would wriggle her arms and reach for the air above her face, searching perhaps for a breast, a point of contact, connection.

If she found nothing in her immediate space her moan would turn into a primal scream that drummed into my skull. I think mothers would feel it in their bones.

The baby always continued howling, even after she was picked up and I was walking to the kitchen to warm up the bottle. Yet, as soon she heard the microwave door close she would turn silent, except for a few aftershock sobs. Her little fists would grab onto my shirt as she listened to the thirty seconds of the microwave plate turning. As soon as it pinged her tiny arms would reach into the space between her mouth and the bottle, her fingers opening and closing, trying to grab the milk before she even laid eyes on it.

While drinking she would grip my hair between her hands, tugging harder the harder she sucked. Satisfied moaning, pulsating fists, eyes locked on mine. After feeding she would always place one of her hands in her mouth, covering it in milky saliva. It was her own miniature ritual. Prayer.

As soon as I got back to my flat my fidgeting, anxious, nicotine-deprived hands would fumble around the cigarette box, needing to make up the lost hours, the lost numbers, add it back up to thirty before going to sleep. No matter how late it was I always hit the magic number, always followed the same prayer as I smoked.

If I reached my daily number too soon my hands would become restless and I would pace around the flat,

fidget,

stare at the next day's cigarettes

and not allow myself to go into them.
I would chew my fingernails and cuticles,
staring at the clock,
watching the seconds until midnight,
my hands shaking like a heroin addict in withdrawal.

It wasn't the physical urge for nicotine. It was the ritual, the sequence, the definite string of events that my hands could follow. Without it I felt unhinged.

These hollow hours were the dangerous ones. They were the spaces that filled with my holy water blood.

Drawing thin lines in my skin with a blade gave my hands the same relief that smoking did. It sounded like the same prayer.

Anxiety's Lucifer was kept in a cage,
controlled,
paced,
fortified by cutting and smoking.

The memory of Malachi smelled like cigarettes and conversation. The rare moments I didn't need to pace my breathing, when anxiety was overshadowed by connection.

I couldn't smoke for a long time. It brought him back into the room every time and I could never hold onto the white air and make it flesh again. My rosary beads were scattered across the floor.

To keep my hands moving, to stop my fingers from digging into the wooden floors and clawing at the paint on the walls, I began a new phalange prayer. Drumming the beat of numbers on the side of my leg in multiples of three.

Protein percentages and daily deficits. My hands opening and closing in anticipation of nurturing milk, fingers drumming and beating an emphatic *no* against my femur.

Calluses rising red on my knuckles, layers of lacerations from my body's rebellion. Nails brittle and bitten, peeled back from too much counting and drumming and tapping in threes.

Rituals and prayers to lull the primal urges, the screaming for milk, the pulsing fists in my brain.

Hollow hours turned to hollow bones.

The smell of Malachi never left the room.

THE EMBODIMENT OF THOUGHT

Listening demands incarnation through the body.

Women in flowing Victorian dresses, forced to gather for hours with other wives, would often knit while engaging in conversation. While listening to a podcast it is fairly common to doodle while making notes. Even watching TV is often accompanied by a hand absentmindedly taking popcorn from bowl to mouth. Praying is embodied by manipulating rosary beads.

Hands that aren't kept busy while listening, even when tuning in to one's own thoughts, will find a way to complete the high energy circuit. The agitation will find a way to overflow into the body. Idle hands will start to scratch, pluck, pull and rub.

Racing thoughts manifest through fidgeting hands and restless bodies. Anxiety can make a person "look" crazy. It can drive them to seek help from a psychiatrist.

Wouldn't they find it ironic, that while they potentially lay on Sigmund Freud's couch, venting about their uncontrollable agitation, the psychoanalyst himself would be obsessively licking his gem ring while listening. Hidden behind the patient, he rather enjoyed fidgeting with tiny figurines during psychoanalysis sessions. His consulting room was filled with small and fragile amulets for this purpose.

Sometimes what we consider crazy is an entirely normal human experience.

A clear thought in a hospital room is about to be embodied.

A message, a song, a call.

Before the girl could hear the other voice her hands would need to be occupied.

Manipulating an object in our hands is a way of connecting to something outside of ourselves. We discover the form and shape of another.

Sometimes we become too attached. Too obsessed about what we are holding onto.

An infant instinctively clings to the mother for survival. It is traumatic to be separated because they view the mother as part of themselves, but eventually we all go on a journey of discovering what is “me” and what is “not-me.” Sometimes infants use a transitional object like a blanket or teddy bear that takes the place of Mom.

The baby builds a sensory relationship with this item which lessens the stress of separation from the mother. This is why it is important to not wash the object repeatedly, even if it is well-worn and dirty. It is this very nature of sensation that gives the baby comfort. The transitional object, which has strong personal and familiar quirks like smell, texture and taste, is a strong defence against anxiety.

During later development, and certainly as adults, our transitional objects transform into the use of symbols and sentimental items. For example, if a loved one is away from home on a long trip, a blouse that is still scented with their perfume can be a source of comfort. Putting it against our face helps us feel less stressed, depressed or anxious. Other people carry “lucky charms” like marbles in their purses and feel safer having it close by. Intellectually most know that it is mere superstition, but the sense of comfort it brings is genuine. On a microscopic level we get a sense of something we can hold and touch that is “not-me,” and ultimately that makes us feel less alone.

*A hand-carved, white, oval object – so light it is almost weightless - is placed in the
girl's hand.
Her fingers reflexively twitch.*

A cuttlebone is the internal shell of a cuttlefish.

Cuttlefish live in shallow water, usually on the continental shelf. The cuttlebone is filled with gas and helps the creatures with their buoyancy, but they are hard and brittle, making them rather fragile under pressure. They implode, depending on the species, at a depth of 200 to 600 metres.

*Will she remember her favourite deep dive snack: cuttlefish popcorn?
Or how she ate the flesh meticulously off others and collected the shells?
Will holding the creature's bone remind her how it once tasted?*

According to Inuit folklore, a woman's stone carvings embody her memory of her own wild consciousness and her union with pure instinct. By holding these talismans she connects with an ancient animal inside of herself.

In the earlier story of the selkie, the distressed woman who lost her seal skin has begun to deteriorate. She has turned grey, grown frail and thin, lost her vitality, and has started to go blind. As she clings to the rocks, her hands rubbing against their sharp edges, she hears a call deep within her unconscious. An ancient voice rising to the surface calling her back to the ocean. Her true wild nature.

The tale proceeds to say that the part of her that hears and responds to the voice from the sea is her inner spirit child. We are told that something happens to a seal woman in a skinless state. A tiny new life is formed within, a small flame that manages to survive inhumane and abusive conditions. A being designed to survive. This spirit, *la nina milagrosa*, a miracle child, has the ability to hear the call. It is this tiny soul that darts over ice crags and slippery stones, responding instinctively to the cry. During this hasty and desperate race to the wild depths, the child accidentally trips over the mother's rolled-up seal skin.

*The mother, the self, the girl in the hospital.
The disembodied voice, the cry, needs to be incarnated.
Needs to push its energy into the body.
The hands.*

Watch her hands.

The child returns the seal pelt to the mother. The child gives her what she needs to return home.

*The girl in the hospital is still asleep, but her fingers begin to feel the grooves in the
cuttlebone.*

They run along the edges of the carving, like a blind person reading Braille.

She is listening.

She is remembering.

The selkie, or seal woman, immediately heads for the ocean. She doesn't leave the child behind, nor does she take the little person with her forever. Instead, she takes the child for a brief visit beneath the surface of the water. In this underworld the young girl is educated in the ancient ways of the wild soul and transforms into a medial woman. One who can stand between two worlds. Between reality and the unconscious. The woman who can walk along the midway line between logic and imagery, between feeling and thinking, body and spirit. Her lungs are filled with a different *pneuma*, a new breath. The Inuit believe that the breath of a human and the breath of a god can mingle and the person can create new and holy songs, stories, prayers.

The power of the medial woman can be summoned by rhythms.

Praying.

Singing.

Writing.

Rite.

Ritual.

Fairytales are often metaphors of the truth, told in a way that we instinctively understand.

Her hands were always busy. Always fidgeting. Always seeking.

Smoking, cutting, counting.

Her rituals were a summons.

Her prayers were heard.

The medial woman is in the room.

ACT V

The creature holds a man-made spear in one of its tentacles. As the suckers roll over the object, it's as if the great animal starts to remember.

In the distance, from the perspective of the animal, we see a ship approaching.



EYES

I'm five years old, my too-small goggles sucking onto my face. I'm determined to dive down to the bottom of the deep end of the pool and retrieve the transparent marble my dad tossed in. He insists I will never see it again, never mind have the ability to get that deep to pick it up. I guess he did it to keep me busy. He knows how obsessive I become when I am focussed.

My lungs are flames licking my ribs, but I go down again and again. I still haven't seen the marble, but I know it's there. I saw it go in.

The light of the sun plays with the water, turning it into a mosaic of shapes. Some are like prisms, blinding triangular glares. Others are darker circles, rippling into one another. As the water moves around my exhausted arms while I catch my next breath, the shapes shift, the light changes, the colours merge. I dive down again to try find the impossible - a clear glass ball that blends effortlessly against any of the pictures the light paints.

I float on the surface, holding my breath, alert to any sudden reflection, any sign of the marble.

Then I see it.

A straight, thin beam of light from the floor of the pool.

I lift my head, take a deep breath, and then dive down. I exhale as I kick with every ounce of strength I have left, squashing my lungs into flat glass, as I reach for the marble.

I grip the small, smooth trophy in my fist and surface.

I shout for my dad in excitement, and look at the marble I'm holding between my fingers. I still have the goggles on, now misting up, and the tiny glass ball is dripping with water. Still, my childlike fascination draws me in and I put the marble against my goggle's right lens. I notice that it isn't completely transparent after all, but has a blue squiggle of colour embedded inside. I stare into the tiny wave and twirl the marble.

Like the eye of a fish it watches me. And then it winks.

The unexpected movement makes me drop the marble and it falls back into the depths.
My dad arrives, demanding to know why I called him.

I found it, I say, my voice uncertain.

He holds his hand open for the marble I don't have and gives me that slanted look that says his favourite word:

Liar.

Memories merge with dreams, which soon float into different dreams and it's impossible to tell if I'm awake or simply in the same room inside a different subconscious space.
The spilling of one dream into another.

There is so much water around me and I can still feel the goggles sucked onto my face.
The marble eye of the fish is right against mine. I stare into the blue swirls of colour and watch it watch me. In a weird way it's like looking into my own eyeball in the mirror.
That moment when you are so close to your own face in the glass that it feels like it belongs to someone else.

I close my eyes to shut out the image and begin screaming in my dream, knowing it cannot be real, shouting at myself to wake up. I feel the ocean against my skin and over my head, but I'm still able to breathe and scream. The sound of a rushing river is loud in my ears, the air itself is made of invisible water. I'm lying down in a bed, yet it feels like I'm floating in the sea. There is a strange sensation that makes me ready to take a deep breath, as if I will need to dive deep again at any moment. I'm in a room I'm in the ocean I'm in the pool.

I yank off the goggles, the rubber ripping notched ovals on my face.
Terrified, I open my eyes again, and it's still there.

The blue eye right against mine.

I smell the strong scent of the sea from the deep green seaweed washed up on the beach.
Water is still lapping against my body, like I'm lying in the sand as waves roll in.
I dig my hand into the mud and am surprised to find it clenching a sheet instead.
Dreams merge with memories and back into dreams.

Hospital bed.

I scream again, unsure if I am awake or still in a different world.
The fish eye that blinks, the marble that moves, floating in front of my face.
I shout for a nurse, I scream for my dad.

I know it's pointless.
I know what their eyes will say.

Liar.

I stop yelling.
I stop expecting someone else to see what I see.

I take a deep breath and let myself dive in.
I don't just look *at* the eye of the fish, I start to look *through* it.

It's only then that I realise it isn't a fish at all.

CAMOUFLAGE AND ILLUSION

The cuttlefish, squid and octopus are colour-blind. Yet, they are clearly able to distinguish colours, given their elaborate camouflage displays and courtship rituals. Colour is a definite priority for them.

This family of molluscs, also called cephalopods, only have one type of light receptor in their eyes, which technically means they shouldn't see colour at all. As an example, humans have a combination of light-receptive cone cells, and each of these contains pigments that are sensitive to different parts of the visual spectrum. People who are colour-blind lack a particular type of cone. Now the octopus only has one receptor – so how on earth does it see colour?

The answer: Their eyes are very bizarrely shaped. The pupils can be in a weird u-shape, or a w-squiggle that looks like a wave, or even dumbbell-shaped. These odd angles scatter white light in many different directions. It's called chromatic aberration. You may have experienced this yourself if you've ever had your pupils dilated.

Pupils dilate for various reasons:

- Taking certain drugs
- Sexual arousal

*Also in different dream states
And times of high stress*

Instead of focusing light through a narrow pinhole like we do (as do cameras and other animals), the octopus pupils blow light out. It spans into different wavelengths and then the cephalopod uses a few antics to discriminate colour – like changing the distance between lens and retina for example.

The outer surface of the human eye is called the cornea and it holds a thin layer of water.

This makes it denser than the air just outside the eye and causes light to refract as it enters. Then an internal lens refracts it further and onto the retina (specifically into molecules called opsins). These rest at the back of the eye and convert the light into electrical signals that the brain then interprets as images.

When we are underwater, which is the same density as the cornea, we lose that refractive trick of the cornea, so what we see becomes very blurry.

*Like seeing a marble underwater.
Or through a misted pair of goggles.
Or both.*

In the island archipelagos along the west coast of Thailand there is a tribe called the Moken people, also known as the sea-nomads. The children spend much of their day in the ocean, diving for food. They see twice as well as European children underwater, and are even able to discern fine details a few metres down.

Turns out that these kids naturally constrict their pupils as they descend. In fact, they do this to the known limit of human performance. In addition, they are able to change the shape of their lens. This is a similar light scattering trick to the octopus. Seals and dolphins picked up the same tactic themselves.

Animal eyes evolve with their environment.

If you look into the eye of a creature, you can tell where it's from.

If you want to look into the eye of an octopus, however, you may need to look across its entire skin. They have essentially developed a body-wide eye. Remember the opsins of the octopus and human retina? Amazingly they have these in their skin as well. In other words, light travels through these opsins and to the nervous system, much like they do through the creature's eye. An octopus skin can therefore detect colour and is particularly sensitive to blue.

This fine-tuned reaction to their environment not only makes them highly effective survivors in the food chain, but also correlates with huge curiosity in their surroundings. They are known escape-artists. Many have escaped their aquarium homes and wandered across the floor, adapting rather rapidly to a non-water habitat.

Of course, because they breathe through gills and are dependent on water for exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide, they can only survive on land for several minutes. If the skin remains moist, a small amount of gaseous exchange can still take place through the skin instead of the gills. In the wild they tend to move from pool to pool like this, never staying out of the water for a long period of time.

Its skin is breathing.

Its skin is covered in eyes.

A blue wave-shaped pupil adjusts to the light.

It stares into another.

Both eyes blink.

MOUTH

Her eyes move away from mine and begin exploring the rest of my face. As her gaze rolls down my cheek I can feel it on my skin, as if her act of seeing is a sliding glass ball.

She allows her eyes to rest on my lips and lingers there.

Coaxing,

taunting,

flirting.

The smooth sliding glass gently parts my lips and her gaze enters my mouth and dissolves on my tongue.

She leans back to see my response and of its own accord my mouth opens wider, my tongue reaching its taste-bud tip towards her.

The blue wave of her eye changes shape, transforming into a dilated circle, desire shifting and refracting light, then radiating once again between my lips.

She doesn't touch me, but I feel her eyes on my mouth and how the thumb of her iris strokes my tongue. She rolls the blue-waved marble up my cheek again, wet glass against my skin, and then we are eye to eye once more. I feel her reach through my pupil and onto the nerves that gather behind the colour and the shape of how I see.

Playing with my senses, her tentacled fingers now start to glide down my neck, yet although I can see the movement, I cannot feel the sensation. Her touch is silent on my skin.

She moves her fingers to her face and closes her eyelids, gesturing to me to do the same. Hypnotically, I obey and shut my eyes.

I can't feel anything in the dark, like I am alone again. I focus on my other senses. There is no sound, as if I am in a vacuum. No taste in my mouth, not even the memory of her. And then I sense the drift of a smell I recognise. The sea in the morning at high tide, when the kelp has washed back into the sea and the sun has started to warm the surface of

the water. It smells salty and green, like the algae that builds up on the glass of a fish tank or on rocks in a shallow pool. It's familiar and comforting, coming in waves, stroking the air around me.

The rock pool returns in the smell-shape of a memory. I'm thirteen, maybe fourteen years old. A group of us are clambering over rocks, just before the breakers. I'm trying to keep up with the popular girls, my awkwardness magnified on the uneven terrain. We have to collect different species of algae for our biology class. They only brought me along because I was the smart one, the nerd, the one who got straight A's and lined up her textbooks alphabetically. Usually I was the brunt of bullying. But not today. Today I had a purpose.

While we hunt for different types of green and brown, the girl who looks the most like Barbie lets out a squeal. Her silver promise ring has fallen between two rocks. Her friends try and help her but none of their hands can reach it.

I approach the huddle and offer to give it a try.

My arm slips effortlessly through the crack and I manage to tweezer the ring between two fingers and pull it out. Barbie grabs it from me, clutching it to her chest.

Oh my god, you have the thinnest arms! Slippery and slidy like a skinny octopus!

The other girls began measuring the slenderness of my wrists by taking turns to loop their fingers around them. Even their pinkie fingers managed to overlap their thumbs around my arm's bones.

It makes them stare in disbelief.

Wow. You really are thin.

Can't believe you got her ring back.

That's amazing.

The words turn to seaweed in my mind as the smell in the room thickens and becomes

more intense and I am pulled back to where I am. Waves of salted scent break into more waves, quicker and quicker. My heart starts beating faster and startled, I open my eyes again.

I see the creature's hand sliding down my waist, and realise that I sense her touch as smell, not as skin on skin. I close my eyes and allow myself to return to the focus of a single sense.

The sea gets stronger and stronger each time I breathe in, a quickening pulse. My body responds and I feel wetness in my vaginal fish mouth, salivating for more. Ocean scents mingle and ripples of fish and kelp and octopus spill over me. Faster and faster, like a rainstorm of different smells beating down harder and harder on a glass olfactory pane.

Then, with a sudden ebb it recedes back, becoming faint again, drifting into the distance. My heart is still pulsing with my goldfish mouth, and I keep my eyes closed until I can't smell anything at all anymore.

As my heart quietens I relax and smile. The gentle way one does when waking from a pleasant dream.

Slowly my eyes open again and a surge of loneliness floods me. I am swallowing sea water and I start to choke on the sudden feeling of being abandoned. The creature has left me.

There is an invisible film of glass on my face, smooth and cold, wet to the touch. My mouth tastes salty and the gaping lips of the vaginal fish is still searching for nourishment. For more.

I close my eyes again and stroke my cheek with my fingertips, imagining the smell of high tide.

The silver skin spilling from her shoulders to her waist slips into different shapes and patterns, watery marble that I want to run my fingers across; smooth ripples shimmering in circles and whirling into spirals. It's like liquid glass ink has been injected into water.

My reflection glides from one mirrored cell to another across her breasts, watching me through their adolescent, pointed nipples that look like tiny suction pads on the tentacle of an octopus. They move with her breasts, swaying in invisible water, never removing their gaze from me.

Being watched is hypnotic.

I place my palms against her nipples and allow them to suck onto my hands, drawing blood to the surface. Through areola eyes she sees herself in the red river beneath my skin. My hands lock on her breasts, squeezing, begging to be noticed. Milk spills between my fingers and streams down my arms.

My reflection looks different in the milk. I am younger. Pure. Clean.

Instinct leans me into her. My head nuzzling against her silver skin begs her to cradle me. I lick the white pouring down my hands, and follow the liquid to her breasts, allow my tongue to move around pointed tips as her webbed hand combs through my hair.

Nipples respond inside my mouth, sucking and releasing against my cheek, tongue, gums. I feel her expand, a tentacle lengthening as she explores, a breast becoming a hand that massages the curves and contours of the inside of my mouth. Her touch tastes like salt in an open graze, the ocean forcing itself into a wound, demanding to be felt. In the moment before I flinch she releases her milk again, soothing the sting. Feeding pulsates between pain and comfort.

My hands, just as an infant's does while drinking, open and close to the same rhythm I am sucking and swallowing the milk. They become ravenous, my fingers clawing at the skin on her back. Her flesh tears under my nails. In a pained response she wraps my hair around her hand like a rope and pulls as she arches her back, shoving a tentacle further down my throat. My neck thrown back releases memories like a flock of birds suddenly disturbed. But, like the salt-milk rhythm, the flashbacks are instantly soothed with the pleasure of her exploring the internal folds of my body. The hand of her breast is smearing my ribcage like fingers coating butter on the inside of a warm bowl.

Intellectually I expect my body to react to the exploring probe down my throat by gagging and trying to lurch it back out, but the sensation is the opposite. It's as if I am stretching a part of myself towards her, an arm extending outwards - not a tentacle moving in. Membrane edges move so closely against each other that it becomes impossible to sense which parts belong to her and which to me.

NOSE

It's the first time I am in the ice-cream doctor's office.

I see his lips moving but can't hear the words. Occasionally I make eye contact and nod, pretend to care about what he's saying.

I don't.

I am looking for her.

I can sense her liquid presence in the room, can smell the fish-tinged movement. I fixate on each item of solidness, searching it for tell-tale signs of her touch. Rows of glass and wooden amulets on his desk, tiny objects he probably runs through his fingers as he listens to patients. She's not in the smooth bear with one eye, and she's not in the textured porcelain wolf. She's not in the cracked crystal mermaid and she's not in the wooden mammoth. I try and recall the essence of her, the taste, the unnameable sense.

The night she visited me is fragments, pieces of broken glass, reflective shards that burn my eyes when I look at them too closely. The memory has no beginning or end, just bits and pieces of smells and images and sounds.

The moments dangle on invisible strings in the air, so close I can reach out and rest my fingers against them. That's how I am sure she is nearby. She spills into spaces through my senses.

I run my eyes along the smooth ebony of his desk and I can see the words he is speaking float across the surface, like heat above tar on a scorching day. The syllables form in a white haze, his drawl about dehydration and how I need to start drinking more on my own, stop relying on the drip. I imagine my lips blowing away the wispy ice-cream scented monotony, to once again reveal the smooth silent ebony. I search there for her. For a hint of her trail. But the wood isn't giving away any of its secrets.

I sniff at the air, a wild beast hunting for clues.

It's the sense that is strongest and immediately I begin to catch pieces of her. She smells like salty foam that remains on the sand after a wave has returned to the sea. When you put your face up against them and breathe, the bubbles start to burst, one by one, releasing a deep fragrance of sunken ships and chunks of fish. I inhale and exhale deeply, feeling the pops against my nostrils. Sailors' blood on planks, fins between my teeth, the bubbling that is distinctly her touching me.

I breathe in deeper still. The scent is incredibly strong now and I know that her skin is rubbing against mine.

The doctor stops speaking and it takes me a few seconds to notice him staring at my dog-like manner of scanning the room.

He raises his right eyebrow, miming the obvious question.

My shoulders shrug the only answer he will get.

He clicks his tongue repeatedly, as if the sound helps trigger him into thinking of something smart to say.

This time his words slide in liquid across the ebony as he pushes a glass of water towards me.

At first I am defiant and don't answer, nor do I reach for the glass.

But my eyes, continually searching for clues, are drawn to the water, still moving in the glass from his forced hand. I stare at the translucence, the clear ripples, the slight swirling. For just a moment I catch a glimpse of blue, a shiny topaz in the light, a gentle swish, a glittering essence.

Then gone.

As soon as I look for her, she disappears. Schrödinger's sea beast.

I push my hand through the dangling memories, slipping easily through with my thin octopus arm, and wrap my hand around the glass. I slowly carry it towards my face, holding it so carefully, as if its fragility could make it instantly disappear. Then I place

my eye against the smooth glass surface, run my finger along the rim, sniff gently at the water. Holding it up to the light I stare into it like a crystal ball, trying to see through the transparency into something else.

The doctor has his right eyebrow raised again. If this water wasn't so sacred to me right now I would throw it all on his head and watch a fish fin flap against his forehead, waking him up to what he cannot see. Long tentacles creeping around his neck and wrapping tighter and tighter until he begs me for mercy.

I answer again in silence and take a small sip of water.

As I swallow I feel scales cling to my teeth and I rub my tongue along their edges, fish flesh coated enamel. It makes me smile and I cover my mouth with my hand, afraid that he will see the shine, the consumption of her.

He starts talking again and I lick my lips. She tastes so fucking good.

It's fish and octopus and seaweed and ocean tide. It's sex and glass and smoothness and floating. It's rough sand and gentle waves and soft seal fur.

It's belonging.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF HUNGER

The octopus has eight arms and in the male, one of these is theoretically a penis. It's called a hectocotylus and it is a specialised mating tentacle. A groove runs along this phallic limb which carries pockets of sperm.

When mating, the male deposits the sperm into a hole of the female's mantle (her head). This is the same hole she uses to breathe and expel waste. In other words, it's a form of nostril.

Fortunately it isn't where the creature's sense of smell resides.

Females are quite a bit larger than males, are voracious eaters, and most often attack their male suitors and consume them. If they don't devour them, they often strangle or seriously injure their mates. It is not uncommon for males to have their limbs torn off or to die from their several wounds.

The longer the male's hectocotylus, the greater his odds of survival. The greater distance he can keep between himself and the female he injects her with sperm, the better. Some have even gone to extreme evolutionary lengths and will completely sever off their own arm, leaving it inside the female's mantle until she fertilises the sperm.

Some males will pretend to be females by camouflaging themselves to look just like their object of desire. This confuses other males (who are putting on a rather dramatic - and very masculine - colour display to attract attention) and prevents them attacking the cunning false females who are in their territory.

Males who look like females.

Men finding devious ways to mate.

Women not always able to fight them off.

Sadly, mating and breeding is the singular purpose of an octopus life. Soon after copulating, both male and female will start to deteriorate and enter a state that is called

senescence. In addition to a physical withering away, they also start to exhibit a form of dementia and lose their minds.

The male stops eating and doesn't return to its den. Eventually it dies from starvation or from simply being an easy form of prey.

The female retreats into solitude and only stays alive for as long as it takes for her eggs to hatch. One deep-sea species, *Graneledone boreopacifica*, brood over their eggs for up to four and a half years without ever leaving their spot to eat.

The cephalopod is clearly not interested in food after copulating. Their bodies stop responding to hunger. They lose their will to live.

*What comes first?
Cessation of hunger -
or wanting to die?*

Octopuses can lay over half a million eggs in one go, but only two will manage to survive and mature into adults. Sex seems to be a whole lot of effort and suffering for such a miniscule payoff, but instinct appears to rule logic in many species.

*Humans included.
Days spent counting, cutting, weighing, purging, calculating again.
To lose a few hundred grams.*

The larger Pacific striped octopus breaks all tradition and mate mouth-to-mouth and sucker-to-sucker. In addition, the touchy feely female of the species doesn't attack or eat the male, and she is able to lay many clutches of eggs before entering dementia and dying.

Touching is very important to the octopus.

The flexible arms of the octopus can squeeze into the tiniest of spaces, because they have

no internal skeleton or bones.

Much like a young girl who slid her arm in a rock crevice to retrieve a ring.

With the high regard given to the sense of touch, each arm of the octopus has hundreds of suction cups, some as many as 240. Each of these highly sensitive suckers are like tiny mouths that taste everything the creature touches. Nostrils included.

With sensors at the end of their tentacle-like limbs they are able to smell exceptionally well.

Smell equals touch.

Touch equals smell.

This is why they are often seen probing it into tiny holes and cracks. They are sniffing out potential prey.

Or mate.

Sometimes this is the same thing.

ACT VI

The octopus, although hiding in the depths of the ocean, is rapidly increasing in size. The injuries it sustained are regenerating into larger appendages.

** Camera to scan over a peaceful ocean scene. With a sudden loud bang, a tentacle bursts through the surface.*



CONSCIOUSNESS

I begin to have the same dream every night.

It forms like a memory, with familiar sounds and shapes.

I hear the Zippo lighter, I feel the rough stubble, I see the eyes on the wall.

Another memory merges with the first, as if it were paint smeared across an illustration.

Sensations of water and diving, the sound of men screaming, blood in my mouth.

My arms are tentacles, my mouth is a beak.

The paint smears, rubs off, blends again.

I am human, feel sheets beneath my hands, then water, then sand.

Cascades of dreamlike states, in and out of worlds, my eyes open then shut, awake and not.

I'm in the motel room, but surrounded by water.

He kneels in front of me.

I trace my forefinger down the middle of his hairy chest, keeping my eyes locked on his.

I watch his pupils dilate in anticipation of sexual pleasure. When I reach the soft space

beneath his sternum, the riptide between his ribs, I pause. Then, turning my hand

sideways, I place my fingertips against his skin, a perfectly straight line, marking the

current that will pull him out to sea.

With my eyes still baiting him, I feel the waters pull back, the energy building up behind me. She flows forcefully into me and through me, sinews wrapping around mine, bones stacking like concrete.

Her fingers weld into mine and spear into his chest, our clawed hand riding the crest of the enormous red wave straight to his heart.

His eyes shift instantly from pinpricked desire, to wide white shock, and then scrunch together like crumpled paper in pain. His scream roars into the tiny room and ricochets off the walls, and the sound of blood in his cries sends a surge of predatory instinct through my arm. I am the sea wolf, I am Kraken, I am Megalodon, I am the hunter.

I grab his heart in my hand, my fingers piercing his beating muscle like razor blades through soft orange salmon. I pull back with the strength of the ocean and drag the bloody ball out his body; the sensation of pulling a deeply buried weed from its roots.

His body falls backward and I am left with a warm heart in my hands, arteries and veins dangling down my arm, bits of flesh and shards of rib bone in the pool of blood I am kneeling in.

I attack the heart with my teeth like a hungry beast, devouring it in an angry frenzy, an ancient rage shredding and swallowing the soul of my prey.

With blood streaming from my mouth and down my neck, I tilt my head back and close my eyes. A primal scream from thousands of women spirals around my spine and bellows like a nuclear shock wave into the room, down the hallway, across roads and rivers, and returns to the ocean, wild and untamed.

I startle awake and sit up in bed.

My eyes dart across the room. Hospital. Still here.

The sheets are white.

The walls have no faces.

There is no water.

Trembling, I look down at my hands.

I grasp at my face, wipe my neck, and then look again.

No blood.

I run my thumbs along my fingertips.

Over and over again.

Then I lift my palms close to my eyes, scrutinise each line in my skin.

They are clean.

NERVES

Guilt burrows into my nerve fibres, a living multitude that feels like the sorrow of grief, but is closer to self-flagellation. My nerves whip through and around my flesh as the guilt eats itself deeper and deeper, becoming both the source and the receptor of pain.

It's my fault that we were still out at sea, despite the approaching storm and exhaustion of my crew. I was so obsessed with *Enteroctopus dofleini*, the octopus I had spent my life studying, that I could think of nothing else. I wanted to take more notes, send the cameras down lower, take the co-ordinates over and over again, just to be sure. I had made them angry, even Malachi. But they knew there was no talking me down when I had my mind glued like a barnacle on an impulse.

Now they are all dead. Because of me.

I deserve to be punished.

I can't forgive the boat snapping in half like a twig, the sea turning red, the taste of not-my-own blood in my mouth and its stickiness on my hands.

The octopus was a real beast that ripped the vessel apart, but it was also a vivid metaphor of my obsession. My self-absorption drowned my men, my eight arms pushing them beneath the swells.

It's been one year and four months.

Still, the same voice travels along my nerves, up my spinal cord, and into the language centre of my brain.

You deserve to be dead, you selfish fuck-up. No atonement. None. You good for nothing piece of shit. They are dead because of you. Mom is gone because of you. It's all your fault. You blew up your life because you're so fucking self-absorbed. You need to be punished. You must be lacerated. Starved. Thrown against walls and have your bones broken. You are impossible to look at. Unworthy of love. I wish you could just be fucking invisible and die. Just die.

It doesn't sound like me. It's kid grammar laced with crude aggression. Yet it is me. It's my voice stretching across miles and miles of nerves, into my fingers, onto the blade, down my throat.

But the scales never balance.

Guilt weighs more than atonement.

The abuse of guilt feels so much like grief, but it's not.

I still haven't mourned the loss. I haven't cried over my Malachi. I haven't thought about Mom. I have only screamed and writhed through the currents of self-punishment.

Grief is still waiting.

Demanding to be held.

ARMS WITH A MIND OF THEIR OWN

The tiny beastie I have formed a deep friendship with at the aquarium is a common octopus. *Octopus vulgaris*. I've named her Frida. When she wraps her tentacles around my arm it feels like a second skin. It is the only time I feel comfortable being held.

She has around 500 million neurons in her body, which puts her in the same range of some rather intelligent mammals. What makes her different though, is that the majority of her neurons are in her arms - double the amount in her brain. Even if she tragically severed off one of her arms and I took it to the lab, it would still be able to reach for my hand and hold it.

Would the arm be able to your voice?

Do your nerves detect sound?

There has been some controversy in the world of medicine around sound and the nervous system. It has been widely accepted that electrical impulses are what send messages from the nerves to our brains where they are encoded. However, some scientists have a different theory. They propose that nerve signals are sound pulses.

Feelings seem to be a tricky area of research.

When a human loses a limb, it doesn't continue to move about on its own for a while like Frida's would. However, up to 80% of amputees feel that it is. A phantom limb, or other body parts, can register sensations in the brain. The person feels pain, gesturing, itches, twitches, and can even try to pick something up with their missing hand. Stress and anxiety can make these sensations stronger.

Losing a limb can feel like grief.

Maybe it travels along nerves in sound.

Guilt fills the space where something once was.

Felt as pain.

Grief lies like a severed arm, reaching.

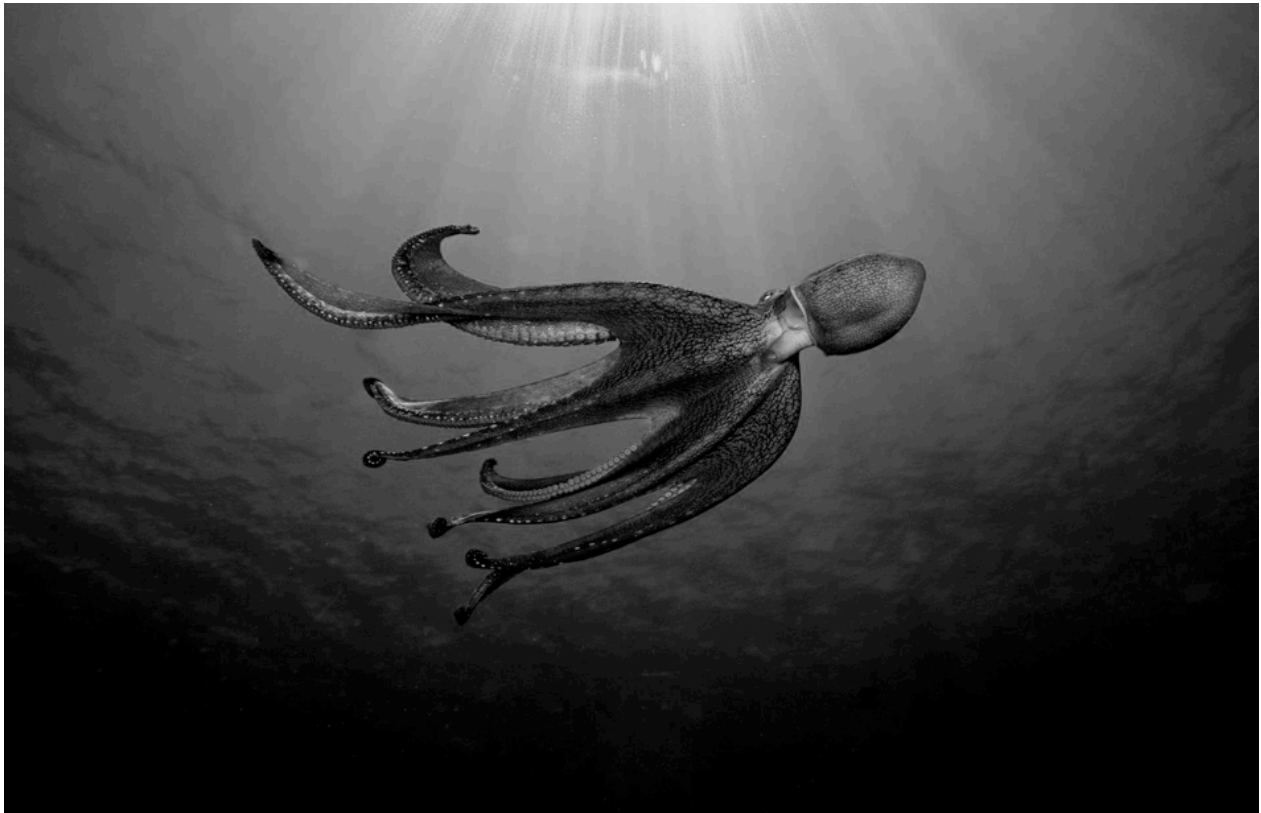
ACT VII

The enormous octopus quickly descends into the depths, its long arms trailing behind it.

Its three hearts beat slowly and calmly.

Gills flap open and closed to the same rhythm.

Timing, from now, will be perfect.



OVARIES

It's impossible to let go. Arranging things together keeps me a safe distance from frantic. Mug handles facing the same direction, knife edges in a row, toiletry bottles according to size. Ovums securely pocketed.

I love collecting things for Frida. On my dives I look through her eyes and sift through sand and wriggle my arm into rock crevices for sea glass and shiny shells. She is obsessive like me, meticulously arranging and rearranging her octopus garden. Her cave is like an eccentric artist's home, with rows of sentimental knick-knacks. She is a neatly organised hoarder, particularly fond of reflective surfaces that she can gaze into. I can never tell if she is looking at herself or right through to something else entirely.

Malachi collected tattoos. His dark skin was choreographed with formations of dancing ink. He had a fascination with intricate details and hidden symbols, an entirely new language on his skin that was as layered with meaning as his personality. He depicted me across his left ribs, a mermaid with octopus arms instead of a tail stretched along his side. He purposefully lined her limbs up perfectly with his gill-shaped bones. The mermaid hair was neatly pinned in a bun, identically to the way mine is always done. The placement was so specific, because I had the habit of placing my hands on his ribs and closing my eyes when I needed to calm my racing thoughts, my fingers slotting between his bones. I contained his breathing and his heartbeat between my hands, connecting to another being, his skin as smooth as the belly of a ray. His steadiness pulsed through my veins and my breathing slowed. Like Frida gazing into a mirrored shell, my hands sought the narrow aperture where I could blend myself into someone else, and feel the lightness of him reflected back.

My menstruation stopped a few months after Malachi's 300 grams stopped beating. My fingers had nowhere to slot into light, and my eggs no longer felt safe enough in my body to leave its follicle and travel to my uterus. Blood ceased to collect in the lined folds of my womb, and to curb the obsessive need for gathering and giving, I searched longer and harder for marine treasures for Frida. On my dive today I came home empty-handed so I

opened the tiny zip on the side of my bag in my locker and reached for my lucky charm, one I had never spent a day without since I first found it at the bottom of a pool.

Frida seems to prize her marble above all her other treasures. Instead of simply placing it in her garden, she spends hours passing it from sucker to sucker, up one arm and down the next, perfect sequences in counts of eight. Then, after rolling the glass ball hundreds of times, she carefully places it in the furthest corner of her cave. Maybe she knows it's not just an object; that sometimes it becomes an eye - a way of looking at yourself and someone else at the same time." That when you hold it in your hand it connects to your heartbeat and makes the zigzag lines less erratic.

Visiting Frida's garden every morning has become my Malachi ribs, my marble, my menstruation.

OCTOPUS GARDENS AND NURSERIES

Octopuses roam the ocean floor collecting shiny objects, and then take them back to their den.

Cephalopods seem to enjoy a sense of ownership and take pride in expanding their showpieces.

They're just as obsessive about their collections of eggs.

The inside-out pose is common for females that are brooding or protecting their young. They quite literally cradle their babies in their arms.

One *Graneledone boreopacifica* female guarded her eggs for four and a half years. In that entire time she didn't hunt or eat.

Soon after her young emerged, she died.

FIELD NOTES

Jane's obsessive nature now revolved almost entirely around a female octopus in the aquarium.

She would spend hours at the tank, simply staring at the creature and observing every tiny movement.

It seemed as if she was looking through the octopus sometimes. Jane's eyes would appear distant, perhaps fixated on a memory reflected in the water. Or maybe she had simply shut the world out and was thinking about nothing at all.

The staff were told by management to let her be. That this was how she was dealing with her grief after the wreck.

Some nights she fell asleep next to the octopus exhibit.

The mornings after were all the same: the animal was against the glass, eyes closed, and Jane's hand was on the outside pane, palm to suckers.

3 millimetres of transparency was all that separated them.

LUNGS

Hunger is a metaphor for giddiness.

The stomach scraped clean like a high-gloss dance floor, a large empty ballroom that echoes with the tapping feet of my heart.

I spin to the sexy salsa of starvation; wide open space for pirouettes on pointed toe.

The fluidity and freedom of dance is magnified underwater, without the dragging force of gravity or satiation. Free-diving ballerina, sensual somersaults through the sea's halls.

Briefly surfacing for a breath, and then down again.

Fiercely exploring weightlessness, as bare feet echo in my heart chambers.

Tapping in vast openness.

Giddy with freedom.

I visualise my body weaving through through the water as I exhale slowly, my eyes closed. This meditative state before a dive is crucial. It determines how long I can hold my breath, how much I can slow my heart rate, how deep I will go on a single inhalation.

I don't notice the motion of the boat as I lean against the side. My head is deeply entranced, mesmerised by swirling blue and wide open ocean dance floors.

You're the only claustrophobic marine biologist I know, Malachi teases.

His interruption brings me a few levels up in consciousness and it annoys me. I am suddenly aware of sound again, their clunky scuba gear bumping against the deck, nozzles ejecting test air, neoprene wetsuits snapping tightly against male bodies.

I open my eyes and look at Malachi, surrendering to a slight smile. He knows why I don't pile on all that heavy equipment before slipping my body into the music.

I despise the artificial bubbles, the noise of the clunky respiration, the heavy tank on my

back. I don't like the rubber mouthpiece between my teeth, or the taste of the metal in the air. Most of all I hate the silicone mask over my face, separating me from the ocean, putting too much space between us.

When I free dive I wear slim goggles, just covering my eyes. I exhale through my nostrils as I descend, my own air forming tiny spheres around my body.

I close my eyes and turn my thoughts fluid again. My exhales are longer than my inhales, because when I extend the breathing out my heart rate decreases. Later, when I am in the water, it will mean I can stay down longer, my calm state requiring less oxygen.

I pause at the end of each in and out breath, slowing my breathing rate. The intercostal muscles between my ribs relax, my empty dance-floor stomach sighs into a curve and rests.

The men sit on the sides of the boat, doing their count. Three two one. All in. I'm left alone on deck for a few more minutes of breathing.

Slowly, I place my goggles over my eyes and climb over the edge and bob on the surface, holding onto the roads looped across the pontoon. I wait for my heart rate to descend again, exhaling slowly. Then, with one long final exhale I close my eyes. I take an extended breath in as I open my eyes and my lungs, fill them with air, tuck my body, and kick.

Then down.

I see the trail of bubbles left by the group and go the other way, following silence.

My body moves like a finger tracing a continuous S along a sheet of paper.

I reach the sand at the bottom, not even fifteen metres down, and roll on my back.

Conserving my energy and my oxygen I am able to lie still like this for a few minutes. I watch two sting rays swim right above me, my motionless shape unthreatening. I resist

the urge to reach up and touch them. I hear my heart beating slowly, the gentle, rhythmic thud against my ear drum. I exhale a tiny bit of air from my nostrils and watch the bubbles rise.

I don't feel the urge to explore today, not even for Frida. Usually I would ascend and descend at least fifteen times on one dive trip. I'd dance and dance on each round. But not this time.

I want to feel the ocean lifting me up in its arms.

I unclip my weight belt and as I let it go I open my arms to the sides. My natural buoyancy raises my body off the sand and the sea does the rest. I am slowly carried to the surface on my back, like a dancer lifted in the air by her partner.

Even when I break the surface I don't feel the need for air. I exhale another small breath, and only then do I take a passive inhale, still lying on my back. I don't want the sea's hands to let me go.

I am starving for intimacy.

I waited for the men to finish rinsing themselves off before I stepped into the shared shower area. Each time I preferred to shiver for twenty minutes, wrapped in my towel, while they bantered and took their time, using all the hot water. I would rather have cold water and stand alone, than have to endure wolf whistles and whispers. More whispers these days. I was getting thinner. When they spoke, my bones passed between their lips, like a meal of a chicken wing licked clean.

Standing beneath the last of the warm water, I saw Malachi watching me from the doorway, a towel around his waist.

I haven't showered yet. Can I join you?

I turned off the tap and reached for a towel, wrapping it quickly around my body.

I'm sorry. I'm so freezing.

He didn't reply and remained standing and staring, a slight smile teasing me.

I towelled myself dry as fast as I could, walking over to my kit bag and slipping on a grey tracksuit. I turned my back to him as I rubbed the wetness from my hair. I knew what he wanted.

He knew that I kept my distance from it, much like I did the scuba gear.

Kissing is another form of artificial breathing.

The respirator in your mouth is attached to a body, sharing its oxygen and processing expelled carbon dioxide.

The same sense of claustrophobia, not enough space, my breathing rhythm mechanically tuned to another.

Yet, I loved him. My body desired his, even though my mind had so many doors and floors to walk through to reach the same place.

I turned to face him, finding his body closer than I expected.

I wanted him as much as I wanted the reasons why I shouldn't to stop pacing in my head.

His chest was still covered by the space that sits between a wetsuit and a warm body. He smelled like neoprene and salt and sweat. I leaned my face into that fragile layer that would soon disappear, the film of ocean that still clung to his nipples and coarse hair. Kneading my fingers between his ribs, I massaged his skin like dough, allowing his moisture to cling to my fingertips.

My tongue teased my lips and I let them part slightly, running them in a whispered exhale along the ocean space across his sternum. His hands responded with a sigh, breathing through my hair and drawing me to his mouth.

Our lips didn't touch and we held the thin space between them with our breathing. I could

taste him without touching him, inhaling his smoke-tinged desire. The cigarette he'd had just before the dive still lingered in his mouth and it drew me closer, my nicotine addiction coaxing my tongue between his lips. His own responded like the curling tip of a curious octopus arm, wrapping around mine and pushing gently into my mouth. He was simultaneously all the things I craved and I could no longer keep the air between our lips.

Malachi's hands slid down my neck and breasts and then my waist, coming to rest on my hips. Then, he lifted me, my legs wrapping around his body, his arms folding into the curves of my bones, slotting into the angular shapes like perfectly cut keys. As we moved, our lips pushed closer together, holding the bond, locking the door.

He held my top lip between his, his tongue gliding flirtatiously beneath, then pushing deeply into my mouth, his lips widening and closing, like a breathing creature of desire. Then he pulled back a little, teasing the corners of my mouth with his tongue, his smile audible. When my fingers clawed into his neck, he pulled me in again, responding to my need with his own.

Slowly his lips and tongue moved away from my lips, down my neck, and as I tilted my head to the side he breathed into the dip of my collarbone, running his mouth along the length of it, then kissing the top of my shoulder, without an exploring tongue, but instead with a firm and respectful pause.

I felt his gaze gently stroking my eyebrow like a fingertip and I opened my eyes. Once again our lips were close, but not touching, his words entering the paper-thin space.
Are you OK with this, love?

His voice rested like sea water on the edge of my lip and I licked the saltiness, giving him my answer by closing the space and kissing him again.

THE MANIPULATION OF OXYGEN

The Cuvier's beaked whale can hold its breath longer than any other mammal in the world. The longest dive recorded so far is 138 minutes. The whale reached a depth of nearly 3000 metres.

Coming in at a close second, sperm whales dive to depths of over 2 kilometres. Elephant seals dive for 2 hours at a time.

Humans, on average, can only hold their breath underwater for less than 30 seconds. The deepest human freedive in history was 253 metres.

That's a lot of numbers.

Only one is important to know.

How long you can hold your breath under water.

Orcinus orca, the Killer Whale, can shift its heart rate from 60 beats per minute to half that in just a few seconds. This is called bradycardia and it causes less blood to pump around the body, and therefore less oxygen is used up - which results in a longer dive.

When you hold your breath, your heart rate decreases.

The more you restrict something, the less you need.

ACT VII

REPORT: SOLE SURVIVOR ON BOARD THE SEACREST

4 JANUARY 1895

THE OCTAPOD! THE OCTAPOD!

A great tale, that hitherto has been concealed by a handful of supersitious seamen, myself included.

It is true that the story of Kraken has captured imaginations, a beast worshipped as a god. Recorded at over fifty feet in size, weighing close to a ton, it is indeed a fearsome squid.

But oh, how it pales in comparison to the giant octopod!

My had seen sketches and tales of a great beast that swallowed ships and tore men in half.

My vessel, The Seacrest, had been on hundreds of voyages. I only ever saw the octopod once.

I know it was no Kraken, even when the men screamed its name.

The fearsome, yet marvellous spectacle, came upon us in calm seas. We had slaughtered a whale the day before, churning up the swells with blood. The savagery seemed to bring a storm with it, for that night the vessel lurched from side to side in the rough seas. I clung to the creaking, fragile boat, fearing for my very life, and I am not a man easily frightened.

I was not to know that the worst was yet to come.

The ocean taking her revenge upon us.

The octopod must have been following us for days. It appeared to be able to predict our intended direction because it ambushed us from the front.

At first I thought we were approaching an unexpected land mass. Only when we right upon it did I realise that it was the enormous mantle of the creature. Its head rose out of the water like a god awoken.

I stumbled back and its large eyes narrowed.

The ocean beneath the boat sucked downwards as the creature lifted its tentacles out the water. The Seacrest lurched through the massive wave left in the octopod's wake.

I launched myself into the freezing water, and swam hard and fast through the swells, swallowing water and hearing screams all around me. Wood was flung through the air, and limbs and heads were severed and constricted.

I watched as the massive arms of the beast thrashed at the boat, snapping wood and bones.

I turned my head away when it lifted its gigantic beak out of the water and sliced it through the middle of a man.

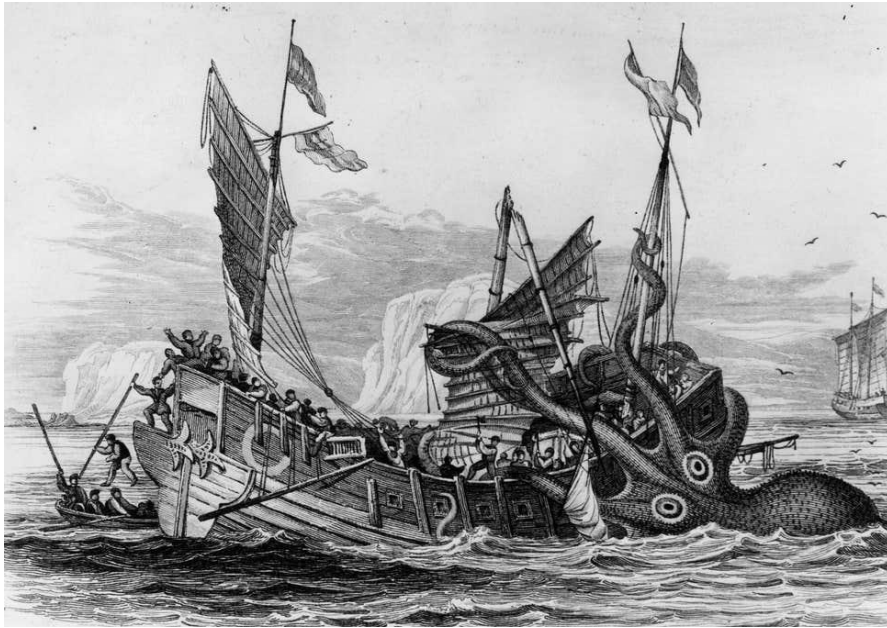
The fearsome eyes appeared to watch me the entire time.

I sank beneath the surface, trying to hide, holding my breath for as long as I could.

The treachery lasted only a few minutes, but the destruction was absolute.

I tell you this certain truth: I am only alive because it wanted it so.

300 GRAMS



SUB-CONSCIOUS

I stand with my hands against the glass and time my breathing with hers.

As she inhales water into her mantle to glide over her gills, I take a deep breath in through my nose and into my lungs. Then, as she exhales water out through her siphon, I breathe out through my mouth. One cycle of in and out shared.

Her breathing rate is faster than mine. I feel like I'm not getting enough air.

My pulse quickens and panic rubs against my skin like a scratchy label at the back of my neck. My instinct is to pull at my wetsuit, to take normal breaths again, to step away from the tank.

But not this time.

Frida is right. I have enough air. I don't need as much as I think I do.

I take smaller breaths and hold them for shorter periods of time. Still in sync. Another in. Another out.

I keep pace. Gills and lungs. Siphon, nose, mouth.

In.

Out.

Two bodies meditating with one breath.

I am going to get inside the water with her now. Frida's tank is only two metres deep and surfacing for air is no problem at all. But panic doesn't view the world through a logical lens.

To others a situation can seem normal and safe. A slightly crowded rock pool. The crash of a plastic bucket. A child screaming for a milkshake.

Anxiety amplifies normal to a screech.

Standing up in a tank of water and popping your head out to take a deep breath suddenly seems frightening. It's as if you dived beneath a floor of ice and when you come up for air you hit a cold wall, water filling your lungs, and you choke and pound the ice with your fists, swallowing more water and drowning in your own fear.

Life guards rush to a woman crouched in the tidal pool, her hands over her ears, rocking back and forth like a mental patient. She says she can't breathe, that there is no air in the water, that the escape hole in the ice has frozen over.

Now that same woman faces an aquarium tank, timing her breaths with an octopus. I pull my wetsuit hoodie over my head, put on my mask and keep breathing with Frida. Then, I climb the ladder to the top of her tank and slide myself in.

One more deep breath at the surface.

Then down.

Down into memories shaped like pebbles at the bottom of a tank.
Rows of tiny bones.

Bones.

I used to call it the room of bones.

After a week at sea, dad's fisherman friends would return with their haul. Most of it was sold off immediately, but they kept the best catches for themselves. Dad had a shipping container on the docks that housed a massive walk-in freezer.

Next to that was a long steel table where they deboned the fish. Tuna, marlin, catfish. The spines and skulls were tossed into bins and then emptied into a large steel barrel at the entrance of the container. The room of bones.

It was my favourite hiding space.

Nobody would think to look for a little girl in a shiny silo that smelled like rotting fish, with bone needles jutting from the blood-coated metal, looking for tiny feet to penetrate.

I loved the pile of bones that smelled like the sea. Flies dotted the skeletons like caviar on white china. I was the marine maiden sifting through jewels I could hang on my ears and around my neck. I peered through skulls with rows of teeth pretending they were mine. Jealous seagull sisters squawked from the outside, wishing they too could be in my treasure cave, but it belonged only to me.

I used to excavate through the bones like a young researcher, digging for clues and rare artefacts for my collection. Shark teeth, conjoined fish skulls, octopus beaks.

Dad made me walk home because I *stank like fish guts* and it became a smell that tasted like the sun to me. The brightest days were when I didn't have to ride in the van or sit too close to him. The days when he left me alone in my room to wash and scrub my new tiny bones and line them up in rows on the windowsill. In the afternoon they reflected the light and created schools of shadow fish on my walls, an ocean surrounding me, moving with the currents of daylight.

Dad made me use the steel wool we used to scrub the pots with, to graze the fish smell off my body in the bath. Fish scales floated in the red water around me, hundreds of tiny scratches on my skin burning under layers of white soap. Although I loved what being filthy earned me, I enjoyed the feeling of being rubbed raw too. The sting of fresh wounds that made me clean again.

In my room I lined the bones in a row, from largest to smallest. My collection stretched along the entire wall and then turned the corner and continued down the next. I counted as I placed each bone on the ground. The counting was the ritual that kept my thoughts at a safe rhythm. It filled the spaces with a number and a bone. Dash-dot. I'm OK in skeletal morse code.

After hours of counting and aligning, I would pack the bones, one by one into a blue

metal suitcase. At the bottom of the case I laid out my mother's white silk blouse. It was the only thing I had that belonged to her. I didn't even have a photograph.

I placed the bones carefully, starting now with the smallest, one at a time, into the case.

Some of the bones were the pale yellow of the urine stain on my mattress. The night I was too afraid to walk to the bathroom. Others were the same, perfect white of my mother's blouse. An untainted memory. My favourites were almost translucent, a frosted window I could look through, into the creature itself.

Sometimes I would scrub a tiny bone from white to transparent to make it seem more real.

I still have the blue suitcase of bones. Mom's blouse isn't perfect snow silk anymore. It has yellowed with age, tiny threads pulled by sharp shards of fish. But it's still laid out at the bottom, cradling the dead.

I've never washed it. The scented molecules of my mother float between the atoms of the smell of the sea. When I open the case I smell her and the ocean and where they meet.

Salted grief.

MANY APPEARING AS ONE

The psychology of a human being is constructed much like jellyfish-like marine creatures known as siphonophores.

These are large gelatinous animals that get blown by the wind across the surface of the ocean. From a distance they look rather strange and as some of them can give rather nasty stings we tend to avoid getting too close. Once you do, however, it becomes apparent that these are much more fascinating than we give them credit for.

The siphonophore isn't a single organism, even though it looks and behaves like one. It is a colony of smaller creatures that all work together to create the illusion of a larger animal. They do this rather well. As a singular unit they eat, excrete, reproduce and evolve. One of these illusionists is the highly venomous Portuguese man o' war. Even as a predator they work as one.

Human behaviour acts similarly. Let's take so-called dysfunctional behaviour for example. We could look at a girl who cuts and starves herself, see her as a whole, and put her in a box labelled crazy.

Traumatic events, like tiny organisms, bundle together and although they are separate animals in their own right, they behave a certain way through one particular human being. How we respond and reflect to each trauma all collects together, and as we are pattern-making machines, we find ways to form a network. They find their commonality, cluster as one, and appear as an illusion of a single, disordered individual. Like the siphonophore, our instinct is to step away from the strange person, to keep a safe distance.

We forget how much more we would understand if we got close.

FIELD NOTES

Frida was dying.

Jane put her hand against the glass and there was no arm of suction pads to meet hers this time. The tiny octopus lay bundled in her carved out rock, simply waiting for the space between breathing and dying.

Still, Jane kept her fingertips pressed against the tank, reaching for the inter-species sensation, that connection that held no words and sensed no physical touch.

Soundless.

Motionless.

Even so, Jane felt the moment of slipping away, as if the glass was melting beneath her skin, consciousness of one being moving through matter and entering another.

Jane sensed Frida move through the glass and into the space around her fingers and then through to her bones.

Suddenly, there was simply silence and stillness, and the grey flesh of an octopus body barely visible through rock crevices.

Transfixed on the water that was the grave, yet still the source of life, she continued to reach for Frida. The water moved, as though breathing. Expecting to see octopus arms and a familiar big eye creeping out from behind the rock, instead she saw Malachi's voice. Sound moved like colour through water, edges of memory rippling in greens, purples, reds. The liquid swirled with the same energy that the room did when he laughed or when he called her name.

The kelp swayed as the sound pulsed through the water, and although Frida's body still lay motionless, Jane felt as if she was somehow still right there, moving and communicating in a different way. Like Malachi's voice had changed to colour, the little octopus presence was shifting to something else entirely.

Jane's hand, breathing with the glass, reached inward with the current of emotion and touched the rainbow echo of *I'm still here*.

Frida became Malachi became Jane became the ocean.

There was no I or you or human or cephalopod.

There was only life that continued and stretched and pulsed and spoke and moved.

Death was simply a different view of the same world.

Frida and Malachi in a tank of water, melting into glass and through a hand.

Jane. Still pressing.

Listening.

Letting life in.

THE AUTOPSY OF AN OCTOPUS

I need to make sure that her death wasn't my fault.

She wasn't old and she wasn't sick.

The only way to cut open the *why* is to cut open Frida.

I lift her limp body out of the water, wrap her in a towel, and carry her in my arms to the lab.

I unwrap the towel and lengthen her body out on a silver tray, all her tentacles straight.

I put on my latex gloves and lay out my tools:

- 14 tiny glass jars
- 3 silver bowls
- scalpel
- forceps
- fine-point scissors
- probe
- six-inch steel ruler

I examine each of her tentacles, touching each suction pad with the probe, searching for any possible injury.

I make a small incision on the top of her head.

Each eye is fully intact, and between them her ganglia – brain - lies spotless.

I flip her over.

Taking a deep breath, I set the scalpel against the grey skin on her mantle.

I slice a long straight line from top to bottom and through the siphon.

Blue blood pours into the tray.

With the probe I check her heart, oesophagus, salivary glands, crop, and gonads.

All perfect.

My perfect girl.

Her large green liver is healthy, and the ink sac it contains, as dark and magnificent as a smooth onyx.

I open up her stomach and note that she had recently eaten her favourite supper of prawn bits. Her intestines were in the process of digestion when she died. Her anus is totally normal. No blockages all the way through her system.

Her two sets of gills at first seem normal, but when I probe the two dark blue gill hearts I immediately see why she died. One was entirely too small, and was most probably a congenital defect. Frida had been breathing through only one side of her body her whole life. The other tiny little blue heart that worked so hard had finally given in.

There was nothing I could have done.

I remove my right glove and gently stroke her buccal bulb, the place that holds her beak. Carefully, I cut it out.

I hold the beak under a tap, wash it clean, and then wrap it in a small piece of gauze, and put it in my back pocket.

I place each of her organs, one by one, onto a scale, and then into the jars and bowls. Apart from her skin and tentacles, the total mass of all her organs is exactly 300 grams.

Frida weighs the same as my heart.

FIELD NOTES

Legally they could only keep Jane against her will for 72 hours.

She had been in hospital for 158.

It was time to go.

Against medical advice.

She agreed to go back to have her stitches removed.

She signs a form.

Leaves barefoot.

(She arrived with no shoes).

They managed to find her a tracksuit in Lost and Found.

Three sizes too big.

But it gets her home.

They offer to call her a taxi.

She chooses to walk.

Her landlady on the second floor gives her a spare set of keys.

She says they've cut the electricity.

Didn't know if or when Jane would return.

Jane's fingers and lungs creaked and clicked for the comfort of a cigarette.

The smooth balm waited on the other side of her front door.

FEET

I can walk around my apartment without turning on the lights.

The furniture has always been arranged the same way.

The front door opens directly into my lounge. I drop the keys in a crystal glass bowl on the kitchen counter.

The lounge has one window with blinds that I wipe with a damp cloth every day.

I keep them closed.

One painting hangs on the wall above the cream couch. A framed watercolour of *octopus vulgaris*, in muted tones except for its bold eyes in striking yellow.

The eyes that watch me wherever I am in the apartment, as if they move when I do. They follow me, merging as one fluid creature with my milky white skin.

A locked door stands between the lounge and the bathroom.

Since I moved in, I am the only person to ever enter.

except that night

White towels, white tiles, white floor.

except that night

Basin. Bath. Toilet.

A digital scale.

There is no window.

I don't have any mirrors.

My living space is open plan, and when I come out of the bathroom I walk 7 steps across the lounge and reach the counter of my kitchen.

Most of the cupboards here remain empty but I clean them every Wednesday and Saturday.

One of them contains:

Two mugs

Two dinner plates

Two knives, forks, teaspoons

One frying pan.

One tupperware with one lid.

The cupboard above the stove has a box of instant soup and two jars of ground coffee.

In the silver bar fridge there are four litres of diet coke, a tray of mushrooms, and a handful of kale. Two tomatoes.

The excess reveals how much I love mushrooms.

The food has spoiled in the few days I was gone.

Four steps from the kitchen lead to the door of my room, and four more reach the foot of the double bed. Covered and smoothed in white sheets and a cream mohair blanket. Two pillows of equal height.

Turn left, another three steps, the mahogany bedside table. A smooth oak lamp stand with a single bulb, no lampshade.

Next to that a long shelf bracketed to the wall - the darkest wood - with seventeen books. Alphabetical. Mostly blue. Marine companions.

I used to hide my secret suitcase under my bed, until Malachi's single visit. He walked in and sniffed the air like a trained police canine.

What is that wretched smell?

I had become accustomed to the familiar and didn't know if he was referring to the faintness of vomit from a few hours before. Couldn't be. I poured a cup of Jik in the toilet, scrubbed it clean.

The kitchen bin was empty.

I hadn't yet fried the mushrooms.

It could only be my collection.

That same night I gave the suitcase a new hiding place.

I have visited hundreds of times since.

After losing Malachi and Frida I come every day.

I prefer walking everywhere. Avoiding traffic and people and enclosed spaces. So I keep important places close to home. The regular coffee shop, the veggie market, the aquarium. And by *home* I don't mean my apartment. I mean the sea.

The blue face with white lips that greets me at the door after a long day.

Before I leave I scrub the dark burgundy stains in the bath, on the tiles, on the floor. On my hands and knees I rub every centimetre the paramedics walked, where the wheels of the stretcher trailed leaving streaks of blood. The apartment smells like Jik and no longer like me.

I throw my white towels they used to absorb the blood in a black bag.

I return to the kitchen and throw the rotten food in with them.

Then I leave.

I don't lock the door.

Halfway down the passage I can't scrape off the gnaw on my spine.

I walk back and turn the key.

At the bottom of the stairs I toss the black bag into a wheelie bin.

And start walking.

My apartment is 1.4 kilometres away along a dirt road that winds down to Rockfish Cove. That's where kids like to strip down to their underwear and swim in the shallows. But I walk, barefoot, past the tide pools and scramble over rocks double my height. The sharp outcrops are ideal grips, like tiny shoulders pushing me up and over.

The rocks follow the line of the reserve's fence, and by the time you can see my cave you've already trespassed on conserved land.

When I was a kid I used to wander off from the crowded rock pools, and after years of treasure hunting and exploring I found a small patch of sand next to the fence. I dug for days until I was able to crawl under. Now, after decades of crawling and dragging treasures, the hole is far bigger than my frame. I seal the secret with a boulder the size of a female seal.

Because just beyond that point is the curved hip of a crag. A flirtatious lure inside.

She's beautiful.

She's mine.

I run my fingers along familiar formations of rock. Rough edges like Braille silently guide me to my haven, speaking in solid and unmoveable syllables.

Low tide brings water to my ankles, my feet buried in wet sand and salty foam; a front door opening.

Safely home.

The alcove is dark and smells like the inside of my blue metal roller-skate case. The way that damp books smell near the sea, the fragrance that seeps into wooden walls, with a subtle hint of kelp and moss. Water drips from the black jagged ceiling and I turn on my torch.

My feet know every single rock, where I can place all my weight, where edges are smooth. I walk further in, until I reach my stashed treasure. I lean over the rock that curves at the height of my hips and reach for my case, carefully hidden in its mute mouth.

My fingers count and climb up tiny stone teeth in the dark, until they reach the hollow where I hid my latest keepsake. Frida's beak wrapped in a small bandage, safely lodged in the gap. I bring it to my lips and kiss her through the gauze.

I kiss her through death.

Sitting on the sand against the cave's damp skin, I open the case, running my fingertips along the tiny bones, remembering where I found each one. I hold the smiling rib of an eel against my own, then line the miniature vertebra of a clownfish in my palm.

I glide the bones along my skin for hours, skeletal memories that bring me comfort.

I bury my toes in the sand and flex my feet, tendons rising like taut threads separating hollow valleys of sunken skin. I place tuna dorsal fin slivers between the ridges, its bones effortlessly slotting between mine.

The muscles and ligaments in my feet and ankles are strong from kicking long fins in currents every day. From walking everywhere. From obsessive flexing and stretching.

An inner green shell of a sea urchin lies next to my left foot. I take the sharp pointed edge of one of the tuna bones and meticulously scrape it along the surface of my foot, making intricate lined patterns identical to the shell.

I try to scratch lightly, to raise the skin just a little, only see a tinge of pink. But the image is too tempting and my impulse too overwhelming.

One by one I stab the dorsal fin bones into the lines I drew, transforming my foot into a white-spined sea urchin. I watch blood slide between my toes and into ocean froth of the tide creeping in. It turns to pink candyfloss, a sweet delicacy formed by skeletal art.

A quarter of my body's bones are puzzled into my feet. Twenty-six pieces arranged from a DNA blueprint. My Morton's toes, high arches, and tight tendons. My mother had always wanted to be a dancer.

She struggled with her feet, with moulds identical to mine. The skinny ballerina with a second toe longer than her big one and Achilles tendons that refused to stretch.

Mom.

I pluck the tuna spines from my feet, preferring that pain above the buried one. The one I keep trying to cut out. I wash the bones clean in the salty saliva of my cave's mouth, then place them one by one in a row along the rocks, joining all my others, from one end of the cave to the other.

Mom.

Her blouse lies at the bottom of the suitcase. Finally my fingers reach between the folds and bring it to my face. The soft silk is the opposite of bone in texture, form, emotion. The blouse is grief and sadness, reminiscent of a consuming tide.

The longer I hold the silk against my nose, the harder it is to breathe.

I fold it neatly again and place it in the suitcase like the skin of someone I loved but couldn't save. In the centre I put Frida's beak, still bandaged. Then I clip the case closed and hold it against my chest as I slowly head back out. The now higher tide pulls me back by the waist, begging me to stay. My feet are heavy in the sand as I walk away.

I leave the row of bones like a necklace around my cave's neck.

OCTOPUSES AND THE ARRANGEMENT OF BONES

The octopus is rather obsessive about keeping its lair clean and tidy. After eating a crustacean or another cephalopod, they push out any remains and pile it neatly outside their home. This heap of shells, carapaces and bones, also called a midden, is the easiest way for marine biologists to spot an octopus hiding place.

Many species enjoy playing with the pieces and even manipulate them into different arrangements, like creating art with bones. There are individual octopuses who have been observed carrying favourite objects around with them as part of a daily ritual. Those in captivity enjoy rearranging their tanks and have even been observed sorting the gravel into different coloured piles. Female octopuses, while spawning, often create barricades to their den using pieces from their middens and some pebbles.

In Nevada, scientists recently excavated vertebral discs and other remains of 37 ichthyosaurs, a marine reptile from the late Triassic period. These creatures were around 15 metres long and its predators would have been even larger.

The fossils were found to be in a curious arrangement, as if something had purposefully placed them in a linear pattern. It has been speculated that an ancient cephalopod, much like the Kraken, hunted these reptiles and then played with the bones, creating massive middens outside their lairs. Eccentric scientists have even gone so far as to say that the rows of vertebrae resembled the pattern of sucker discs of an octopus arm, almost as if it were a primitive self-portrait.

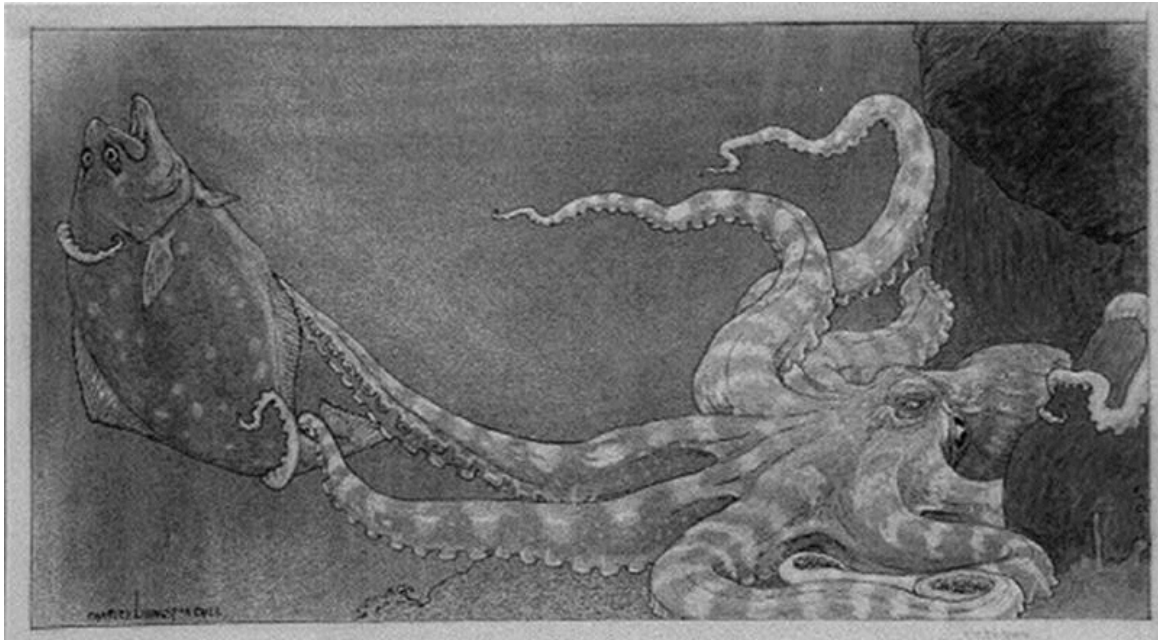
Arranging bones could be a form of self-expression.

Collecting them, predation.

ACT VIII

The creature begins to hunt again, capturing larger and larger prey. It drags the prizes into its lair, stacking the bones like a trophy.

Human skulls adorn the cave.



BREATH

I wait for the aquarium to close before letting myself in.
Another place I can find my way around in the dark.

I stop by Frida's empty tank and place my palms against the glass. I can't feel her anymore. I put my hand in the water, stretching for her little garden and take out the marble.

I have missed the feel of the glass between my fingers.

I kneel down, wiping my wet hand on my jeans. Opening the suitcase, I take out her wrapped beak, unravelling it slowly. I move it between my fingers, remembering the fullness of life in her.

I slip my middle finger in the gap between upper and lower beak. Her mouth a ring around my knuckle.

I close the suitcase again and walk downstairs to the dock.

Familiar lockers line the wall by the exit. Mine and Malachi's are next to each other. I peel a sticker of a shark off the front of his steel door and smooth it onto my arm. Then, before I allow myself to cry, I open the door of my locker and take out my wetsuit, quickly stripping down and zipping up the neoprene. I take fins and my goggles. I leave the towel.

I slip the marble inside the neck of my wetsuit, lodging it between my ribs.

The motor on the aquarium's rubber duck starts on the first try. I steer my way out the harbour and into open sea.

The moon is waxing crescent, low light on the calm black of the water. I turn off the engine to absorb the silence of the night, to hear only ocean.

I open the suitcase again and take out the silk blouse, slipping it over my wetsuit.

Free diving at night is like a drug that suspends you on a thin line between safety and fear.

A greater rush than nicotine, emptiness and cutting flowing into one sensation.

For a long time I sit on the edge of the boat, my feet in the water. I hold the empty, open suitcase on my lap and cry for the first time.

Later, I fill the case with water and lock it shut, then let it go. I let it sink like a dead body.

I put on my goggles.

Leave the torch on the boat.

Leave my fins.

Bobbing on the surface I remove the marble from inside the wetsuit. Cold water rushes in, chilling my bones and stiffening my skin.

I hear my dad's voice in my head as I clutch the glass ball in my fist. I take a deep inhale then drop the marble, bend forward and kick.

As I descend the blouse billows over my head, slowing me down, blocking my vision, restricting my arms.

As I fight the need for air I slip off the white silk and let it float and rise to the surface like a white flag.

I kick and kick until I find myself on the ocean floor, suspended between drowning and surfacing.

Time turns to liquid and dark water breathes itself into my lungs as I slice the impulse to fight back up for air.

My body convulses, like a fish out of water.

Then it calms and I can only hear the sound of my heart.

ba boom ba boom ba boom

Until the surface lets me go.

THE DEPTH ONE USUALLY FINDS THE GIANT PACIFIC OCTOPUS

Enteroctopus dofleini lives at depths of up to 750 metres.

FINAL ACT

Fade to black.



SKIN

My skin is cool and smooth, colours of the deep rippling across its surface. The strangeness of dark blues and various shades of black, seen and felt through every pore.

Blue is sensed as soft suede, darker blue like fine paper. The first tone of black is hard to place, somewhere between banana skin and the lower epidermis of a rat's pelt.

The water surrounding me like seal fur feels like Malachi's fingertips on every inch of my skin at the same time. My limbs extend and undulate, long twists of muscle stretching metres beyond me like a sinking star.

I move an arm toward my mouth, feeling it with the tip. Hard and sharp like Frida's.

I stretch it wide as a yawn, hear it crack and waken. The tip of my arm goes inside, between my upper and lower jaw like a finger.

Inside it's softer than any flesh I've ever felt before.

White silk.

Salt water eases through the ache of the eyes on my skin, and pulses through blue blood currents of my boneless body. My single heart divides into three.

I dive deep, gills splayed open, inhaling the sea.

Gliding.

Observing.

Hunting.

Then finally -

Enveloping a cuttlefish

 a fisherman

 a heart

I find my body's strength -
And eat.

END.

PORTFOLIO

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Michelle Ainslie

November 2019

Contents

SECTION 1: THE NOVELLA (THESIS).....	3
Introduction	3
1. Writing Style and Form.....	5
Writing through the senses.....	5
Playing with Form.....	6
Mixed Media	7
2. Literature Research.....	9
3. Scientific Research.....	13
Historical aspect of the novel.....	13
Further research.....	14
4. Character Development.....	16
5. Creating a Narrative Space.....	17
6. Personal Growth as a Writer	18
SECTION 2: NARRATIVE ESSAY.....	21
SECTION 3: COMMUNITY PROJECT	29
SECTION 4: REFLECTION ON THE READER'S REPORT	33

SECTION 1: THE NOVELLA (THESIS)

Introduction

I chose to write this summary of my journey as a writer through the MA in Creative Writing by looking closely at the most pivotal aspects that influenced my work and final novella submission.

I divided these into six sections:

1. Writing Style and Form
2. Literature Research (including book reviews)
3. Scientific Research
4. Character Development
5. Creating a Narrative Space
6. Personal Growth as a Writer

Before I start with those, here is a short synopsis on what the novella is about:

300 Grams

Jane grew up without a maternal figure, spending her hours with her father and his fishermen buddies. Hours at the docks, hiding from the drunk and the inappropriate, a little girl who learned to occupy herself with what was around her. The rats, bones of fish, sea creatures. Even as a child she is obsessive and meticulous. Order helps her feel OK and she likes arranging things in sequences and rows.

As an adult she is a marine biologist, obsessed with the Giant Pacific Octopus. Research takes her deep out to sea, and at the aquarium where she works she has a special bond with a common octopus. She is in love with one member of her crew, Malachi, but it has to be kept secret because there are racial divides, as well as professional ones. On one particular research trip, the one she pushed too hard and went too far into the storm, the boat is ambushed by a massive sea creature. It cannot be real - an octopus of fantastical proportions. It kills the entire crew. Only Jane survives. The scene overlaps one of historical significance (similar to Kraken, but an octopus not a squid) and is the climax of the novel.

This event is a metaphor of her control - she is symbolically that octopus. Her control and obsession, in her mind, killed everyone.

Her rituals become more pronounced - her smoking, cutting, counting grams of food.

And then her beloved octopus at the aquarium dies.

It pushes Jane over the edge.

In one of her cutting rituals she goes too far and then lands in the hospital. It is here, while starved, after much blood loss, and too much medication - she starts hallucinating the presence of a sea creature in her room. Memories, reality and these vivid visions start merging and it is impossible to tell what is fantasy and what is real. The reader gets to make up their own mind.

She now forms a deep bond with this creature, merging with its power, in a sense becoming one with it. Or perhaps she always was this being and is now simply remembering who she is. The world becomes more and more liquid, and when returning to work, Jane's dives become deeper and deeper, her solo trips out to sea longer and longer.

She is human, and not human. Time becomes fluid. She goes back to her childhood, and then into real-time, sinking beneath the ocean. Swimming and diving, eventually disappearing into blackness.

The reader is left to decide how they perceive the ending, and ultimately the meaning of who Jane is and what really happened.

1. Writing Style and Form

I struggled for a long time to find my novella's final form.

It was initially all written in the first person, the writing was dense (in Jane's signature way of speaking and thinking), and was difficult for the reader to navigate. There needed to be a means for the reader to take a breath, and to change the pace and intensity. I also battled to find the story itself. The writing was very focussed on Jane's interior and was where I was comfortable as a writer, but it wasn't working on its own.

The scientific voice came later, based purely on my interest and experience with marine life. As I have a fair knowledge of Zoology, I could naturally make comparisons between the behaviour of animals and Jane's. These similarities began to merge in unexpected ways and the links seemed to be unique, so I became fascinated with the research. As I wrote a chapter in Jane's voice, I immediately began researching that same body part in the marine environment, found the links, and then blended them in the narrative. Much later, the historical images and film-style clips emerged. Eventually the chapters naturally evolved into sets of three.

Over time this became too repetitive, with a lulling effect on the reader. There needed to be a sudden shift, a way of pulling the reader back. This is where, in discussion with my supervisor, Stacy, we decided on expanding one of the usually short and clipped chapters into a much longer, historical account. This is also where I hope the climax of the novella is evident, a way of linking trauma with Jane's experience.

Writing through the senses

What I have really enjoyed playing with is switching up the senses a little bit. So, for example, the character senses touch not by how it feels on her skin, but as smell. There is an entire scene that I am hoping the reader can pick up is an orgasmic experience, however I don't use any sensory language connected to touch or sight. It is all scent-based. So the cascades of smell and how strong they are or how quickly she perceives them gives the reader an indication of how intimately she is being touched.

I also play around with other sense jumbles, such as memories that dangle in a room like physical objects she can see, and so on. This all lends to a world that it perceived in a completely different way, and it gives the novel a bit of a hallucinatory feel, but also leaves you wondering what is real and what isn't. What's in her mind and what is really happening in reality? Ultimately, I hope that it doesn't matter. The story continues regardless of interpretation or meaning, and this is left for the reader to decide.

I have started to give my character a bit more depth by giving reference to memories of her childhood and even recent years. They are just snippets, but ones that move in and out of her memory, and help to give us a better idea of who she is and how she perceives the world. They also help to anchor the narrative a bit, giving tiny images to work with and echo later on, that helps bring the story together. Until now it has felt a bit disjointed, like a series of chapters that describe the narrator's experience of her immediate world, but with not enough depth somehow. I needed more story, more "plot."

I have enjoyed experiencing storytelling from this perspective. In particular, I watched the series called "Love Death Robots" which is a collection of short animated films, all of which are a bit trippy and graphic. The tales are usually dark and twisted, which is, of course, right up my alley.

The reason I mention this is because of the pilot episode, “Sonnie’s Edge.” It is based on a short story written by Peter F. Hamilton with the same title. The plot revolves around a future world where humans connect their consciousness with monsters. Two monsters are then put in a deep pit and forced to fight to the death, with the humans “inside their head” living through them and “telling” them what to do. The human becomes the beast – but only in consciousness. When the creature’s body dies, the human continues to live.

The twist in the story (spoiler alert) is when we find out that Sonnie, the woman behind a really magnificent beast, is actually dead. Her consciousness has been planted in the monster, and essentially he lives through her (not the other way around). So when this fierce beast is in the ring, it is literally a human consciousness in this animal body fighting for her life.

The reason why I enjoyed this so much, apart from the brilliant animation and story, is that it echoes a lot of what the idea behind my book is (and always has been). It felt like I was in cahoots with Peter F. Hamilton on some level.

Playing with Form

The more I read, and the more I work on this novella, the more I am becoming absolutely fascinated with form. I enjoy learning how other writers have used form to help tell the story, not just as a “clever addition.” I am diving deep as I read, trying to figure out why authors chose a particular form to tell a particular part of the story, and why it works or doesn’t work (in my personal point of view and with my particular reader lens).

I am also extremely interested in researching different spaces (physical and psychological) and how narrative takes up that place-holder, as well as how the interaction between reader and text moulds it and changes it.

For example, in one of the books I refer to later, *Faces in the Crowd* by Valeria Luiselli, she speaks about how she puts poems to memory in certain places as she walks through her city. For example, she recites a specific poem by Sylvia Plath on a particular spot on the subway. Later, she repeats a poem by Emily Dickinson as she walks through the park. After many repetitions it is almost as if that geographical space has absorbed that poem. So if she is in the subway at a particular spot she automatically calls to mind the Plath poem. The poem now lives, at least in her mind, in that space. The poem inhabits the subway. Of course, this is only in her mind, which shows, once again, how subjective reading is – and how we create our own meaning from the narrative. How interesting would it be to create a piece of work that nudges the reader in that direction, that works with underlying themes and rhythms, that are entirely unconscious, but which still have an effect.

As an example from my work – I can weave in the “feeling” of fluidity into a paragraph, without mentioning anything liquid in my words. The reader could get a sense of being carried along water through the rhythm more than the content itself. I am also playing with the idea of including links in certain chapters to audio and video material – to add an optional further dimension to the reader’s experience.

Upon further research on Valeria Luiselli’s work, I found this quote by Jim Krusoe from the New York Times which sums up my thoughts rather perfectly:

“Valeria Luiselli is as much a cartographer as a writer, interested in finding areas still unmapped. As in her first novel, “Faces in the Crowd,” she combines fictional narrative with historical and intellectual points of reference, and the result is writing without preconceptions, as airy and open as a soccer field. Prefigured by her excellent book of essays, “Sidewalks,” “The Story of My Teeth” is playful, attentive and very smart without

being for a minute pretentious...Luiselli is an exciting writer to watch, not only for this book, but also for the fresh approach she brings to fiction, one that invites participation and reaction, even skepticism — a living, breathing map.”

This feels like the perfect place to add my review of the book I read by Luiselli last week, as well as some other titles that I have enjoyed as part of my recent research:

***Faces in the Crowd* by Valeria Luiselli**

This remarkable novel shifts between lives and time and space effortlessly. At first glance it is a ghost story, but upon deeper inspection it is so much more. It's more about the many lives you can live in one life, how you can overlap with parts of yourself.

I love her writing and her heavy-handed personifications (just the way I enjoy it), such as: *“Death in Philadelphia is approaching like a bedraggled cat, it rubs its dirty ass up against my lower leg, licks my hands, scratches my face, asks me for food; and I feed it.”*

Luiselli says of her own work, *“...it's a horizontal novel, told vertically. A novel which has to be told from the outside in order to be read from within.”*

Once again, it draws me in because of the play with space and form and reader engagement.

There is also a part of *300 Grams* (my novella) down the line where the narrator will merge with another being, which ultimately is a hidden part of herself. This quote from *Faces in the Crowd* was a mirror reflection of that. It resonated with me on a deep level:

“Now I know that when I go into the children's room, the baby will catch my smell and shiver in her cot, because some secret place in her body is teaching her to demand her part of what belongs to us both, the threads that sustain and separate us.”

A similar feeling is evoked in the book, *Hands*, which I discuss briefly later on.

Another book that influenced my form is:

***An Extraordinary Theory of Objects* by Stephanie LaCava**

This memoir is a brilliant experiment with form. The author weaves her own personal story with multiple short non-fiction essays. So, for example, she will recall a memory during her move to Paris that involved packing a dress. This will then link to an image of a dress and a seemingly unrelated essay on the nineties slip dress that Kate Moss wore. Essentially it is two books in one – a collection of random (yet you “feel” like they link somehow) essays and her memoir.

I absolutely loved her scientific research and attention to detail, as well as how she weaved the theme effortlessly throughout. As a child forced to move continents, she could only take a handful of meaningful objects with her. When she arrives in Paris she starts noticing all sorts of items and researches them all, as if she were collecting information, trying to rebuild a life.

It's a fascinating combination and a book I will return to for inspiration. I have found that I also love weaving non-fiction into my fictional work. It adds another layer, a deeper meaning. It's fantastic.

Mixed Media

I am very interested in the concept of “mixed mediums” in my writing. With that I mean writing that is combined with other artistic forms such as images or fine art, and merging the two into one piece. The idea of inserting occasional images with my words has been on my mind for a long time and I am thrilled that I could experiment with that in *300 Grams*. As

much of my writing is richly metaphorical and imagery plays an essential part, I believe it can form an interesting mix.

300 Grams is a hybrid. Linking ideas and concepts that previously may not have been put together (such as an octopus and anorexia), as well as mixing forms (fiction and non-fiction, text and images), I am truly excited about what I am working on.

2. Literature Research

One of the greatest privileges of the MA was the exposure to authors and books that I had never engaged with before. I read dozens and dozens of books, but these were the ones that had the greatest impact on my novella:

***Borne* by Jeff VanderMeer**

This is pure science fiction and took me into an entirely different world. The writing is visceral and the reader can literally feel what is happening on their own skin. Colours are bold. Imaginary creatures, although entirely fictional, appear to be real and believable.

What I noticed the author did with his writing, to ground us as readers in this completely different world, was to bring some “real world” into the descriptions. So, for example, when a massive bear with venomous fangs is attacking the main character in the cave, not only do we read about this beast’s breath and roar and claws, but also how her hands scrape against the cave walls as she tries to escape by crawling into a smaller space. Through strong description the reader can literally feel the scrapes on their own hands (very real, very human, very in “this world”) which makes the entire narrative seem real, believable, riveting.

This has helped me with my own book, as part of the story involves the character hallucinating, and also has strong elements of fantasy woven throughout. For example, although it is entirely inside her head, she truly believes that she is turning into a marine creature. To root the book back in the “real world” there needs to be points of contact where the reader can feel grounded again. I do this through real-life, “normal” memories. I also alternate chapters with scientific facts to break up the claustrophobic nature of her voice.

In many ways I am playing with the water metaphor on a different level. One chapter I submerge the reader, leave them gasping for air because of the detailed language, verging on “purple prose.” And then, in the next chapter I throw the reader back into a clinical and scientific world, which is almost like resurfacing and taking a breath again. In a really ideal situation, the reader would begin to feel, perhaps on an emotional level, this flux from submersion to relief.

***Tuesday nights in 1980* by Molly Prentiss**

This novel follows the interconnected lives of artists and muses in New York City in 1980. It’s a dreamlike narrative of art, human relationships and the impact one small decision can have. What most affected me as a reader and writer, was the author’s vivid depiction of James who has synaesthesia.

The way we are pulled into his strange world – where someone is perceived as a colour or a taste for example – is exceptionally well done. It’s an idea I have been playing with in *300 Grams* for a while now, especially when Jane’s perception of reality is distorted. I enjoy the art of moving between conscious states and using senses to describe that morphing. After reading *Tuesday Nights in 1980* I immediately went and wrote the chapter where Jane is underwater and her curiosity “becomes a shadow” and she can feel the octopus’s “smile” (in other words, emotion) on her skin. My intention was to describe the dream-like state of the unconscious, where physical things become intangible, but where you can touch feelings. Images are brighter and flow of time isn’t logical.

***The Middle Stories* by Sheila Heti**

What I love about Sheila Heti's writing in this collection of short stories is that she makes the bizarre seem so normal. There is no fancy writing, no complicated imagery, no drawn out scenarios. They are simply fairytale-like stories that fascinate you so intently and grab you immediately, despite not necessarily always understanding the meaning or the motive.

For example, there is a rather sadistic story about a girl who is given a mermaid in a jar. In some ways she appears to torture this poor half-human creature, such as the time she rolls the trapped mermaid down a hill. There is also a story about a man who seeks love advice from a frog, and another about a woman who lived in a shoe and appears to be having a midlife crisis. None of them make any sense, and yet – they make perfect sense.

What I loved about this book was the simplicity of the language. As a novice reader when it comes to fantasy and mythology, it is difficult to find books that don't confuse me completely by combining a magical world I need to wrap my head around, in language that is too poetic and descriptive (ironically the exact bind I find myself in as a writer).

***Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens**

This is a stunning book about a marsh girl who grows up uneducated and wild, and yet has this incredible connection to nature. Although I found the story itself a bit too predictable and some of the scenes seemed to be forced into a mould that worked for the writer's narrative (as opposed to being plausible), the author's way of connecting the reader with nature through the eyes of the main character (Kya) was remarkable.

It really inspired me to work harder on my novel. To somehow try and encapsulate Jane's deep love for marine life, to make this passion tangible to my reader. What I noticed Delia Owens did, was to go into tremendous detail on the things that really mattered to her main character, for example, the intricate patterns on a feather and what that meant about its origin, and then what she did with that feather (she had an entire collection on her wall). This all showed us a deeper side to Kya and by seeing through her eyes and experiencing the world through her emotions, when something happened to disrupt that world, as a reader we are instantly emotionally invested.

I want THAT in my work. That is when I chose to introduce Frida the octopus and I am slowly starting to build that relationship with Jane, and hope that this creates more of an impact with the reader than just the narrator's intellectual and then very self-absorbed internal monologue. Although the latter certainly forms a purpose for what I am creating with my novel, I did need that extra depth, and *Where the Crawdads Sing* helped me identify that gap.

***Hands* by Darian Leader**

I was drawn to this strange work of non-fiction simply because it involved a distinct aspect of the human body, and a lot of body work is incorporated into my novella. It was a remarkable find.

Darian Leader is a psychoanalyst and researcher, and I was immediately drawn to the scientific and psychological nature of his work. It also helped me gain insight into my character and gave me important aspects to work into my novella.

For example, this quote on when an infant feeds: "*When the mouth closes on the nipple, the hand tightens into a fist. The harder the infant sucks, the tighter the grip.*" In a sense, the

baby is trying to absorb the entire experience. The hand has always been directly linked to our mouths. When we smoke, for instance, it is more the motion of our fingers that we miss when we stop smoking, than the addiction to nicotine itself. This form of transitional object will form a critical part of my book later on, when my main character needs to learn to eat again.

Another aspect, directly related to my work, is this: *“A state of unrest and unbearable tension is mediated, as the hand not only transmits pain to the one it strikes, but loses pain from itself...when we can’t find someone else, we can of course strike ourselves directly, a fact well known to those who self-harm.”*

There is so much more to explore here and I am amazed by the unlikely places I am finding my inspiration.

It feels like I am starting to discover my unique voice as I dive deeper into my novella. It is starting to take on a life of its own, and through working with that and following my intuition, I think I am starting to touch on something magical.

Seamus Heaney said that when one is learning to write one should not expect it to be immediately good. He says: *“The aspiring poet (writer) is constantly lowering a bucket only halfway down a well, coming up time and again with nothing but empty air. The frustration is immense. But you must keep doing it, anyway. After many years of practice the chain draws unexpectedly tight and you have dipped into waters that will continue to entice you back. You’ll have broken the skin on the pool of yourself.”*

I feel like I have broken my skin.

***Hollow Heart* by Viola di Grado**

This outstanding novel starts with the narrator committing suicide and shares similarities with my novella, in the sense that it is very visceral and written through the body. Why this book came at the perfect time, thanks to Stacy’s recommendation, is that the author manages to achieve what I was struggling with – going deeper into sensations and into exquisite detail about the body. She also uses strong metaphors to layer her writing into a multi-dimensional form.

As an example:

“The rigor mortis of planet Earth started with my heart: not only was it the first organ in my body to stop, it was also the first to harden. Two hours after my death, while I was still in the tub, its cavities began to tighten in on themselves, and its walls thickened as if to brace themselves against this one last disappointment. Then came time for my eyelids and all the muscles of my gaunt face. Then for the muscles of my head and neck, my upper body, my belly, my slightly bowed legs, my feet. Twelve hours later, I was completely rigid. Then came time for the rest of the planet.”

This in stark contrast to these lines from my first draft:

“The cold white of the bath pushes hard against my skin and I fumble for the plug so that I can turn on the tap to swarm warm water around my body. My nails are violet. Winter is in my bones.”

***Mend the Living* by Maylis de Kerangal**

This longlisted Man Booker novel follows the journey of a heart, as it moves from a young man killed in a car accident, through a transplant, and into the body of someone else. The descriptions are intensely detailed; sometimes an entire page is dedicated to deep navigation of one emotion or one bodily sensation.

Another example:

“She catches her own eye in the mirror – glazed irises beneath lids that are swollen as though by a blow, Simone Signoret eyes, Charlotte Rampling eyes, green line beneath her lashes – and she’s struck by not recognising herself, as though her disfiguration had begun, as though she were already a different woman: an entire slice of her life, a massive slice, still warm, compact, detaches from the present and capsizes into the past, plummets and disappears.”

This immediately inspired me to write about one organ in my character’s body, which then evolved into an entire chapter. This is how it starts:

“The heart has four rooms, lined with wallpaper of muscle, sheet upon sheet, living chambers pooling blood and then opening swivel valve doors to gush it to the adjacent room, a shared entrance, a secret exit, a solid beating house of fist-sized flesh. The walls of my heart are membrane thin, like the expanded throat of a frog, always threatening to burst, an overfull balloon, transparent curves letting too much light in. It feeds on ghosts that swim in my blood, light as air, smoky memories of nutrient-rich life, just passing through, slowly trailing door to door, a haunted crimson stream. I am told that at any moment a door could slam shut, a wall could collapse upon itself, the entire house could implode room by room, a demolition of slow falling dominoes, which would instantaneously fill my body’s skyline with death-grained dust, and stop my blood from pooling and pumping, allowing it to collect and stagnate in flattened arteries, sucking colour from my brain, shutting it down to white folds that will shrink away from my skull and become dry and brittle, a desert landscape with buried flashbacks of hip bones pushing through my skin, ribs in the shape of fingers expanding against cling wrap, a spine jutting from my back like the dorsal fin of a fish. I have prophetic bones, their defined lines a prediction of organs losing their muscular armour, of a heart transforming into confetti, congratulating me for betrothing myself to death, one less bite at a time.”

3. Scientific Research

A significant part of 300 Grams is based on marine science, and the research involved was naturally extensive.

I visited the Two Oceans Aquarium and spent many hours in front of the octopus tank, simply observing its behaviour and movement. There is something about seeing the fluidity of this in real life that I wanted to capture through my writing somehow. I also watched a number of videos for the same reason.

I also needed to do extensive research on Anorexia Nervosa. I read a number of books and journal articles.

Here is one example:

***Hunger Strike* by Susie Orbach**

This is a fairly old book, published in 1980, so some of the research on anorexia nervosa is outdated. However, I did find some of the information really interesting. For example, some anorexics see their body as a symbol of their emotional needs, and controlling food gives some sense of a control over their “neediness.” Her denial (and suppression of needs) is seen as a strength and provides her with a sense of pride. Also, historically, women have used their bodies as points of protest. For example, when the suffragettes refused to eat, and through that creating awareness - a form of self-expression. The woman with anorexia sometimes shows us with her body what she is unable to express in words.

Anorexia gives the person something that is uniquely her own, that is all hers. All her life she may have been shaped and forced by others, responding to desires of others instead of herself. Her body becomes the arena for this struggle, where she can finally have a voice and a will of her own.

This is a very complicated and multi-layered disease. Even as someone who has had a lifetime of eating disorders, I still struggle to comprehend the psychology behind the behaviour. It isn't simply a matter of control and not eating. It's so much more than that. I hope that this novel sheds a little bit of light on the thought processes that form part of anorexia and anxiety.

Historical aspect of the novel

Writing the “retro” chapter for my novel, which will ultimately be the climax, as well as representative of a shift in form, has been the most challenging part of my book so far. I am not familiar with classical texts, nor how language was used in the late 1700's. However, reading stories like *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* by Herman Melville is certainly helping me a lot. In the same spirit as *Moby Dick*, Melville depicts the world of early mariners and the aggressive ocean they encountered with impeccable skill.

I'm wrapping my head around words like henceforth and hitherto, as well as absorbing the seafaring language and using terms like seamen instead of sailors, for example. The trick for me has been to find a way to not sound pretentious, or like I am trying too hard, but rather like it was simply an authentic piece of writing that was discovered and now forms part of my novel. No easy task!

I am finding the research aspect of my novella the most exciting. A lot of my narrative is based on actual science, particularly of the marine environment. I am finding it fascinating to delve into the weird biology of some animals and then creating ways to link it to my story and create a unique angle with my work.

It is also a lot of fun to play with form and different voices. As mentioned earlier, my chapters alternate between the very visual language of the main narrator, and then switches to rather scientific language and a subtle “conversation” with the reader. I am hoping that through this questioning style of writing, that I can involve the reader intimately with the story, to perhaps evoke a different way of seeing someone with anorexia nervosa. In many ways it links the idea I began toying with in my creative non-fiction essay, where I explored the gap between the book and the reader, where the content is interpreted and where potential subjective meaning is found. Although it isn’t a direct intention when writing, a part of me is hoping that the way I am writing is touching a bit on this idea.

Further research

I was actually afraid to read the following book. After reading the synopsis I thought – ah man – this author has already gone and written something along the same lines as my book. The idea is no longer new. This has been done before. There was the ocean, a merging of creatures, an octopus. Yet, thankfully, it was entirely different. And inspiring. And taught me SO much.

***From the Wreck* by Jane Rawson**

The book is set in the late 1800’s and involves a shipwreck where a man named George spends a frightening 8 days floating at sea. A creature, one that can shape-shift at will, keeps him warm and alive. However, as he will discover, she doesn’t leave him alone after his rescue. She continues to transform herself – into a woman, his cat, a birthmark on his child’s back. She has this perpetual longing for the ocean, a place she knows she came from, yet doesn’t entirely understand.

The story is unique, yet simple. What I learned the most from her writing, however, was how she lived within each creature, becoming it. As the reader, seen through the first person, you become the tentacle, the fur, the liquid. The process of her transformations are described in a visceral way, you feel how the limbs are shifted and morphed, you sense the texture of each change.

Although there is a similarity on the surface to my work, on a deeper level it is something else entirely. The form, the story, the style. I did, however think that the human-octopus transition was unique, and I was wrong. This taught me something else: stories live in our collective conscious. They have been told for hundreds of thousands of years. What makes a book unique is the writer’s voice, the interpretation of a specific story, remaking art in a distinctive way.

It may be very likely that my book will be the first to ever merge the idea of anorexia and anxiety to sea creatures. Maybe. Maybe not. I finally see that this isn’t the point. It will always be different because how I write is different and how I see the world is unique. Perhaps that is the best part about reading. Seeing the same world through different eyes.

Even as I write, I am no longer looking through my own senses, but through Jane’s. She is just a character, and yet so very alive in my mind, as if she exists somewhere (albeit just in my imagination). I have moved away from the way I see, the way I feel, and instead live through her when I write.

I think that is what Rawson did so well. She became that horse, that cat, that octopus. And that is what made her writing so powerful.

Another book that heavily influenced my writing, was *Peach* by Emma Glass. I adored this book. Emma Glass tells the very brutal story of a rape in a surreal way. The characters are made of custard, trees, jelly, potatoes, and of course a peach. Yet, they are also clearly human with very strong personalities and emotions (which are cleverly depicted in the form they take). Peach was raped by a greasy sausage and the book follows her traumatic aftermath. The psychological insight was superb and Glass's style of writing was fantastic. I particularly enjoyed her short sentence structure, use of alliteration and imagery, and stream of consciousness form. A book I will return to again and again. It was tremendously influential of the development of my "ice-cream doctor" character.

***The Life of Hunger* by Amelie Nothomb**

I expected this novel to be about a teen's struggle with anorexia - and it was and it wasn't. What made the book supremely interesting is that the author used hunger as a metaphor and told the story through this young girl's eyes – as seen through the lens of hunger itself. The emptiness she felt as an immigrant, the void of not having words when learning a new language, the hollow feeling of not fitting in. Her actual encounter with anorexia as an eating disorder is only elaborated upon in one chapter.

What I liked about this was that it moved beyond the cliché of counting calories and cutting food. This was an exploration of the feeling of hunger, of the addiction for that empty feeling, and it is not necessarily related to food.

This powerful line really stuck with me:

"Anorexia chloroformed the voice of hatred."

It also echoed the scene in my novel where Jane is dissecting a rat and taking out its organs, then laying them in a row on a paper towel. Anorexia is also a form of taking apart a body, of taking apart "something." It is giving form and voice to an emotion – like hatred or grief or shame.

I liked the subtle nature of this novel. How there was a simple story that somehow managed to carry itself and speak a larger truth that wasn't laid out clearly – but left to the reader to discover. It's a book that stays with you, that finds its way into your thoughts days after reading it. I learned that you don't have to have this exciting plot that grips the reader from start to finish, nor do your characters have to be impressively complicated. You can write a simple story but that carries a layered metaphor – one that is open to interpretation, one that carries personal meaning, in other words. I like that idea – of making the reader excavate through the writing to find something else entirely.

4. Character Development

Initially there was only one character in 300 Grams, and that was Jane. She didn't have a name for a long time, and there was a lack of clarity in large spaces. I knew she had an eating disorder and was hospitalised, I also knew she had an obsessive nature and suffered from anxiety and sometimes hallucinated. However, in the beginning I thought she was a medical student who went through a traumatic event which translated into ritualised behaviour. However, the more I wrote, the more she started taking on a life of her own. As more and more comparisons were made to marine creatures I started to see a distinct pattern, and realised her deep knowledge and synchronicity in this regard would only make sense if she was involved in the marine world on a more intimate basis. It was then that I made her a marine biologist.

There needed to be a traumatic event and intuitively this linked in my mind to a giant sea creature, similar to the Kraken legend. The more I researched these historical and mythical accounts, the more I began to see that there needed to be a wreck - which later juxtaposed with another historical one, merging past and present.

It was through this wreck that the name Malachi popped into the narrative and a deeper layer to Jane's story emerged.

I do think it needs more work in terms of developing characters more, to give the reader a reason to “care” about Jane, in particular. In some ways she is distant, and perhaps a bit too “whiney.” I need to bring in more of those real-life examples, to anchor her in the world of the reader so that they can resonate with her on an emotional level (and not just feel the visceral response to some of the writing).

5. Creating a Narrative Space

My narrative essay explores the psychological space between the reader and a work of fiction, and this is something I am tremendously fascinated by. It interests me to know how and why readers are emotionally moved or intellectually curious by what is on the page. I explored this in much greater detail in my essay (found in SECTION 2 of this document).

In that piece I examined the idea of the third image, or the liminal space between the reader and the text. This “space” fascinates me. I also found when writing about anorexia, that I was exploring (in a way) that space between mind and body. So, for instance, I am curious about what happens (in minutiae) between the moment you are compelled to reach for the thing you are addicted to (cigarette, drink, food, etc.) and the moment you actually do. What happens between thought and action? Between the movie screen and the viewer? That place of suspended interpretation or emotion. I enjoy “microscopic” writing – going deeply into the detail of an image or short moment in time.

This is also something I tried to incorporate into my novella, which is another motivation behind experimenting with form and strong metaphors.

I attended a storytelling workshop at the Animation Festival in Cape Town, and the facilitator was talking about exactly this – how stories are layered, and are able to reach the audience/reader’s subconscious without it being obvious at all. For example, movies use particular colours to evoke emotion, which we aren’t consciously aware of in the theatre, but somehow it adds meaning on a different level. The speaker referred to the concept of a second ending to a movie or story – where the story itself comes to an end, but there is a deeper second meaning or take-away for the audience or reader. Something that makes them think about a concept long after the book ends. Something that may even change how they perceive a specific theme. As such, storytellers are a critical part of the evolution of human consciousness. It sounds a little woo-woo saying it like that, but in a sense, stories are what change people. Stories make a difference.

This once again taps into the same idea that I wrote about in my essay, and clearly it is one that resonates deeply with me. It is something I want to continually bring into my work, or at least try to.

6. Personal Growth as a Writer

I learned much about my writing and what appears to be working, and what isn't. For example, my reading was initially immersed in the world of fairy tales and magical realism, which I really enjoyed. However, I have discovered that as much as I love reading books like this, writing in that form doesn't come naturally to me. I have seen that I love the magical edge, but don't choose to write fairy tales in the "pure" form like Kate Bernheimer, for example. I like those little touches of weird and symbolic, and tried to incorporate that into 300 Grams.

Based on my feedback with one of the earlier assignments, as well as how I personally felt about my pieces and what I enjoyed writing most, the story that was most positively received was the one I wrote about the girl with anorexia, which was very focussed on detail and sensory images, with surprisingly very thin narrative. The irony is that this is the opposite to fairy tales (which contains strong narrative and story with minimal "complicated" language). I am starting to see that what draws me to fable-like writing is the magical and the deeper meanings, as opposed to the form and style.

This story would later form one of the chapters in my novella, where Jane is waiting to be weighed.

I think my challenge is now to rein in my enthusiasm for imagery and metaphor, and focus a bit more on the storytelling itself. I have noticed that sometimes I lose my reader (based on general feedback) when I get too hooked on my images, and then lose the meaning behind those images. Although I know that I don't need to write stories that are blatantly obvious, I also can't allude to depths so low that nobody gets it. I am thoroughly enjoying the experimenting and exploration.

My supervisor, Stacy, suggested that I go into more detail, to dive deep into metaphors and expand on what I have written. There was initially not enough in the writing. Although there were strong points where there were elements of a great image or a good turn of phrase, overall it lacked that punch in the gut that I was going for.

This saturation with detail and working closely with extended metaphors helped me rework the first few chapters that I wasn't happy with. Once again I took a single organ – in this case, skin - and created an entire scene around that.

Another element that is exciting to work with is voice. Stacy pointed out that my characters are not discernable enough in terms of their voice and how they use words. These can certainly be pulled apart and reworked and that will be the focus of the next couple of weeks. For example, there is a doctor who plays a critical role in the novella, and the style in the chapters he features in needs to shift to reflect a different mood, and the dialogue and the way he speaks must adjust to his personality and presence. At the moment my own writer's voice is coming across too strongly in all of the characters, and although this works quite fine for the narrator, the other people in the book need to come into their own more.

Also, I have brought in a lot of motifs and images that upon future revision need to be taken deeper, and when editing the next draft, perhaps echoed sooner in the narrative too. It becomes all too easy to focus on the prose and the language and lose sight of the story itself. And, very soon after, the reader.

Another observation is that my writing is sometimes "too obvious" for the reader. This specific critique has been applied to my work over and over again and it is one that I want to banish from my style! I am learning that in order to keep my reader glued to the page, I don't have to give them information, but in fact...sometimes withhold it from them. This allows the

intelligent reader to fill in the gaps and become part of the process themselves (which as you know is something I am passionate about – reader experience). Ambiguity makes the reader a part of the narrative – they fill in the gaps, and make up their own mind about what something means. For example, I don't need to go into detail about how the narrator cuts up her food. Most people know how anorexia shows up on the plate. It's about going behind that idea and writing from a different angle and perspective. I am writing a piece of imaginative fiction, not a textbook on anorexia nervosa.

In a similar vein, Stacy sent me this short story which was phenomenal on a visceral level:

***SPAR* by Kij Johnson**

The language here is exquisite. I see what Stacy means by telling something “obvious” in a unique and experimental way. The use of “in” and “out” in this story, for example, was so effective and left much to the imagination of the reader. Also, by being less “obvious” the sex was less “gross” if that makes any sense. It was a play with imagery and metaphor and body, and was somehow intoxicating despite being rather weird.

By reading these pieces of writing I was drawn to writing a part of a scene in 300 Grams that is also of a sensual nature. I was nervous to do this – I didn't want an explicit sexual act, but I did want to give an indication of merging and becoming one with this ocean creature. I need to expand on this much more, but the start has been an entirely new writing experience for me.

Other books I have read over the past two weeks were non-fiction, for research purposes, and include the following:

As I aim to be experimental in my work, I was reminded of the book *Peach* by Emma Glass, which was one of my inspirations for this type of writing. She never mentions the fact that the character was raped, nor do you know what the guy looks like. But through imagery of sausages and peaches you get the idea. That is the kind of effect I need to work on. As Viktor Shklovsky says: “What makes the stone stony?” What makes anorexia, anorexia?

It's also interesting to see how my personal life is starting to play a role in the writing. Initially my main character (in my mind) was a medical student. However, there was this distance between me and her, perhaps because I couldn't relate to her profession and either needed to do a lot more research and interviews with experts, or else follow my gut which was nudging me in a different direction. Turns out, Jane is a marine biologist. This I can completely understand and relate to as it is what I first studied when I left school. Finally...my degree in Zoology becomes useful!

A recurring theme for me, as a writer, is that sometimes my work is misunderstood. Too many images, not enough narrative. What is rather interesting for me is that when I let myself go and allow the writing to play experimentally, which is when I receive the most criticism (which is good because it is showing me where I need to work harder). Yet, when I write plain old stories from life, things that I know, narrative that is familiar, then my work is understood, praised, encouraged. Bringing in my natural interest in Marine Biology helped me cross this line.

This question also led me to think about what I most love to read. That will always be books that are filled with beautiful prose (the more imagery and metaphors, the happier I am as a reader), ideally short and powerful pockets of narrative. Either short chapters or a collection of short stories woven together. When a writer is able to somehow create meaning with how they write, or pull me in as a reader because I can so relate to what is being written, almost “understood,” then I am enthralled by the book. It can be fiction or non-fiction, but these elements all seem to be there every time.

I want that same response in reaction to what I write. I think that I lose this because I don't include enough story and my work is too burdened with metaphor. I hide the meaning too deeply and readers don't get it.

I found that Jane started to take on a life of her own as I wrote. Whereas before I used parts of my own history and story to weave into hers (for example, I really did dissect a rat as part of my undergraduate degree), now she has inserted her own experience. For example, I have never been a smoker apart from the odd cigarette socially. So writing an entire chapter around her ritual of smoking was something that came from another place; that seemed to come from her. Strange as that may sound.

I have felt a natural shift in my writing, and I believe it is a good one. I am bolder with where I take the story, not worrying so much about where it will end or how much sense it makes. I am more focussed on the way of writing and experimenting with ideas and syntax. I have seen through the reading I have been exposed to, and the way my mind naturally tends to go, that there are no rules. Content doesn't always have to fit into a neat little literature box. It can play and spill over.

SECTION 2: NARRATIVE ESSAY

Creating narrative spaces of self-discovery

“And if there is consuming going on, it’s not about money; it’s a reader wanting to take a book I wrote and maybe put it in their mouth or rest it on their chest or take it into the sea with them.” – Lidia Yuknavitch

Although there are authors who write books to make money, I believe the vast majority of the really great writers write because they feel like they can do nothing else. They hope that when their work reaches the reader that there is a response, any response, even if it’s harsh critique. Because then, at least, your writing has evoked a feeling. It has made someone think. Good writers don’t just want to write great stories, they want to affect the reader. Books that make us feel something, or somehow reveal hidden parts of ourselves, or make us think differently about the world, are the ones that stay with us long after we have finished reading them.

The questions I seek to start answering in this essay are, what is it that makes stories like this, and how do writers achieve that result? To follow the arc of this research I weave quotes from a number of writers who share insights from different angles. It’s a collective essay, a gathering of information and ideas. For this reason, I left voices untouched and included them as I continued to explore the questions.

I begin with the idea that there is a *space* between the narrative and the reader. There are different theories about what occupies this space, as well as how to fill it in such a way that the reader is tied to the words, without necessarily understanding why. In this space there is room for the reader to create personal meaning, feel sensations in the body, and become aware of previously unconscious thoughts.

1. What is this space?

I would like to suggest that it isn’t so much a place, but a relationship - an interaction between the reader and the text. Jackie Wang, in her essay titled *Aliens as a Form of Life*, speaks of this space as a container. She writes: “To create space for the imagination is to create a container for the un-containing and un-leashing of desire. The container should facilitate generative encounters and provide a ground on which energising and magical experiences can take place. For me, the art is always what happens during the encounter, for writing is first and foremost energy and connective tissue – a relation. It’s not the textual objects but the bonds that matter.”

The art, that writing I refer to that shifts the energy in the reader, happens because of this bond and connection (which exists inside the space). It is not, however, forged by content, but by form. The reader doesn’t need to understand what he/she is reading, but rather, needs to feel it. Content is secondary.

2. Where does it come from?

Form creates the space, not content. Charles Olson, in his manifesto, *Projective Verse*, described the poem as a field of action. He ventured on to say that form is never more than an extension of content. In other words, content determines form. The irony here, as it relates to my argument, is that content determines form which in turn creates this energetic space where “magic” happens. But if form creates this space, and not content, and yet content determines the form, then where does the circle start and end? What comes first, the chicken or the egg?

RM Berry, in an introductory piece called *Writing the Present* writes: “As a result, if we don’t understand the writing of Diane Williams or Michael Joyce or Leslie Scalapino, we won’t normally wonder **what their words mean**. We’ll wonder **what their words make**: a puzzle, a pastiche, a collage, a plot, a spoof, an essay, a mess.”

So if it’s not so much about what the reader understands, but more about what he/she feels and sees, then the job of the writer is similar. Perhaps we should stop hankering so much on content and the “what” (story, plot) and focus more on the “how” (structure, form, style, language). To me this is almost more of a visual process – presenting an image to the reader and describing the shades and contours, more than what this image does (or why). The feeling will naturally bubble up in the reader, it cannot be dictated or described.

Here is a very simple example:

Form creating space:

The dark arms of the trees swallowed the sun. At this hour the girl walked into the forest and called her mother’s name.

Content creating space:

Yasmin was terrified. She was only six years old and had never been alone before, but she needed to go and find her mom who had gone missing three days before. The sun had just set and she knew it wasn’t safe walking in the forest in the dark.

It is likely that the first story introduction hooked you more as a reader than the second. That is because you determined for yourself how this girl was feeling, and you may be intrigued as to why she is calling for her mom. In the second example, there are too many details and too much information. You’re told that the character is terrified and in an unsafe situation. There is no space, for you as a reader, to have an experience.

Brian Evenson in an essay he wrote called *Dark Turns of an Imaginary Past*, suggests that writers think less in terms of the information they are presenting, and more in terms of how they present it. As he says, “The excellence of the mental entertainment consists less in the subject than in the author’s skill in dressing it up.”

In other words, it’s not so much about the content, what the writing is about or what it depicts, but how it is structured. Evenson goes on to question whether we depict something as it is in life, or do we shape it? Are novels mirrors or containers? Writers should try to not so much capture the event (literal moment) itself, but rather the lingering strangeness and intensity (which the reader can feel and experience).

William Carlos Williams, in *The Poem as a Field of Action*, speaks about vocabulary opening the mind to feeling, and how in order to feel more we need the means to feel with – the tokens or the apparatus. This apparatus, in his view, is the measure or the structure of the poem (reality). The subject matter itself, which is fantasy, is what is wished for. The poem is a space where these wishes can be fulfilled. But, the trick is to not cling to the subject, the fantasy, the lines of lush content. Williams says, “When a poet, in the broadest sense, begins to devote himself to the subject matter of his poems, genre, he has come to an end of his poetic means.” This brings us back to the central important hinge: structure. Form.

3. How is this type of form formed?

Kate Bernheimer, in the article, *Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale*, proposed four elements of traditional fairy tales: flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalised magic. I would like to focus on one of those aspects as it is the most useful in laying the foundation for the form often required in the space I have been referring to: Flatness.

This flatness leads to an instant sense of familiarity. There is no showing, fairy tales are all telling. Readers know that this happened, and then that happened, with no concrete cause or reason why. As Berhheimer muses, you have an uneasy yet comforting sensation, a “supernatural awareness of living inside a story.” The story also enters you and lives in you. She says, “Fairy tales hold the key to the door locked between psychology and abstraction.”

I think it’s important to note that flatness does not necessarily imply simple. Writing a character in a flat style suggests that one does not elaborate on her motivations, for example. These need to be “uncovered” by the reader through exploration and inquisitive introspection, and will be different for every person. In a sense, flatness creates a dream world where the reader has agency. The story is told for sure (this happened, then this happened), but this is simply to guide the dreamer along a journey. Where that journey culminates is not necessarily a single, common point. Flatness can still be complex and multidimensional, just not **explained**.

Alissa Nutting writes in a journal titled *Evening Will Come*, “Like snow, flatness blankets the surface of language – it covers the sinister and the good with an equalizing coat of paint, and the game then comes in the act of reading when we have to scratch away and reveal, through context, the emotion beneath the sentence’s calm surface.”

This beautifully illustrates how the reader extracts the emotion and the feeling – he/she isn’t told how to feel or what to feel – it is a natural unfolding and unearthing. Nutting says: “It involves the reader directly – rather than being told exactly what the character is feeling, readers must instead extract that feeling on their own from the understated vapours or flat language. Flatness, in my opinion, leads wholly to fullness.” The skill then for writers comes in evoking emotion and feeling, without writing about that specific feeling.

Matt Bell, in the same issue of the journal, *Evening Will Come*, adds: “This, more than anything else, is the secret power of flatness: the wonderful way in which something flat can also be a container, and that what it might come to contain is the bottomless self of the reader, set in new motion from inside a story.”

This forms the crux of what I am trying to put my finger on. That journey into the reader’s sense of self and discovering hidden depths through emotion, the senses, and unexpected insight. This container, this space, that holds the reader – that is the elusive field that flatness can make room for.

Lucas Southworth continues with his contribution: “Fairy tale sentences create emotion and conflict. There is danger, a hint of the visceral... If the sentences are flat, and they are, they also have a unique kind of depth.”

I would like to argue that this depth is within the reader, in his/her feelings, thoughts, and even body. Southworth says something similar, “The flatness stumps us at first. Then with nowhere to go we ebb back into ourselves. This is why these sentences take our breaths away; they are like trying to breathe with our mouths against a window... I attempt to write so that the experience of the sentence must be solely on the reader, that as the writer my experience must not, cannot, lurk behind the words at all.”

This last sentence from Southworth is critical. Our own emotions and experiences cannot come across in our writing, and detaching ourselves somehow from that is what will help create flatness and the platform for the reader to go within themselves for those feelings. Once we “tell” the reader how to feel, we have lost that vital energy, that interaction and relationship. The story, no matter how well written, can become lifeless.

As my own “first reader” I often feel that same surge of emotion as I step through my sentences for the first time after I have written them. If I have done the writing “right” I may find myself gasping as I read. I know I am responsible for putting the words on paper, but

writing and reading are two different things. Even though I know it's there, only now, as a reader, do I allow myself to actually feel what's there.

I have heard it said that a poem isn't finished until the writing has caused the poet himself to cry. Perhaps this sometimes only happens upon a third or fourth reading, not in the actual writing thereof.

4. Where is the space?

The more I dig into research and the more I think about it, it seems that most often the space is lived in the present moment. Writing in the present moment creates an immediate alternative reality.

Kate Bernheimer writes in *Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale*: "The first thing you always know about a fairy tale is that you are in it. Immediately it announces that it is a form and that you are inside the form."

William Carlos Williams speaks about leaving readers naked, deprived of their protective barrier or covering. "The reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a vision of what he would be, some day... But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is."

As a writer I create new worlds and characters that never existed before. To immerse readers in this world, I need to write stories that can somehow be embodied in real time. As Kate Bernheimer states, in *Evening Will Come*: "From this sort of story no reader can escape unchanged back into the world outside of the story, which to the story – and thus to the reader – does not really exist." She chooses to write using fairy tale techniques as the medium to transform fictional worlds into emotional planes of existence. These stories are flat and one-dimensional abstract spaces. But in these spaces the reader has room to experience and invent new ways of experiencing the world. The writing is transparent and not obscure. Nothing is hidden from the reader. The message is instant: This is the story you are in, the time is now, live it. Feel it before you try to understand it.

5. What happens in the space?

There appears to often be a disruption, dismantling, or dislodging. Where things fall apart or seem out of place somehow. A known thing, which Noy Holland suggests could be any object, even one's own body, appears where it shouldn't normally be. It startles the reader, bumps the earth a little, dislodges a few stuck thoughts or feelings.

Brian Evenson in *Dark Turns of an Imaginary Past* talks about the novel, *City and the City* by China Mieville. He says, "Mieville is taking ideas and perhaps his own memories of a post-WWII Berlin and using them as fodder, chopping them up, transforming them, and offering something that is at once not at all true to the reality of that divided city yet still captures, in a unique way, its real intensity." Evenson goes on to say that *City and the City* touched him more deeply than any novel written directly and obviously about the war.

I don't think this space is often perceived as "comfortable" – in fact, I would venture to say that it needs to be *uncomfortable* in order to be effective. Intense emotions and dismantled ideas should not be easy to sit with.

Carl Jung once wrote:

"The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and it makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life."

Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is lacking."

6. How do you enter the space?

For writing to have an affective and visceral response, the reader needs to be an active agent in the feast, not a passive word-eater.

The ways that authors could invite this active response is to write with three possible approaches (there are certainly more, I am sure):

- a. Use sensory language
- b. Allow for different points of access
- c. Generate feelings/emotions

a. Use sensory language

Lara Glenum, in *Language is the Site*, says: "Cultivate a highly tactile sense of language. Perform experiments not with language but on language." There are ways of putting words together that can make the reader's skin crawl or their belly twist. If a writer succeeds in doing this, immediately you have included the reader in the narrative. He is there, literally experiencing it.

Lidia Yuknavitch, in *Why do you write it all weird?* says, "If someone reads writing of mine and they feel something in their actual bodies, then I've succeeded... What I need, what I live for, what I write for, is this: that moment when the reader is holding an actual book in their hands and they can feel their skin differently. Their heart beating. Their torso, their face, the place where their very sex sits. An alive body inside language. Corporeal writing."

Once again, this is immediate, in the present moment. The reader is there, participating, feeling.

In a different article, *Toward the Edge*, Yuknavitch writes: "I felt an old rage running through me. I thought, hey, it isn't true what they've told us. You don't need anything to happen or depend on a conflict for a story to rise. You don't need a central character with motivations – you just need a body."

As a writer, I have been taught standard formulas for writing a good story. I have learned to insert conflict or tension at just the right point, have a sound plot, take the main character on a hero's journey, and so on. Yet, so many stories and novels, despite adhering to all the rules, remain stagnant. But you can read a short story with none of these elements, that simply makes you feel sensations in your body, and you have something interesting going on. The reader is participating. There is movement.

It's not to say that plot isn't important, or that character development is never a consideration. This isn't whimsy. The idea, however, is that it is essential to bring the reader's senses into the reading experience in order for the story to be felt. This comes back to form and writing style. The content (subject, plot) is secondary.

b. Allow for different points of access

No two readers are alike and will interpret and respond to stories in different ways. Entering and experiencing a particular world is not immediate for everyone.

Craig Santos Perez in *Unincorporated Poetic Territories* said: "Stories are not told whole. Stories live and breathe and change with each telling. Stories are shaped, in the moment, by the audience, the setting, the season, the body and voice and memory of the storyteller."

[...]The plurality and unpredictability of these audiences means that there is no single trajectory of accessibility...I try to write poems that have multiple points of access and, in turn, walls of inaccessibility.”

One way to create these points of access is through writing style. This can be done in such a way that it is an invitation to the reader to participate with the narrative, even if it means wrestling with it. In other words, audiences are compelled to transform how they read, and this in turn transforms how they think, and possibly, how they feel.

Bell Hooks, in *Narratives of Struggle*, writes: “The way the *Bluest Eye* is constructed forces the reader to confront the reality that the critical apparatus necessary to understand this fiction cannot be reached by conventional ways of knowing. Readers must learn to “see” the world differently if they want to understand this work.”

It’s a shifting of paradigms. Sometimes narratives describe realities and worlds that readers don’t know or understand. The language isn’t recognisable, the journey is foreign. There is nothing standard or conventional to hold onto as you walk in the dark, and that is exactly why it brings the reader instantly into that space, that container. It isn’t comfortable, it isn’t familiar, it’s confusing, and you don’t understand. Which means you, as a reader, are forced to perceive differently.

c. Generate feelings/emotions

This shifting of perception in unfamiliar territory, leads directly to feelings in the reader, which can be physical, mental or emotional.

Basil Bunting, in *Poet’s Point of View*, speaks about poetry that “the hearer **feels rather than understands**, lines of sound drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose.”

Wei T’ai, way back in the eleventh century, wrote: “Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling, for as soon as the mind responds and connects with the thing the feeling shows in words; this is how poetry enters deeply into us. If the poet presents directly feelings which overwhelm him, and keeps nothing back to linger as an aftertaste, he stirs us superficially; he cannot start the hands and feet involuntarily waving and tapping in time, far less strengthen morality and refine culture, set heaven and earth in motion, and call up the spirits!”

This is perhaps the most important point in this essay: We are attempting to convey feeling, not through talking about that feeling or dictating what should be felt. Instead, as Wei T’ai stated, writing should present the thing which evokes that feeling. Although we want flat characters, for instance, we certainly don’t want superficial ones. We desire depth and nuance. This “presenting of the thing” however, is not a simple task.

Camille Roy writes in her essay titled *Experimentalism*: “Genre fiction is not about representing experience but producing and organising feeling – sexual excitement, horror, mystery, fear. The aim is to invade the reader’s subjectivity. To control, and then to release. The desire of the reader to be aroused or to otherwise escape is the keyhole through which all the mechanisms of the narrative operate”

This producing and organising of feeling, of controlling and releasing a reader’s arousal, becomes sticky. The trap I believe we can so easily fall into as writers, is trying to create a space or structure that is too rigid, too prescriptive. As soon as we **try** to make a reader feel a certain way, we have failed.

Somatic Cinema, written by Luke Hockley, is a detailed investigation of the relationship between the body and film using a Jungian perspective. In many cases, instead of film one

could just as easily be speaking about a novel, which is simply another form of art. Hockley speaks about an intersubjective space which refers to the unlooked-for, unaddressed, unseen, unbeckoned and unexpected personal responses that people have to art. He has termed this space, which I believe is the same dimension readers slide into when engrossed in a story, the “third image.” He is very clear that meaning is not just an intellectual undertaking, but is also felt and embodied. In other words, just as other writers have reported, this space of relationship with the reader is supported by **feeling**.

However, he also touches on the dilemma both filmmakers and writers face. That is, the harder you try to create this space, this feeling, the further you actually end up from doing so. Many books that try to make a reader feel a certain way fail completely. In contrast, these same readers may have the desired response but with a book that, on the surface, had absolutely nothing to do with that emotion. The same novel can enthrall one person and bore another, as psychologically these two people have not read the same book.

Conclusion

Writing provides the means, through a space one can inhabit, where there is a descent into one’s own inner world, which may or may not look like the one that has been written about. This space is a gateway where we can bypass the surface question of “what is this about” in our rational, conscious minds, and go deeper into the questions of “what does this feel like” and “what does this mean to me?” This opens up valuable insights into the core of who we are, and serves as a means of self-discovery.

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SECTION 3: COMMUNITY PROJECT

For this assignment I teamed up with another student, Graham Dukas, and we hosted two writing workshops with the objective of helping new writers get over their fear of putting pen to page and having some fun reading each other's work.

The venue was a local independent book shop. Wine and snacks were provided, flowers were arranged, and we created a lovely, relaxed atmosphere. We had six participants.

Outline of the two evenings:

Week 1:

There was a basic introduction to the process of free writing. Participants were encouraged to have fun, be experimental and just enjoy the writing process.

This was followed by some readings and examples of short form fiction. This included work done by myself and Graham, followed by examples of other authors, such as Lydia Davis and Sheila Heti.

Participants were then given the opportunity to experience a free writing exercise. We offered two rounds of a few minutes each. They were provided with writing prompts. Each person drew something different out of a box – a simple prompt, an image, or a fun phrase. They then created a short piece of free writing based on this.

Each person read their piece to the group (if they were comfortable to do so) and there was an opportunity for everyone to give their opinions and feedback.

They were then asked to develop their free-writing into a short piece of flash fiction for the following week or to write something completely new, if they preferred.

Week 2:

This session was an opportunity for each participant to read out the piece they polished or wrote afresh and to obtain feedback from the group. There was an informal discussion around the writing process and how the experience was for everyone.

We also read again at this session, using examples of our own work and those of others as well.

We closed the session by having time for questions and answers, reflections and observations.

Feedback from participants:

Helen:

I would say that you both crafted a very welcoming and open environment. I appreciated your particular focus on ensuring that everyone felt that their individual styles and preoccupations were valid; I noticed and appreciated the way that you repeatedly brought this up. I also liked the mermaid in the bottle story! The prompts were good -- despite some mild complaints from others, they clearly sparked instant and varied responses.

Christine:

Thanks for including me in your project.

I enjoyed the evening meetings.

You were both friendly and relaxed. It made me feel safe and willing to participate.

I liked the examples you both read.

I enjoyed the discussions and the references you gave.

The prompts were good, the exercises worked.

It was a good idea to take the three short pieces of the first evening and extend them into a longer piece for the second evening. A good exercise.

Even though I didn't bring that to the last session, I wrangled the pieces and found I could make something out of them — to complete later.

I used the homework time and 500 words to write a new introduction to a story I'm thinking of writing. I was grateful for that.

Rosemarie:

I enjoyed the workshop very much

What I enjoyed most was in Workshop 1, when you told us to put pencil to paper and just write. I think we each picked a starting line from the hat. It was a wonderful way to get the creativity started. There is absolutely no reason why the finished work should have anything to do with the opening sentence but it gets you started. The first paragraph can easily be discarded later.

Catherine:

Firstly thank you to both you and Graham for organising the workshop and creating a safe environment in which I felt very comfortable sharing and contributing. I love connecting with other writers at any opportunity so this workshop provided a great space to interact with others of varying levels / experience / genres. In a situation like this, you always learn from others and leave the richer for it.

Flash fiction – I have never done this before and loved it. It is definitely something I will continue to do on my own and I have already started building my own "magic hat" of ideas. Great for when you are feeling low on inspiration or need a kick start.

I really enjoyed listening to the other pieces and am always amazed at how everyone's style and topics differ. I loved the dark humour, the quirky and the strange.

Examples of participant's writing:

Helen:

Chad turns up the road to the cable way station.

“You’re taking her to the colony?”

“It’s her only chance. Someone dropped out last night. Came to collect their kid – said they’d rather take their chances as a family.”

“But…”

“It’s the only place she’ll survive. They have everything she could possibly need there.” He pulls up in the parking lot. “Get her ready.”

There’s a blanket in the back of the car – it belongs to one of Chad’s kids. I wrap the baby in it. He gives me a piece of scrap paper and a pen. “What’s her name?”

What is her name? Her first name is Ebba. We decided that long ago. But is she a Markgraaf or a den Eeden?

“*Her name is Ebba.*” I write. Leave the surname out. We can decide that later when we come to fetch her.

Chad pins the paper to her blanket, hides the baby in the togbag he uses for tools, and clicks on the kinetikaphone. “Maak oop,” he calls. “Maintenance.”

The door swings open.

“Last minute adjustment,” he says. “Net ‘n oomblik.”

“Wait here.” He’s gone, disappearing into the dark mountain with my daughter.

Rosemarie:

Reaching for a folder, a small wrapped package dislodged at the rear of the shelf. Faded smooth brown paper and yellowed sellotape. Removing the paper revealed a square cut glass ink well with a delicately engraved silver hinged lid. The lid now metallically dull against the clear cut glass edges, which remained unforgivingly sharp despite the passing of time.

Despite its obvious neglect, it retained a beauty and enduring clarity that had not completely disappeared. A small scroll of paper tied with a ribbon would be seen inside the ink well.

Catherine:

Sharp bird-like brown blood-shot eyes stared out from an unshaven face. A mass of tangled dirty grey hair covered his head from which large pointed ears jutted. Saliva-laden bulbous purple lips glistened like a beacon between the bushy moustache and the long untidy gingery-grey matted beard which covered his chest.

Christine:

There’s a Portuguese restaurant that’s survived relocation. Manny greets me like a long-lost friend. Wally knows where to find me. The plasma-screen dominates the back wall. Cristiano Ronaldo, running around like a Portuguese god. I’m a Man City man myself. I order a Corona and wait for the next game, flick through the channels. Suddenly the screen is an aquarium and a beautiful mermaid fills the space. I look into her eyes. It’s not every day you see a mermaid, certainly not in Maitland, but she’s smiling and waving at me. There are moments I ask myself if I’m crazy, if my mind is migrating. I’ve known mermaids in my time — always there when I’ve needed them.

Aimee:

I could snap at her. The words are ready in my throat, in my mouth. They’re lined up on my tongue like an impatient army, awaiting the order to charge. "Stop fucking reading all the time," I could say. "It's like you're rubbing my dyslexia in my fucking face. Put down the Goddamn book and kiss me first for once."

I tilt back my head, close my eyes like I'm orgasming, and down my wine in one decidedly unclassy swig. The army of words in my mouth is washed away and drowned drowned drowned, like the Egyptians swept to their death by the Red Sea.

When I open my eyes, Valentina is looking at me. "Could you not be so fidgety? I'm trying to read here."

My experience of the project:

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that my feedback to the participants was positive, insightful and helpful – and this is entirely due to all the practice we had as students during the MA. Our feedback to one another every two weeks helped develop a very important skill, and both Graham and myself saw this in action during our writing workshops.

Also, it was interesting to see that some of the best writing came not from the published authors and poets in the group, but rather the very new writers. The ones who weren't trying to impress anyone with fancy words, but rather wrote from the gut. The same was true during group feedback. The established writers tended to be more critical, while the newer writers were positive and thoughtful.

I enjoyed the opportunity to give back to the community in a small way, to inspire just a handful of people to write more, and to encourage reading as a way of growing as a writer.

SECTION 4: REFLECTION ON THE READER'S REPORT

I was tremendously encouraged and impressed by the reader's analysis of *300 Grams*. The reader showed tremendous insight into my work, and not only gave me specific advice on how to improve certain aspects, but also highlighted points that I wasn't aware of, in terms of how my novella could be interpreted on a larger social scale.

I was also motivated to continue finding my place in the literary scene in terms of genre and discovering my "family" of similar authors. I was struck how the reader compared my work to some of my favourite writers and books, including Mishka Hoosen's *Call it a difficult night*, Lily Hoang's *A Bestiary* and Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*.

I am pleased that my attempt to combine factual scientific narration with fiction worked from the reader's perspective. The reader considered this one of my strengths and remarked: "*As a reader I enjoyed attempting to untie these hinted at strands, and one of the strengths of the novella is how it skilfully weaves the facts into Jane's life.*"

The reader also pinpoints my genre incredibly accurately: "*Michelle Ainslie's 300 Grams is a hybrid novella – for me, it felt like an evocative prose poem exploring the intersections of fact, fable and fiction. It's raw, lyrical and intense.*"

The critique helped me revise and improve my work in these specific ways:

- The weight of numbers and details in the scientific narrative was occasionally ponderous. I edited this down to make it less dense.
- I explored more of Jane's character and tried to give her more depth by including more about her life, such as her mother's drowning. The reader's connection to Jane needed to be strengthened, without taking from her reclusive and secretive nature.
- There were some confusing aspects in certain parts of my narrative where the reader needed to question what Jane was referring to. I clarified this by being less abstract in certain paragraphs.

There were also numerous positive comments that solidified that much of my intention behind the novella was achieved:

- The reader "got" that the ocean serves symbolically as an unconscious realm, and as the ecocritical home of the novel.
- I tried to use the narrative to take the reader on a journey that was much like the ebb and flow of the ocean: deep dives that were almost suffocating, and then surfacing for air. I have a deep interest in exploring that space where readers experience what they are reading on a visceral level. It appears that I managed to achieve that to a satisfactory degree.

The reader states: "*It does feel as if I was experiencing that tension I alluded to earlier: being immersed in the narrative flow versus a foregrounding of the narrative constructedness...and indeed, there are pleasures in both, and pleasures in the intertwined overlaps.*

Keeping facts out of reach is one of Michelle's strengths. She is accomplished at making the reader feel as if (to borrow one of her observations) they're swimming underwater with their eyes open – there are shapes, but the clear-cut clarity of air shifts and fractures."

- I was equally happy to find that my shift in narrative voices was interpreted in a

way that I desired most readers would:

“The shifting between different narrative voices – third person, first person, second person is impressive in how it highlights very broadly the different ways in which Jane negotiates her identity. How she sees herself is expressed through first person; how she is seen by society is expressed through third person; what self is projected onto society is expressed through second person. Given Jane’s compulsion for structure, it’s clear a lot of thought has gone into structuring the novella, and this careful ordering integrates excellently into our understanding of Jane and her methodical self.”

- Finally, the one device I enjoy using and feel is where I am most accomplished is in terms of imagery. Sometimes I push it too far and it can get too dense and loses the story. This was a critique earlier on in my work. However, I think I managed to filter it down now, to a point where the reader found it enjoyable to read. I am so happy that this is the case as it is certainly my favourite part of writing:

“The imagery is beautifully crafted and evocative, and is one of the joys of reading the novella – the immersion in the language. There were so many moments which were revelations, and there were many accomplished and wonderfully constructed remarkable observations.”

I am moved by the effort and time that the reader took with my work, and the insight provided was invaluable in helping me craft my novella into a work I am truly proud of.

I extend much gratitude for this opportunity.