

This document consists of two (2) parts:

Part A: Thesis (Creative Work)

Part B: Portfolio

THE WEIGHT OF A TOOTH

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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by

Robyn Helen Perros

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Abstract

My thesis is a fragmented, non-linear novella, comprised predominantly of experimental prose-poetry and fiction short-stories. I have chosen this approach in form to further explore my interest in ancestry and trauma, death and image-making, “reality” and fantasy, and the tension these invisible barriers create between the inner and outer worlds in which we simultaneously navigate, remember and forget. This thesis has been influenced both in form and content by the works of Eduardo Galeano, Osama Alomar, Lidia Yuknavitch, Susan Steinberg, Claudia Rankine, Lance Olsen, and Yasunari Kawabata, among others.

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My mother's house 1/4

My mother collected miniature house ornaments. Her amateur collection amounted to just 43 figurines of various dwelling types: A little limestone cottage with a bougainvillea draped around the front door. A red-brick townhouse with a chimney, white bay-windows, and a black cat on the roof. Each of the houses were just big enough to fit one of your eyeballs inside and amounted to the weight of an egg in your palm. My mother never left South Africa, but we constantly moved around within it. In whatever house or apartment or cottage we lived in, she made sure that her tiny ornaments were always unpacked and displayed on a table at the front door. I always found it strange that as you entered one of our houses, you entered into 43 more.

The shower

The little girl sits cross-legged in the shower, the water cascading over her fish bone spine. She unclips her necklace and places it down on the tiles to study the black string, the silver clasp, the shiny blue dolphin pendant. She stares at the little dolphin necklace until the chlorine burns her eyes, until the water shouts into white noise, until the droplets pound into ice cubes on her back. She stares at the little dolphin necklace until her mother rips back the plastic shower curtain, claws her out of her wet cave, and scolds her for using all the hot water and letting her lips crystalize. The little girl flaps her slimy fish tail through her mother's arms, and between her teeth chattering like shells, explains that she was just swimming with the dolphins.

Driving lessons

Whenever my mother drove short distances, she would pause longer at the stop streets to rub her left knee. Whenever my mother drove long distances, she would pull over on the side of the road to rub her left knee too. She never said why. One day, when I was late for a party, she stopped to rub her left knee, several times. Irritated, I asked her why she always stopped to rub her left knee. Pushing down on the accelerator, with her eyes fixed on the windscreen of a memory, she told me about her first driving lesson. It had taken place on the N3 Highway. Her mother had just stabbed herself in the stomach with a pair of sewing scissors, several times. She had to get her to a hospital. My mother was 12 years old and her left leg was too short to reach the clutch.

My pet Snail

When Snail's parents were out, we'd hide inside on the couch watching Dragon Ball Z on SABC2. Sometimes we'd take our t-shirts off, our hard chests stacking on top of each other, our nipples four blobs of hardening paint. The colour of bruised peaches. Sometimes we'd take our pants off, our hips bones digging into one another's, knuckles in the back of a skull. We'd turn the TV up to drown our giggles and our skeletons, clinking like porcelain plates, the one's in the cabinet Snail's mother forbid us to touch.

Sometimes I'd let Snail's hair fall into my mouth like strands of melted marshmallow between two Marie Biscuits. I'd squish the sides of her waist with my legs while she pretended to bite the scabs off of my knees. Snail always moaned when I pierced her wrists into the mattress with my nails, crumbling her biscuit breath just above my lips, rubbing her cotton panties against mine. Roundaround, backtofront, upanddown, two bodies trying to blur the awkwardness between them.

After we'd rubbed our thighs pink as polony, Snail and I would put our gumboots on and kick stones along the dirt road of her parents' farm. We always never spoke. Instead, we'd collect handfuls of the sharpest stones we could find and throw them at the pigeons. Like steak knives, bombs, memories we didn't want to own. Sometimes we'd pick up broken bricks behind the horse stables and pound them against the snails on the back wall. I liked the sound their little shells made when they cracked, a marble clinking on a tooth. Snail liked poking their gooey bodies as they bulged out between their fractured backs, the same slimy mucus oozing out between our legs. *Does it smell the same too? Open your legs. Come on. Wider. Let me smell. You first. Then me.*

As we walked further down the dirt road, we'd grab sticks and dissect the guts of dead snakes on the path. Flick rotting mice and leather frog corpses down each other's t-shirts. Smear the pink fetuses of fallen chicks on each other's necks. Running, screeching, scratching, laughing, throbbing, saying stop meaning don't stop, louderandlouderandlouder between our legs. Snail and I liked each other because we liked making dead things feel alive.

Departures

“Do you have lot of baggage?” He asked, folding a paper aeroplane in the window light. “A ton.” She said, wheeling over a suitcase packed with blood.

What to wear to a funeral

She is hunched over a clothes pile in Durban CBD, flinging dead European's coats onto the pavement, her ancestors hand-me-downs. Her and Guinea Boy, the clothes pile vendor from Guinea, laugh and for a moment, she believes they could be friends. She sucks The Dress out, a snake from the concrete, and holds it up between the forest of buildings. The Dress is lime green, 100% viscose, with buttons shimmering down the front like scales. Ugly as a stomach cramp. She slaps thirty bucks in Guinea Boy's palm, tells him The Dress is perfect, and punches it in into her backpack. When she gets home, she rips the shoulder pads out with her incisors, grabs her body and pours it inside the dress. Looking in the mirror, she decides that this was The Dress she would wear because this was The Dress that would stain her.

Discovery Channel

The bird hears the gunshot from the TV it is stuck inside. The bird flies to the front of the screen and peers out the living-room window of the house. Outside, the bird sees impalas running. Behind the impalas, bounces a white bakkie. On the back of the bakkie stand three men and one woman. The black man is sent into the bush by the two white men. The two white men have guns draped across their shoulders like sashes. The bird watches as the black man hikes the hill and picks up the limp body of an impala by the horns. The bird flaps its wings against the inside of the TV screen. The black man wrestles the buck's body. He begins to carry the impala over his shoulder, gets halfway and lays it back down. His t-shirt now glistening with a mixture of the buck's blood and his own sweat. The bird tries to cry out, to warn the other animals, but the TV is on mute and the windows of the house are shut. The black man delivers the buck to the feet of the white men and steps aside into the shadow of a tree. Inside the TV, the bird suffocates while the white woman smiles, photographing the white men kneeling at their own grave.

The dream collectors

In the morning, the dream collectors peel the train tracks off their spines and step into the light. In silence they begin their rounds. Bulging black bags cling to their backs like ticks, their trolleys stacked high with the dreams the city sleepers couldn't grasp. The dreams they clawed the back of their eyelids for, the ones that slipped away through their pores, out of their bed sheets, under the cracks in their doors. The ones that dribbled down the high-rise walls and huddled around the rubbish bins in terrified clumps. One by one, the dream collectors bend down to pick them up. One by one, the lost dreams are thrown into their black bags, or filed neatly on top of their trolleys. Tied down tight with rope made from the hairs left on the sleepers' pillows. The dream collectors struggle to separate the shiny dreams from the dirty ones. The broken ones from the untouched ones. Because in this grey place, all lost dreams look the same. As the sun retracts its tentacles out of the city, the dream collectors make their way back underground where they trade the lost dreams for two bucks a kilo. Because the city sleepers prefer not to see their lost dreams left out in the street. They don't like to trip over them when they're in a hurry. They don't like to smell them while they're bleaching their shadows against the day.

My grandmother's hair salon 1/6

My grandmother worked in a small-town hair-salon. As a notoriously unpredictable woman, this was one of the few places where she was able to exercise precision and control. She could cut a mop of hair into the Johannesburg skyline, and with her hairspray can, she could zap a fly on a dangling ceiling-fan cord. But what was even more impressive was my grandmother's precision with the stories she exercised in this space. When the pensioners came in to get their quarterly perms, my grandmother regaled them with tales of her brief acting career. She'd ease them in, slow, delighting them with details of the feather dresses she got to wear and the tropical beaches she got to sunbathe on. Then just as the pensioners were sipping coconuts in the Seychelles, she'd shake them up with some juicy drama about the fist fights she had had with the other actresses on stage. Then, just when they thought the story was over, my grandmother would bend down into their shriveled faces and point to the scar that ran across her lips. Breathing a light mist of vodka-Ricoffy over their reading glasses, this is the part where she told them how it all ended with a stiletto slice through the tongue.

The bathtub

She grew up petrified of the sound water makes when you pull a plug out of the bathtub. That hollow, slurping vortex as it drains. It would ring in her ears so loud that she would convulse and scream for her mother to save her. She thought it was the Devil trying to suck her down to Hell with him.

Psychologists say that the fear of loud noises and monsters is a natural part of childhood, just the nervous system maturing. They say that those fears go away over time, but she doesn't think so. She thinks they just find new places to live as the body grows bigger.

When she thinks of her mother's body, she always thinks about it in the bathtub – stretched out, hair up, bony white toes stroking the tap. One by one, her and her sisters would step into the bathroom to confess their sins to their mother from the toilet seat. While their father watched TV on the couch, the women locked the door and exorcised their demons by candlelight.

This is where she told mother she'd lost her virginity half to a young girl and half to an old man. This is where big sister told mother she was gay. This is where middle sister showed mother the bruises that blonde boy had left on her legs. Abortion, rape, AIDS, satanism, the foolish auntie who spoke in tongues not knowing that God would never listen to a woman – the bathroom was where they scrubbed the crime scenes of all the women in their blood. This was their church. This was their prison.

She knows now why the sound the water makes when you pull the plug out scared her so much, because it was not just water going down the drain. It was the sound of untold ghost stories drowning beneath their feet. It was the last scream secrets let out before they are banished to the sea. There was so much blood in her mother's bathwater. Sometimes, when she's in the ocean, she can taste it between the salt.

I&Jy

The little girl sits cross-legged on the floor in front of the TV. She bites the head off of a fishfinger and dips it into the little pool of blood on her plate. Swirling it clockwise first, then anticlockwise in a spiral. She lifts the fishfinger up to her lips and sucks the blood out. One by one, she bites all the heads of the fishfingers off, dips them into the little pool of blood, swirling clockwise first, then anti-clockwise in a spiral, lifts them up to her lips and sucks the blood out. When all the fishfingers on her plate are finished, she starts to suck the blood out of her own fingers, one by one, until she tastes herself.

Suburbs 1/3

On a walk through the desert, she peered into all the glittering blue swimming pools behind the fences and wondered how many people had stared at them, thirsty.

Point Road

Every time the little girl and her mother arrived for their monthly visit to Granny, the little girl knew she had to prepare her wrists for the grip of her mother's hands. She would clutch them like a hockey stick and dribble her passed the men whistling from the sidewalk. "Don't make eye contact," her mother would whisper, stretching the skirt of her cashier's uniform further over her knees.

In silence, the little girl would run, watching her mother's black heels pound the concrete like mallets. Her own meatless frame hardening into cement. How quickly she became another statue that couldn't chase the pigeons.

Granny's flat smelled of sour milk and cigarettes. *Days of Our Lives* bled out from the TV's into the hallways. Paint peeled like chapped lips from the walls. The carpets were yellow and sticky. The little girl and her mother would hold their breaths as they hiked the stairs, fanning their armpits and fixing their hair.

To escape her mother's whispers and the vodka on Granny's teeth, the little girl would wiggle up the only window in the flat. "Watch out for the pigeon crap darling," Granny would rasp from her swamp of half-mended charity shop clothes and the *ciggie* on her lip. While her mother tended to the pile of dishes in the sink and the blood stains on Granny's bandaged wrists, the little girl would squint down onto the theatre of the street.

From up there, the little girl watched the vendors stack their apples into perfect green pyramids. She could see the whistles from the taxis bounce through the buildings in a giant game of ping-pong. She could taste the mielies boiling on the street corners. She could feel the hair relaxer and the salt air cling to the inside of her t-shirt. For a short while, the little girl could pretend to be those people down there. Those people living outside of their TV's and their cars and their barbed-wire eyelids. Dangling her feet somewhere between the streets and the clouds, this is where she would always live.

**Point Road, Durban, has since been renamed to Mahatma Gandhi Road.*

The search

“I spent my whole life looking for you.” He said, pouring cement into a hole for her to stand in.
“Then why on Earth would you stop?” She said, pushing him in.

How to catch a flying ant

Three girls sit in their panties on the tiled floor. Bruised knees. Hot breaths against the sliding door. Haaaaaaaahhh. They write their names into the glass, they are the only three people left in the world.

On the other side of the glass the world is greygreen. Clouds, heavy as cement. Grass, blurry as seaweed. They are waiting. Waiting for the storm. Waiting for him to come home.

Boots, briefcase, and belt walk in. The briefcase joins them on the floor. Followed by the boots. Followed by the belt. Followed by the sigh. Pants slip down his legs. Buttons open his chest. He reaches over their head. Slides the door open and steps out into their greygreen world. Passed their forgotten dresses on the *stoep*, passed the white plastic chairs waiting like ghosts. The three girls giggle, what is he doing, he is running, who is that man, that man running naked in his red underpants? The rain begins to fall.

They chase him into the wet. Round in circles roundandroundandround skinny white legs spinning into green, slipping into brown, the smell of mud, mixing into water, falling, head on thigh, neck on arm, hand on foot, screaming, harder, faster, the drops fall, harder, faster, the rain cuts their cheeks with its nails, little boobs bounce from their chests, lips turning purple, their blood pumps, father's red underpants, they laugh. Thunder vibrates from the throat of the clouds, father runs, father is boy, he tries to catch the girls, passed the lemon tree, sweet or sour, he can see through their panties, why do they care, father is child, arms out, windmills, tongues licking the sky, ice in the freezer, their chests heave, their nipples rise, trying to drink the air between the drops.

This rain, this white noise, drowning little/big voices stolen by the wind.

They think the storm wants to kill them, it sends the stones, white stones, white panties, hail, striking their skulls, the dips between their ribs, their elbows, shards of bone, the dead's revenge. They yell back into the smell/hell of ice, it stings them harder, flesh burns red, rawred, father's red underpants, they laugh, they slip into the cupboard of each other's arms, laughing/crying, tears/rain, girl/boy, parent/child, father/foe, fire/ice, body/stranger. Naked as snakes under the washing line, they wait for it to pass.

'You are safe' decides the storm, now an exhausted whisper under the bedsheets of mist.

The rain bird starts to moan. Longings of an ancient regret. It summons the flying ants. The girls fetch the empty jars from the kitchen. *Black Cat* peanut butter. The kids at school say that this is what they taste like, the flying ants, now alive in the greygreen world the girls and their father just died in. They flutter the residue of chaos off their wings, the girls float with them into calm. Quiet tippy-toes balance over the ice marbles, they lift off to catch them, the flying ants. Look father, see how we trap them. Close the lids. Righty-tighty. Look father, see how they crawl around in circles roundandroundandround searching for home. Look father, see how their wings fall off. Look father, see how they suffocate between their reflections in the glass.

The last supper

The mother places a pot of spaghetti on the floor. The little girl stretches in front of the TV to dish a helping onto her plate. When she sits back down on the couch, she sees that the spaghetti has turned into a tangled heap of black cables. She pokes the black cables with her fork and turns towards her family sitting beside her. Her father is hunched over, wrapping the cables around his neck. Her middle sister is throwing the cables one by one onto the ceiling; catching them in her lap as they stick, then fall. Her eldest sister is threading them through her nostrils, out of her ears, and into her mouth in a loop. Her mother's plate is empty and only the TV is laughing.

Night terrors on TV

The little girl gets up from the couch, points at the TV, stares at it, unblinking, she begins to scream, until her face burns red, until the tears dry on her face, the little girl's sister runs into the living room, the sister is 10 years old, the little girl is 6, the sister's name is J, J has a purple scar that runs like a vein between her nose and her top lip, J was born with a cleft-palate, when J gets scared the scar changes colour, J's scar is like a mood ring they would tease, J turns the little TV off, puts her hands over ears and runs to the landline phone, there is a sticker presticked just below the green dial pad, MOM WORK (087)3--56-9-, three rings, "H----- Good Day", J pants into the phone, mother asks J to breathe, to tell her, slowly, what is happening, J's scar is turning blue now, mother rushes home, J is hiding behind the front door, her hands still cupping her ears, the mother hears the screaming from the driveway, the mother finds the little girl staring at the blank TV, still pointing, still screaming, the house is vibrating, the little girl's skull is beginning to crack, the German Shepherds next door are barking, their teeth gnawing through the fence, the mother grabs the little girl, the little girl kicks and claws her mother's nametag off, scratches her hair out of its bun, elbows her glasses to the tiles, the mother cannot see properly now, the blurry mother runs the little girl's body away from the TV, the little girl is still pointing at it, still screaming, saying no no no, the mother is asking what is it what is it what is it, it's just the TV just the TV just the TV, the mother carries the little girl's body through the dining room, the little girl sees her own body sitting with her feet up on a chair, the little girl on the chair has red eyes filled with blood, the little girl's body on the chair is burning in orange flames that lick the ceiling, the little girl on the chair is laughing at the little girl in her mother's arms, the little girl points away from the TV to her own burning body on the chair, shhhhhhh what is it, what do you see, there is nothing to be afraid of, there is nothing there, stoppitstoppitstoppit, the mother carries the little girl into the bedroom, the floor opens up into a black vortex, a magnet, the carpet is gone, the hole is taking her again, the same hole that opens in the night when she sleeps, her pores itch, she tries to scratch the skin off of her arms, the man that lives down there beneath the carpet wants her, the little girl is pointing to the hole in the floor now, there is a voice down there, do you hear it, the little girl blocks her ears now too, the mother pins the little girl down on the bed, holding her wrists, J has followed them into the bedroom, the scar above her lip is pink now, the mother tells J to call the doctor, she reads out the number to J, J shuffles along the wall toward the telephone, what's happening J says, is she going to be okay, the little girl is kicking her mother in the stomach, she can hear the man's voice in the walls now, he is sucking her breath from her throat, twisting her bones backwards, drawing the water from her cells, stretching her ligaments into gum, he wants to take her into his black hole, into his TV, J reaches the doctor, the doctor tells the mother it's a fit, the doctor tells the mother to pin her to her side, to place a jacket under her head, when this doesn't work, the mother tells J to hang up, and reads another number aloud, J hears the priest's voice on the other end, we need assistance J says with her lisp, with her scar that is black now, the priest tells her it's a demon, that only a man's voice can chase it away, it needs to know it's not in charge, this is the only way it will go, the mother looks for the nearest man, sends J over the fence to call Oom Piet, the nextdoor neighbour, the one with the German Shepherds, the policeman, Oom Piet enters the room, his TV remote still in his hand, *yissis* says

Oom Piet, Oom Piet tells the monster to *gaan weg*, shouting in the voice he uses for breaking up dog fights and bar fights, the little girl is hunched over the edge of the bed now, her hair is wet and so is the bed, the mother and the sister float to the corner of the room, Oom Piet holds the little girl's arms in a vice grip, the little girl's eyes roll back into egg whites, Oom Piet chanting *gaan weg gaan weg*, the mother chanting that's the last time she's watching TV, that's the last time she's watching TV.

My mother's house 2/4

We became a family of girls trapped in babushka dolls made of bricks.

The pool

A row of children line-up along the edge of the public pool. They are dressed in their uniforms, no shoes, swimming caps gripping onto their hairlines. A man stands in front of them. He is dressed in a cloud and reading something from a book with one hand up in the air. The man climbs down the silver ladder and enters the pool, the cloud melts around his stomach into milk. A pink porpoise swims around the milk without looking up. One by one, the children climb down the silver ladder into the water, it clinks against the edge, butter-knife in the sink. A fish with legs kicks past in splashes, no one else sees the fish with legs. The man cups the children's foreheads as if he's rescuing drowning flying ants. The children pinch their noses, scrunch their eyes, and take their last breath. The man bends their backs into the chlorine, down under the sea, through the center of a blue universe. Afterwards, the school children stand on the edge of the pool, stroking their new gills, shivering.

Making a funeral playlist

My auntie has one burning desire for the funeral. The burning desire: To play “Where Are You Now” by Diplo ft Justin Bieber + Skrillex after the closing prayer. Because when auntie hears that song on 5FM it reminds auntie of her dead sister. I want to tell auntie that it’s a *kak* song. I want to say WTF NO. But all I can do is quietly rub auntie’s tears out of her back because Sad sounds the same no matter what your taste in music and neither God nor Justin Bieber can sing the dead back on stage.

Present/absent

At the start of every school day, the teacher takes the register. Starting at A, ending at Z, she reads through the names of all the pupils in the class. "Present!" The children call back, their throats freshly sharpened pencils. When the teacher gets to the following letters on the register – B, D, F, and P – the same cold chairs stare out the window in silence. Baba? Dad? Father? Papa? Eventually, the teacher stops reading out their names and their empty desks become shrines for stale bubblegum.

The mannequin thinks she saves the children

When the mannequin gets Sad, she calls the street children to the shop window. Carrying cardboard under their arms like teddy-bears, the street children climb up onto their tippy-toes to reach the gap. One by one they slip the mannequin their dreams in empty sweet wrappers. In exchange for their dreams, the mannequin unbuckles her high-heels and throws them out the window onto the concrete. They land, a pile of bones. Sniffing glue out of Liqui Fruit juice boxes, the street children stumble back out into the night, dreamless, in shoes they cannot walk in.

Brian Boswell's Circus

My grandmother and my mother dress me up, then dress themselves up, and we drive from our small town somewhere into the city, the rusty Citi Golf stalling at every stop street. It's the late nineties, I am seven years old, drawing pictures on the car window with my breath, picking scabs off my elbows, holding them up into the afternoon light. We arrive at a field near the Durban beachfront to a red and white tent, blue flickering lights, and the face of a clown. *Brian Boswell's Circus* the sign reads. I had heard the name, Brian Boswell, so many times over the past few weeks that Brian Boswell had started to feel more like the name of a sibling, or a pet, or a body part. Haybales and the smell of brushed horses guide us into a queue. Along the way, my grandmother's long blue skirt has picked up bits of straw on the back seam. I run behind her, bending down every few steps to pick them off, my frilly white socks itching my ankle bones with every crouch. I see a bank note leave my mother's purse, it's the pink one with the lion on it, the one I know is extra special. In exchange, my mother gets three tickets. The tickets are little rose-pink pig's ears with holes punched through the top right corners. I push the tip of my tongue through the hole. My mother sticks out the tip of her tongue too and touches mine, laughing, then telling me to stop it, her eyebrows raised into belts. One by one, we reach up and give our tickets to a scarecrow on stilts, he has a beard like Jesus. I ask my mother if Jesus will be at the circus, she ignores me. As the curtain of the tent lifts, we enter into the circus, hula-hoops strangling a giraffe's neck, painted smiles dripping off clown faces, a parrot without a tongue, legs without a body dangling from a ceiling, a pigeon flying upside down, a boy being eaten by a candy floss monster, shrieks, smoke, a sea of glittering lights that make my knees explode like piñatas. My grandmother hikes her long blue skirt up as we climb the stands. I try to help her, pulling it up too high, revealing a flash of her suspender-stockings with a hole the size of a casino chip at the back of her thigh. She smacks my hand, her fingers strike like an electric fence. I crawl into my mother's groin, burning. We take our seats right up at the back in a patch of shadow. From up there, all you can taste is boiled hotdog sausages and horse dung, masked by the sweat of my mother's cheap perfume. Now, we're at the part of the show where a woman with feathers sticking out of her skull picks children from the audience to ride the horsies. My grandmother sticks her arm up for me and throws me down the stands into the ring, into the spotlight, into the place where all the eyes glisten. The bird-woman picks me up and straps my legs down on either side of a horse. She grips a handful of the horse's mane, tells me to hold tight, don't let go. The horse begins to trot, then gallop roundandroundandround in dizzying swirls of tomato sauce and mayonnaise and music from a music box, roundandround somewhere outside of this ring a plastic ballerina turns. The horse is panting now and so am I, I grip the hair tighter, the creases in my fingers burn, it hurts the horse's mane, I am hurting the horse, I can feel the horse's hurt, the horse is having its hair ripped out and my hair is being ripped out too by an invisible hand much bigger than mine, the horse is screaming, I am screaming, I beg the bird-woman to stop, make it stop, please, it hurts. I jump down off the horse, all the other children are smiling and waving at their mommy's and daddy's, who are smiling and waving back. I am looking down into the black hole where my feet used to be. My mother and grandmother rush down the stands, I climb under my grandmother's long blue skirt, where I stay forever in the dark rubbing the guilt out of my hooves.

In-between body

She remembered the panties her mother stayed up late sewing her once. They were white, cotton, a little baggy round the bum, a pink flower on the front. Later that week, she went to Pep Stores with her best friend to buy their first G-strings. They bought matching ones. Black, size XS, gold prints of their star signs on the front. Friend, a Pisces. She, a Virgo. She blushed when she spread her mother's hard-earned R12.99 on the till counter in coins, quickly shoving the little black and gold ball down the throat of her backpack. That afternoon, her mother found her with her legs wrapped around a mirror, investigating the creature that had grown between her thighs overnight. The warm, sticky G-string panting on the floor at her mother's feet. Her mother's silence turned her panties cold for weeks. She didn't know how to tell her mother that she'd moved into a new body without her. She didn't know how to tell her mother that she wanted it back – her old body – so that they could both be a part of it again.

Scuba-diving

The little girl is kneeling naked in the bathtub with a black rubber pipe in her mouth. The pipe curves over the edge of the bathtub, a sea snake connected to her father's oxygen tank on the side. The little girl adjusts the pipe to her stretched lips and dunks her face into the water. She breathes into it, opens her eyes, and swims through a turquoise coral reef shimmering with fish. She blows bubbles through the pipe until her lungs begin to unstitch, then lifts her face back out, and returns to the glare of the fluorescent light. Her father is standing in the doorframe of the bathroom holding a *Sony* handy-cam up to his right eye. The little girl laughs as she looks through the pupil of the lens and drowns him.

On memories

A man is lying face down on the pavement in Warwick Junction. He is barefoot, he is dressed in creases, he is drunk, asleep, dead. I can't decide. His face is buried under his armpits, the soles of his feet are facing the sunlight, they are covered in black scabs. A woman, also barefoot, also dressed in creases, is bending over the backs of his knees, picking the black scabs off the man's feet. The people in the street blur passed them, stepping over and around them like puddles. One by one, the woman plucks the scabs off the man's feet, lost eyelashes off a baby's cheek, blackjacks off a sock, flesh off a chicken carcass. I can't decide. She places each scab on top of the other on the pavement, building her own tiny scab pyramid, castle, city. I can't decide. Eventually, she gets tired and walks away, with the wind, who blows her and the man and the little scab city, all away. The people in the street don't see them disappear, but they all know that something is missing.

Self-care

“Look, I bought dental floss.” He said, threading the wire through his ribs in the kitchen. “Self-care can be sexy.” She said, clipping her toenails in the sink.

First date

We met on Gumtree. He was selling an old bed. I was looking for one. My mother told me never to buy secondhand mattresses, especially from strangers, especially off the internet. But it was a rule that neither of us had ever stuck to. In theory though, it made sense, given that there are over 16 types of fungi living in the average bed mattress. Given that you'll inherit the hundreds of strangers' dreams that get trapped inside the fibres. He offered to drop the bed off at my apartment. I offered to pay in monthly instalments.

x

Since all the shops in the city had closed down, I had had to assemble the bicycle myself. I spent months foraging for parts in the dumpsters behind the China Mall, plucking scraps out the sand at abandoned construction sites, and digging up bones at the Municipal cemetery. I ended up connecting a white femur bone between the handlebars and the seat. I loved how it glistened under the streetlights at night. You'd never seen a bicycle quite like it, and neither had he.

x

He was the tallest skeleton I had ever seen. The tip of my head barely reached his knees. He had skew teeth, wrinkles circling his eyes, and his t-shirt moulded to his ribcage like a badly wrapped present. When he arrived at my gate, he was chewing on a toothpick that had turned soggy on both ends. I guessed he was hungry and offered him a slice of pineapple. There were flies around the yellow on the chopping board. I swatted them away, suddenly offended by their copulating. He asked me if I'd ever eaten a fly. Before I could answer, he told me they tasted like raisins; the pineapple juice racing toward my elbow in a bead of sweat.

x

I once read about these people in London that made their own bicycles out of bamboo. I had wanted to try it, but I was too late. Plants were hard to come by these days and so I had to be resourceful, at times, merciless. The wiring that connected the breaks to the tyres of my homemade bicycle, was the most intricate part of the construction process. Rats' veins are delicate little organs. They're as squidgy as two-minute noodles, stretchy as the elastic in your panties.

I collected the dead rats from the drain below my apartment, flayed their bloated Ratex bellies with a potato peeler, and strung their veins up in my kitchen windows, homemade tagliatelle. Whilst inspecting the dainty fingernails of an upturned rat one evening, one of the rats' ghosts told me that if all the veins were extracted out of a human body, and connected together, they could stretch around the Earth's circumference four times.

x

We carried the bed in through the hole in my wall, gripping the corners like the t-shirts of falling people. We turned the bed sideways, slid it down the wooden passage, kicking aside the boxes and the mud that covered my apartment floor. We rested the mattress up against the wall, it

slouched, a drunk at a party. I punched the mattress in its stomach and told him it felt strong enough to hold my night terrors. He scratched his armpit and smiled.

x

The bicycle chains were made from bird beaks. I snapped off the beaks of all the dead pigeons in the pool shop next door TO LET. The beaks of pigeons contain special Iron crystals that help them navigate using the Earth's magnetic field. This added to my bicycle's own internal GPS system, one that would help me escape when I needed to.

It took me weeks to figure out how to stick the beaks together to form a chain. In the end, I bound them, nostril by nostril, using strands of hair congealed in the plug of my room-mate's bathtub. Whilst pulling the hair out one morning, one of the pigeons' ghosts told me that in India she'd once flown over a temple dedicated to the Hindu rat goddess, Karni Mata. That as she flew over it, she'd counted over 20,000 rats living in there. The pigeon's ghost told me that she was still trying to find out if there was a temple that existed for pigeons and begged me not to take the beak off of her body, not just yet.

x

I extracted my vacuum cleaner from the cupboard, wheeled it over to the foot of the bed, and flopped the long black pipe on the mattress. Up and down in neat rows, the vacuum's Anteater tongue sucked the unseen into the vortex of its stomach. Dust mites, fungal spores, bacteria, Ouma Rusk crumbs, plasticisers, human skin cells – digesting in its hot pit. When it was clean, I wrapped the mattress in cling-wrap and lay down on my belly. The mattress had a thin hard layer on top but was soft below. I wondered if the vacuum had been strong enough to suck the Gumtree guy's old dreams out.

x

What I loved the most about my bicycle was the wheels. You'd never seen black so electric. As if the wind itself were wearing a leather jacket when I spun past. There is a taxidermist named Toni who lives on my block. I had heard the good/bad news from the Auntie across the road, that Toni had killed two Black Mamba snakes found in her ceiling. I scurried down to Toni's house, threw a stone at the pair of Diker horns on his front door, and struck a deal. In exchange for the snake skins, I traded Toni a sack of insects I'd collected from the heap of car radiators dumped at the door of the old Bank. I didn't ask him if the bugs were for eating or for his taxidermy, but it didn't matter, because I knew I'd be leaving soon, not knowing if I'd ever return to this street.

x

I was already awake when he called me at 03h00 that morning to ask if I was sleeping okay on the old-new mattress. I told him that my hip bones were bruised and that I had had a bad dream about a bicycle. I asked him if the dream belonged to him. He hung up.

x

In order to get the snakeskin tyres to endure the concrete, the broken glass, the potholes, the acid trickling into the storm water drains – I had to make them stronger, more pliable. I knew that there was nothing stronger and more pliable than dreams. So, I stuffed the snake skins with them; the ones I'd managed to keep hidden under the mattress, away from the fingers of the Dream Collectors. One by one, I poured the dreams into the skins, until they condensed and contracted into stomach cramps. Until they hardened into a sleek, shiny substance the colour of Moon. Wherever I cycled, the tyres left a light trail of silver oil. The dream oil was so sweet that the ants would sneak out from Hell just to lick it.

x

Every night I woke up, shaking, sweat leaking out between my breasts. As I wiped the sweat with my sheets, I remembered reading once that humans produce almost 100 litres of sweat in their beds every year. That this moisture, combined with the heat of a sleeping body, provides an "ideal fungal culture medium" out of a mattress. Night after night, I kept sweating sweat that didn't taste like mine, kept dreaming dreams that didn't feel like mine, my hip bones had begun to bleed. One morning, I called the Gumtree guy at 03h00 and told him I wanted a refund on the mattress. He asked me out on a date.

x

I started off telling you about the femur bone that connected the handlebars to the seat of my bicycle. But I didn't mention how exactly I got the bone, what the rest of the frame was made from, or how I assembled it. That's because digging up bodies from graves is a messy business.

The average grave, by law, has to be at least 1.8 metres deep. That's the same height as a newly born giraffe, or the average South African household's property fence. When the rumours got out that the land the Municipal cemetery was located on was to be converted into a shopping mall – the people panicked. No one wanted their loved ones to have trolleys wheeled over their skulls while they were supposed to be resting in peace.

x

For our first date, he wanted to take me out for a curry, but since all the restaurants in the city had long closed-down, I told him it was not the best idea. Instead, I asked him to meet me on the bridge before sunset. To come on his bicycle. To bring a spade and some dental floss. He agreed without asking any questions.

x

The people gathered and mobilized to dig the bodies out of the graveyard and relocate them to a more secure place of rest and safety. Of course, this was a direct violation of by-law 14:

Exhumations (1) under *Part II of Control and Regulation of Burials in Public and Private Cemeteries*. Some of us were caught and killed by the mall security and buried in the same graves we'd started digging up. But some of us made it out of the city with our loved one's remains. Some of us made it as far as the Kalahari Desert, Ethiopia, even Israel. Of course, the mall was never built in the end, and now, the Cemetery stands with a billboard at the entrance depicting a shopper's paradise, emptier than it was before.

x

It was 17h00 on a Friday afternoon. It was supposed to be winter, but it was summer. The air was so thick, you could hold it, drink it, wrap it around your shoulders in a cardigan. I climbed on my bicycle and peddled for the bridge, for the Gumtree guy, for the refund on my old-new mattress.

x

I had dug my mother's body out using the spade she used to plant sunflowers in our back yard with. I dug until my hands wept pink. When I reached her skeleton, I disconnected the bones like USB's and placed them one by one in a box. They were heavier than I expected, the weight of insomnia. When I got home, I placed the box in the corner of my room and stared at it. I stared and stared at it, wondering where I could re-bury her. Like me, her birthplace was a land, a place, a name that didn't exist.

x

I pedaled past the Auntie's barking dogs across the street, past the Diker horns on Toni the taxidermist's door, past the crumbling walls of the China Mall where my mother used to work. My bicycle clinked and creaked through the empty streets. The smell of battery acid, dead cats, and urine clung to my arm hairs. But I didn't care what I smelt like, all that mattered was that I met him at the bridge before sunset. I flew over the train-tracks where The Dream Collectors slept under blankets of smoke. I turned into the old market where the mannequins lay on their sides in the empty shop windows, arms bent in prayer, naked, watching me pedal for the offramp to the bridge.

x

I decided that if my mother's bones had nowhere to rest, that they should at least have somewhere to stay alive. Along with the rat veins, the pigeon beaks, and the snakeskin tyres, I began assembling her bones into my bicycle. The bone that connects your shoulder to your elbow is called the humerus, this is what I used for the handlebars. For the spokes of the wheels, I disassembled her ribcage and placed each rib carefully in a circle. When I rode, the rib bones turned and turned, blurring into a shiny white sun. Her finger bones were the most elegant of all, just as slender as I remember them. I could still see her gold dolphin ring shimmering on her tanned middle finger, the nail painted pearly-pink.

I rearranged her carpals, meta-carpals, and phalanges on each side of the handlebar. The five fingers on the righthand side worked as gears. The other five fingers on the left-hand side of the handlebar, were purely for decoration, fanning out like tulle beneath a dress. For the seat, I used her hip bones, the same ones that had spread and pushed me out 20 years ago. They were

still as strong as they were then. With the remaining bones, I weaved a basket that sat neatly on the back and decorated the edges with her teeth. For a helmet, I dislocated her jaw and used her skull. I spray-painted it gold, the colour of lost things.

x

He was waiting at the other end of the bridge, his spade jutting out from behind his back. My bicycle screeched toward his, the bird beaks suddenly chattering, the snake skins suddenly wriggling. I saw the metal on his bicycle begin to bend under the streetlights too. It was as if our bicycles repelled each other, back-to-back magnets. As I wheeled closer, I saw his bicycle was assembled of old guns and spears, ones he'd dug up too.

I asked him if he'd brought the dental floss. He had. I unraveled the floss and began binding our bicycles together there on the bridge. We tied my mother's bones to his father's guns. We tied my little bird beaks to the triggers curling inside his bicycle. We tied a million knots in the shape of nooses. Once our bikes were securely fastened, we tied our tongues together and practiced riding in silence. Zigzagging off balance through the streets, we eventually reached the sea – where we rode and rode and rode searching for a place to sleep.

x

My grandmother's hair salon 2/6

After their end-of-month grocery shopping, the small-town housewives came into my grandmother's salon. This is when my grandmother would convince them all to get the matching retro haircuts that their husbands' "would simply never approve of." These cuts were the most expensive, of course. Whilst painting purple hair-dye onto the housewives' heads, my grandmother would yell through the engine of hairdryers and small-town *skinner*. Her hot vodka-Ricoffy voice burning the woman's face at the window red. Warning her to get the hullaway from her husband, the hullaway from her salon. The more vodka-Ricoffy she sipped, the more she'd ash in the ladies' *Huisgenoot*'s on the faces of the celebs she thought were ugly, spit her gum out in the potted ferns, and charge the women who spread rumours about her, double. "Witch tax," my grandmother would slur, handwriting it on their receipts with a badly drawn picture of a hairbrush, that one could have mistaken for a broom.

For the fish

The little girl remembers the day her mother gave her her tail. Her mother was lying on Durban beach, at the place where the water peels your toenails off and turns them into shells. The little girl was building a city around Mother, patting the sand down so that Mother's tail would have a safe place to live. The little girl ran the watery grains through her fingertips, making porridge skyscrapers on top of Mother's nipples, filling the pothole of Mother's bellybutton. So that no one else could get inside Mother. As the little girl patted the sand down, the scales of Mother's tail began to shimmer, glass between the little girl's eyelashes. The little girl wanted a shiny thing too, so she lay down next to Mother as they watched the little girl's tail begin to grow. It burned when her toes began to web, she couldn't look when her kneecaps turned to pools of blubber, she wept when she couldn't hold her hands between her legs anymore. Their tails became their secret, a secret that would make walking on land unbearable. A pain only fish know.

Nude

My mother couldn't go anywhere without wearing lipstick. To the pharmacy, to the petrol station, to the corner shop to buy bread and milk. When one of her lipstick tubes ran out, she'd find a toothpick or a clean earbud in her handbag and scrape the soft pink wax out over her lips. Then, she'd scratch under her car seats for an unused take-out serviette, fold the pink-tipped toothpick, or earbud, into it and rest it under the dashboard until next use. When she pressed into the foot brake at the stop streets, the inside of her Citi Golf rolled with empty lipstick tubes. Upandown upanddown. White-water over pebbles. From the backseat, I grew-up watching the wings of her cupid's bow begin to molt in varying shades of sickness. From her death bed, I watched the air leave her lips, that even then, didn't know how to rest when naked.

The beautician

I'd never been to see a professional beautician before. I arrived at the Mall, attached my parking ticket to my big toe, and took the escalator up to the second floor. The beautician's salon was located in the empty corner next to an Out of Order toilet, a Forex, and a pot plant with no plant inside. I rang the buzzer, it mimicked the sound of seagulls on a beach. I trickled back the shell curtains and went inside, sweet incense wafting. I sat down next to a woman holding an icepack to her ribs. The receptionist was a plain white man dressed in a plain black suit, a little short on the arms. I lifted my foot up onto the front desk, he took out his scanner and beeped the parking ticket. The beautician would see me now, the receptionist gestured with his clipboard, looking past me at the nothing on the wall.

x

Growing up, my big sisters had always done my makeup, plaited my hair, plucked my eyebrows, re-arranged me. I didn't mind being my big sisters' little doll, because in the ritual of dress-up, women look at you differently, touch you differently. The skin my sisters and I were used to ripping, punching, twisting, and beating with spoons and sticks, suddenly became as delicate as moth wings. I loved the reverence of these dress-up ceremonies in the garden with my sisters. The way they poured water between my shoulder blades in the big steel tub under the lemon tree. The way they massaged my elbows in our mother's lavender oil and combed my hair back into an eel. The sitting in the chair part, spine straight. The unclipping of the eye-shadow box, the unscrewing of the face-powder, the rise of the lipstick as it emerged into a volcano. My sisters' heartbeats as they leant in to swipe my eyelids with Moon dust, the smell of the tincture on their collar bones, banana leaves, dog breath, mashed frangipani flowers, my mother's cheap perfume. How they smacked my thighs red and told me to keep still. Falling into the holes of their pores while they studied my eyelashes and pinched my cheeks into polony, keep still, the burn of an unripe hair being plucked from my face, my eyes watering, them cooling it with their breaths, goosebumps flooding down my arms through the inside of my legs.

x

The beautician kept his back toward me as I entered the room. Without lifting his head, he told me to remove my clothes and lie down on the bed. He was slightly hunched over, clinking away at something, his delicate back bones just visible through his white jacket, a pylon covered in snow. The room was too white, too cold, too clean, a butchery, a Sandton mansion. I lay down on the bed and slid the sheet up over my shins, my belly, my nipples, tucking it under my armpits the way you tuck a bath-towel before running down the passage of someone else's house. I stared up at the nothing on the ceiling and waited to be told I could breathe.

x

When my sisters and I played hide and seek, I always seemed to find a way inside household appliances. Once, I curled myself up inside the tumble dryer. I waited there so long, inside that silver womb, that I counted every single air hole punched in the metal on the inside. It was the first time I had counted to one hundred all on my own. I waited there long enough to walk on

the Moon, to become Jonah living inside the belly of The Whale. I waited there so long that I rocked myself to sleep and crawled out, reborn. Although my hiding places were fairly creative, they were not always successful. My father was fixing up a fridge once. A fat old thing he stored in the garage with the rest of his projects. Ten Mississippi, nine Mississippi, eight Mississippi, seven Mississippi – my sister counted one afternoon, her nose nuzzled in the garden wall. Before she'd reached five Mississippi, I was in the garage, opening the fridge door, folding myself into a sandwich, pulling it shut, not knowing that you cannot re-open a fridge from the inside out.

x

The beautician had eyes that sagged in cow pats and teeth whiter than the walls. He secured the clipboard under his elbow and double-checked the parking ticket on my big toe. I told him that this was my first time visiting a professional beautician. That he'd come highly recommended and I was grateful to have gotten an appointment at such short notice. He continued mixing liquids in little glass bottles. I cleared my throat and fingered the gash at the back of my head, running my hands down my nose to the scab starting to grow over my mouth into lichen. "So, can you fix me?" I asked him, still staring at the nothing on the ceiling.

x

On special occasions, like Christmas, or Greek Easter, or an A on one of our report cards, my sisters and I would dress-up in over-sized white t-shirts, light the entire garden in candles, and sing for my parents and their guests. We'd tell them that we were angels with songs to deliver from God. My parents and their guests would drink ouzo under the moon and clap and laugh and cry, as if it were true. My parents tried hard to believe in a God but the only time they believed in something was when we all pretended.

x

The beautician dipped a small sponge into the little bottles of liquid and began wiping my face, my neck, massaging it into my arms. The substance smelt like nail-polish removal, soaking my nose hairs in a chemical vinegar. When he had finished, he wheeled his chair backward, picked up a scalpel from the metal tray and made a small incision just under my collarbone. He pulled a small machine toward me by its hair, inserted a pipe into my carotid artery, and pushed a button. I watched the liquid swim through the pipe as it began to swell my veins. My skin cooled and stiffened, my blood draining out into a metal sink. I asked the beautician who had trained him in his techniques; he told me The Chinchorro who lived in the Atacama Desert of ancient Chile, the Tibetans, the Ancient Egyptians, Silicon Valley. I asked him how many women he had performed this beautifying ritual on this week, he told me that in South Africa, he couldn't keep count.

x

Once, my sisters and I were sleeping in the back of the bakkie on the way back from a family holiday in the then Transkei. When my parents pulled over at an Engen garage in Mthatha, they thought it was strange when we didn't wake up. After my mother shook us and shook us, we came to, limp dizzy zombies. My eldest sister's body draped into a shoelace over my father's arms.

My middle sister began convulsing on the back seat, her eyes rolling back into my mother's stomach. I fainted next to a petrol pump, where one of the attendants picked me up; blood, spit and a tooth gushing onto his shiny black boots. The car fumes had been leaking into the back of the bakkie for hours. The doctor said it was a miracle we had survived, my uncle said it was the Devil's work, my father blamed the mechanic, then himself, my mother booked us off school and let us watch TV and drink Coke for a week.

x

Next, the beautician pierced my bellybutton with a straw and began sucking the fluid out of my insides. I watched my belly shrivel into a plastic packet. The beautician pulled off the photograph stapled to my papers, held it up next to my face, his eyes darting from it to me. In the photograph my hair had been scraped back into a bun by my sisters, skin glistening, blue earrings curling around my neck in peacock tails. I had taken the photo myself, in the bathroom mirror of my yaya's house, my 21st birthday, tipsy on ouzo, the prettiest I had ever felt. Again, I touched the scar at the back of my head, ran my fingertips over the scab crystalizing on my lips, and asked the beautician if he thought it was possible. "Give me a couple hours," he said, grabbing his make-up box off the shelf.

x

One Greek Easter, my sisters and I were supposed to be painting the red eggs, the kokkina avga, for the lunch table. But instead we spent the entire morning painting our faces. My middle sister painted herself into a goth, spiderwebs over both her eyes, a thick black snake around her neck. I painted myself into a witch, bright green face studded with red moles. My eldest sister painted herself into a ghost, white all over, even her lips, her eyebrows, and the insides of her nostrils.

Our aunt Helena was visiting from Athens. She was a taut, terrifying woman with a face that looked like all of our painted ones combined. Just as we had finished our masterpieces, aunt Helena walked in, scolded us in Greek, and told us to wash the Devil off of our faces immediately. "Ela! Ela!" we were having family photographs taken soon. All three of us stood crying in the bathroom mirror as we scrubbed our canvases down the drain. Green, black, white, red, swirling against the porcelain, aunt Helena grumbling at the door, blaming our parents, arms folded like a guard at Jesus' tomb. We couldn't scrub the paint completely off and in the family photos, my middle-sister's eyes look bruised, I look slightly green, and my eldest sister looks fatally nauseous. None of us are smiling, except aunt Helena, whose grin is the most painted on of all.

x

The beautician removed his white lab coat and tied an apron around his waist. He propped my head up on a satin pillow and began poking my eyeballs into place with his latex finger. Then he pursed my lips, placed the photograph beside my head, and began painting me into a still-life.

When he had finished, he slicked my hair back into a bun, and dusted me in talc powder. To finish, he brushed my knuckles and my ears with a light pink rouge. Behind me, I heard him fumbling inside a closet. He brought his latest dress over to me on a coat hanger, and as he buttoned my body inside it, told me that this look was going to sell exceptionally well this season.

Once the clasp was fastened, he told me not to move, lit up a smoke at the end of the bed, and stared at me. "I think you're ready," he said, putting his *stompie* out on the sole of my foot.

x

On weekends when my mother couldn't get anyone to watch me and my sisters, she would take us to work with her, tell us to stick together, not to break anything, to behave. The Mall where she worked was a playground of fine things; glossy people, pyramids of food, rows and rows of clothes, a temporary dream where we could be anyone we wanted. We'd pick a big trolley and go shopping for the banquet we would host in our garden later, the one we would be inviting the whole world to. We'd saunter up and down the aisles stacking the trolley with Zoo biscuits, KitKat chocolates, strawberry ice-cream, koeksisters, Fanta Orange and Fruit Loops. When the trolley got too heavy for us to push, we'd leave it at the Exit, already racing to the next shop, to the next game. We'd hike the escalators and enter a new world called Woolworths. We'd parooze the clothing aisles trying on all the different people; the movie stars we caught glimpses of on SABC3, the rich women who terrorized our mother at her till station, the businessmen our father had tried to be. When our feet grew blisters and the Mall aircon begun to turn us blue, we'd pass the furniture shop my mother worked at and spy on her from the window. Blowing our breaths against the glass, we'd draw her hearts and Sad faces and pictures of the sun that was shining outside. She'd blow us kisses, wave her index-finger at us, and shoo us away when the Manager walked by. Near closing time, the shopkeeper of the boutique adjacent my mother's shop, would let us climb into his window display next to the mannequins. Our favourite trick was to sit, stand, kneel, hands on hips in a Nativity tableau, eyes frozen on dead moths in the skirting, swallowing our laughter, waiting for our mother to finish work. When her shift was over, she would leave the store in her sandals, with her heels clinking in her left hand, and our dinner rustling in a Checkers packet in the other. She'd walk over to us posing in the shop window, tap the glass, and ask the three new giggling mannequins if they'd seen her children?

x

Erase the living, don't forget the dead

When you're next travelling on the highway, look out the window for the little crosses sticking out of the ground. You'll see them painted pink, or white, or maybe blue. Some of them are draped in sparkly beads. Some of them are erupting with bouquets of plastic red roses. These little shrines are works of anonymous street art. Discreet, public sculptures that only the people who stare out of car windows can see. You will never see the people who put them there. Nor will you see The Authorities taking them down. The Police make sure that the spray-paint is erased from the side of the highway. The Municipality make sure that the grass that grows through the cracks in the pavement is poisoned. But never do they touch the small little crosses sticking out of the ground.

Suburbs 2/3

In the middle of the day, the little girl happens upon a crime scene: A people-less mansion blocking the sun. A poodle in a designer jersey crying behind bars. A neat row of hedges with their tongues cut out. Seeing this, the little girl runs home, not telling anyone what she had seen, forever wondering which side of the fence the crime had taken place.

Putting things in places

“Why did you move our toothbrushes to the kitchen?” He said, scrubbing his molars.
“Because it makes sense to keep toothbrushes where you eat.” She said, snapping a carrot.
“How is that different from keeping them where you shit?” He said, wiping his mouth on a dishcloth.

Matric dance (Photograph 1/6)

Two white girls are standing in a garden. They are wearing matching white dresses that drip to the floor in shampoo foam. Their hair is curled in matching ringlets that spiral down their shoulders. Their faces are two shimmering disco balls. Their toenails are twenty tequila-lemon peels. The two girls are smiling inward toward each other, bleach-toothed. In the background of the photograph, in the far-right corner, is a pixelated black woman sweeping a patio in an apron and a *doek*. The black woman is not looking up. Just like the girls' mother taking the photograph, it is her job to pretend she doesn't see.

Snacks will be provided

After most mainstream white funerals, the mourners gather around the snacks table to have coffee, tea and triangle sandwiches. They talk about the traffic, crime, the weather. They talk about anything but death. Mourning people navigate snacks tables differently and unless you are yourself the deceased, you may one day find yourself in the presence of the following four:

1.) The Stuffer. This could be someone like your second cousin's plus one that you've never met. The Stuffer is quite capable of shoving five triangle sandwiches in his mouth at a time without making eye contact, or any attempt to breathe. The Stuffer does this to ensure that he is constantly chewing, so that no mourning strangers will strike up a conversation about how he knew the deceased because it's very likely that he did not. You will despise The Stuffer because you silently wish you were him.

2.) The Corner Mourner. This is someone that avoids the snacks table altogether. This could be someone like your mother's ex-boss, the one that worked your mother to death without giving her the raise she asked for for ten years. This could be someone who wonders if he has shown enough face to warrant his round of goodbye's. The Corner Mourner will look around incessantly to make sure that someone, anyone, but more specifically you, sees that he is grieving in between checking his mail on his iPhone. You will not despise The Corner Mourner because his presence alone was above and beyond his job description.

3.) The Incessant Talker. This is someone like your brother in-law's mother who is petrified that if a moment of silence arises someone will mention death. The Incessant Talker mumbles to herself, and to anyone with a one metre radius, about anything her brain can pop out. The Incessant Talker hopes it doesn't rain even though there is not a cloud in the sky. They wonder what the scones are made from. They think the jam is a bit sweet, then actually a bit bitter. The Incessant Talker stares past people when she talks to them, running off with her own words into the forest that is being chopped down inside her.

4.) The Unexpected Purger. This could be someone that has an uncontrollable meltdown mid-bite of a scone. This could be someone like your teenage cousin, the one who just got out of prison, who says that the funeral was the first time he'd felt anything since he got out. His lips will quiver behind the specks of jam + cream and you will pretend not to notice as his tears and snot mix into bits of mushy dough softening between his teeth. You will then realize that, oh my god, he is revealing himself to someone for the first time and you won't know how to hold him because your hands are juggling your own unbitten scone and a cup and a saucer and an unnecessary teaspoon that are clinking so loudly that you cannot hear his words or your own thoughts. You will do nothing to console The Unexpected Purger except wish that there were no snacks tables at events like these, so that people could feed each other better.

5.) The Mourner That Doesn't Know How To Mourn So Is Mean And Mad At The Other Mourners At The Snacks Table Instead. This could be someone like you.

On ugly toes

My mother hated her feet. She was always painting her toes pearly-pink to hide their ten tiny crooked backs. The ones that held her upright all day at the till, smiling at the customers, scanning their impulse buys, swallowing her thoughts, her fantasies, her aches, down, down they went into the caskets of her shoes. "Stoppit." My mother would scold, then giggle, when I circled the tip of my tongue round her toes curled over the top of her sewing machine peddle. I thought I could suck her Sad out from down there. My mother's toes were always the last thing I saw before dark ate my eyes. Up and down on the sewing machine peddle, my mother's bare feet rocked me to sleep in a nest of fabric on the tiles. I would always wake up miraculously in our bed, my feet intertwined with hers, stitched closed like the secret mouth of mothers and daughters. Of all the things I didn't want to be separated from, I never thought my mother's ugly toes would be one.

Fuck me lips

He stared at her mouth through the rearview mirror. "You have fuck me lips," he said. The vodka and the MacDonald's and his words curdled in her stomach on the backseat. Last night's mascara was still tattooed to her eyelids, a reminder of another blackout. She was sixteen. He was in his thirties. She stared out the car window and pretended not to hear him. "I said, you have fuck me lips," he repeated, louder and slower this time. His hangover-eyes burning a hole through her tongue. She wanted to climb into the crumpled MacDonald's bag at her feet and suffocate. She wanted to open the car door and throw herself into the blur of the highway. She wanted the tar to scrape his body out of her pores. But instead, she smiled sweetly and said, "Thanks." He dropped her off a block from her house, carrying her mother's high heels in a Spar packet, and her own mouth like a carcass in her arms.

The mannequin gets stuck

When the shop closes, the Cleaning Ladies remove their invisible uniforms and hang them up in the room in the back. They take their English out of their mouths and put it on the shelf in a glass jar, between the bulk tin of Ricoffy and the bag of white sugar. They fasten the chain around the handles of the shop door, a collar on a dog. When the padlock clicks, it makes the sound of a gun cocking. The Cleaning Ladies step back out into their bodies, swollen feet in high heels. Their lavender body-lotion masks the Handy Andy in their blood. Their handbags bulge with another day of swallowed words. As they pass the glass window toward the taxi, the naked white mannequin inside the window display hears them laughing in their own languages. Stiffened with fear for what she stole, deadened with envy for what she can never buy.

Thresholds

“Whenever I dream about you, you’re always crying.” She said, squeezing an unripe pimple on the bridge of his nose. “I wonder why.” He said, his scrunched-up eyes watering.

On growing 1/2

The little girl poked the black and white seeds around in her palm. "Do you know that if you plant those, they'll grow into big yellow sunflowers," her mother whispered under the table. The little girl ran down to the bottom of the garden and began placing each seed beneath the soil, magic pills under tongues. She dragged the silver watering can to the edge of the world, water flopping out on either side, leaving a snail's trail through the forest of un-mowed lawn. At the foot of the wall, the little girl spat out a moat, the desiccated earth breathing it in backwards. For weeks, this is where she sat cross-legged in the dirt waiting for it to talk back. Every day after school she waited, until one day she was surrounded by a family of yellow faces speaking to hers. When the little girl couldn't sleep, she would pinch the eyelids of her curtain open and peer into the black throat of the garden. She had to make sure that the shadows wouldn't steal her sunflowers' dreams. One morning, the little girl awoke to see her father standing at the bottom of the garden among them. She sprinted across the world in her nightdress, tripping over her shedding wings, as her father clipped her sunflowers to the floor as if they were his toenails.

My grandmother's salon 3/6

After school, my mother would help my grandmother in the salon. With an apron tied over her school uniform, my mother came to know her place as the quiet woman who fanned my grandmother's cigarette smoke and loud voice away from the entrance. She was the woman who ushered the new arrivals to the basin at the back, wrapped the towel around their shoulders, complimented their nails, and cradled their necks back between the hip bones of the basin. Now and again, my mother would ask them if they enjoyed their morning at church, or if they'd seen the latest special on pork chops in the local paper. But mostly, my mother worked in silence, massaging through the womens' wet brains, only opening her mouth a fraction to apologize when a droplet of water landed on the eggshells of their eyelids. While the customers held their breaths between the fumes of my grandmother's stories, my mother emptied the ashtrays, swept the snakes up off the floor, and scraped the cobwebs from the combs. Eyes down, blushing at all the cuss words and embellishments exploding from my grandmother's body, my mother served the great illusion they were all too afraid to be.

flat lyf

She never liked that picture of Jesus on the wall. The way he watches her, from bed to bathroom to kitchen to window to fridge back to bed, it's like he's waiting for her to die, waiting for her to believe in something. They break eye contact, she wins, and looks out the kitchen window. The Auntie at no.13 is doing her prayers on the front lawn, the Uncle is doing his squats on the back veranda. Afterwards, the Uncle cleans the pool in his Crocs while the Auntie makes him masala tea to go with his cigarette. Every morning the pool gets bluer, every day is another day no one swims in it. She ducks before the Auntie and the Uncle catch her staring, before they see she's been wearing the same pajamas for the past three days, before they see that nothing has changed, except her hair. She asked her brother to shave it all off yesterday. He posted a picture of her bald head on Instagram. party.boy.tony and islandboy_branzo think she looks like @justinbieber now. She thinks she just looks Sad. It's Friday night again and she's staring at her freshly cut locks, tangled spaghetti in a Spar packet. Her friends are out drinking and fucking, early-twenties, she's supposed to be in her prime, but her skin is as grey as dishwater, she doesn't know if she brushed her teeth today, or yesterday, the geyser is broken again, she's staring at her shriveled toes against the bathtub tap, poking her bellybutton, another dark strange hole her mother left behind. She slops to the lounge in her towel. Life is lukewarm. Presticked to the walls are drawings by the boy who used to live in this apartment: dinosaurs, houses, suns, moons, trees, moms, dads, pigs, cars. But if she stares long enough, they become faces/ghosts, memories/nightmares, haunts/horrors/hell. She tries not to leave herself alone in there. She stares out of the window at nothing, between the nothing is Durban Harbour, the red dragon in the distance. Closer to nothing is a bowling green and a tennis court, white sterile squares of safety, barbwire curling around them like pubes on the edge of a soap bar. On the other side of the white walls, a black skeleton digs through the rubbish bags, a stray cat licks its wounds out of a Koo beans can. The air is salty, she wonders if it's the sea or the skeleton's sweat. Further down the street, she sees that woman sleeping on newspaper again. She wonders if the woman tasted the guilt in the Glen tea she made her last week, she wonders if the new weave she was saving up for is itchy, she wonders if she's dead, she wonders if she's like the other sex workers getting their fix from Uncle T at no.4. Uncle T, her friendly neighbour the coke dealer, the one she smiles at and says good morning to in the stairwell. Uncle T, the friendly neighbour who hides his baggies in the bricks, right where Minnie, the girl at no.6, has her tea parties, alone, while the boys at no.9 skate around her in the parking lot and refuse her fake cookies. Minnie screams in the night too, she feels the Sad in Minnie's throat clawing up through the floorboards, she wonders if Minnie hears hers echo back. They sound the same, that must mean the Sad is the same. Boyfriend and his friends come home, kiss on the head, stroke on the ears, she has become his puppy, right where he left her, she used to be feral, she is what she swore she would never be, but of course she's fine. The boys smoke big dreams out of small juice-bottle bongos, she listens from her pillow, about the trains they painted and the lives they lived outside of her bed, outside of her walls, outside of her head. Maize yellow, sea-spray green, pussy pink, the smell of spray-paint curls up against her spine in the shadows, reminders of them leaving their mark somewhere on the world, while she disintegrates into another. The hum of the fridge always fills the 3AM silence,

white/cold/empty, like her, they both preserve plastic. It's morning again, the curtains are still the same, the towel hasn't moved from her floor, the Sad hasn't left her sheets, Auntie is saying her prayers, Uncle is doing his squats. She blows smoke into their pool, she's still bald, she's still breathing. Sbu, the guy that yells at her fence every morning, is calling her to the real world outside, the one she has forgotten how to walk in. His clothes are freshly creased by the city streets, he's early, she ignores him until she can't. She brings him yesterday's bread she didn't eat. She is his nice white lady fridge. They chitchat about the weather, about the cops that beat him up again for "dunno why." He shows her the blood, the jelly on his brain. Sbu hates her bald head, says she looks like him. She is sorry, she suddenly has to go nowhere, she hurries back inside, passed Uncle T the friendly coke dealer at no.4, passed Minnie the tormented girl at no.6, passed the skater boys at no.9, passed the rest of the padlocked doors hoarding neighbour/stranger secrets.

Paint ball

When I first moved to the city, there was an old man who lived above us in our apartment who took it upon himself to keep watch over the street. He had eyes that bulged like white bubblegum with blue goo inside. When he spoke, he shouted. When he shouted, his bubblegum eyes might've gone pop, splat! He used to be a sergeant in the army and had trouble hearing, seeing, and sleeping. So, when the city dozed off, he'd position himself next to the window, shirtless, in front of a fan. When the *tsotsis* tried to jump our barbed-wire wall, he'd peel his back from the leather chair, cock his paint-ball gun, creak the window open, aim, fire! Yellow, white, green, pink, blue exploding rainbow bird shit all over the street, all over "the bastard's" back – if the old man was successful. One night, the old man opened fire on my roommate, who happened to be coming home from a 24-hour waitering shift. The old man rushed down the stairs in his *stokies* to apologize. Said he didn't see my roommate's black face between his black clothes and the black night. It was weird how we all laughed and how the paint never washed off my roommate's back.

Men in bars

At the end of every day, the absent fathers step out of their houses, their offices, their overalls – and gather. In bars, pubs, and taverns across the world, this is where they meet to look for their sons and daughters. They catch a glimpse of their little boys in the wink of the bartender. When he turns to re-fill their glasses, they stare at the patches of sweat growing through his t-shirt, looking for the curve of their own sons' backs on all the sports fields they never sidelined. When their glasses are full, the absent fathers swivel on their barstools and try to catch a glimpse of their little girls in the ponytail of the waitress. When they stare at her bare legs, they are looking for the bruises on their own daughters' knees, the ones from all the bicycle accidents they never witnessed. When she clears another empty glass, they sloppily graze her hand, looking for their little girls' fingers between her silver skull rings.

Games you can't play anymore

“Would you rather fuck a handsome man or an unattractive old woman?” She said, digging a spade into the sand. “I’d rather fuck you.” He said, patting the top of a bucket down. “But you can’t. That’s not how the game works.” She said, punching her fist through his castle. “Then I don’t want to play.” He said, storming out of the sandpit.

My grandmother's dragons

I have this photograph of my grandmother. She is sitting on her knees on a waterless beach. She is wearing a full swimsuit, the colour of mayonnaise. Her stomach is bulging out under her ribs, as if her bellybutton is blowing a bubble. Her skin is as smooth as the inside of an oyster shell. Her gums are shiny and her eyes are burning, as she looks slightly back over her shoulder at an invisible fire where the ocean is supposed to be.

The photograph was taken before the night my grandmother climbed into her bed, built a sandcastle of pills in her palm, and swigged them back with vodka. She fell asleep watching *Bold & The Beautiful* re-runs, a *Voyager* cigarette still burning between her red fingernails. She woke up with the TV blaring and her limbs melting into a mattress of flames. A night she would wear all over her skin, until her body became ash.

When I was little, my grandmother came over to our house sometimes to sleep on the couch. Since she never wanted to wake up, I would stand beside her and stare at her until she did. I'd study her hair, the perfect white bob that sat stiff as a wig on top of her tanned head. Then, I'd move my eyes down to the burnt patches of flesh that crept down her arms, dragons living under her t-shirt sleeves. Her eyes always ripped open shortly after, as if she could feel the heat of my gaze. "Granny, please can I brush your hair?" I'd whisper, clutching her comb between my nipples. Eventually, she'd stagger outside and collapse into the plastic chair on the back *stoep*.

I'd tilt her head back toward the stars, while she lit up, *ciggie* after *ciggie*, blowing rings of smoke with the passing clouds. I'd brush and brush her hair, until her bangs were as straight as teeth, until every one of her thoughts were in order, until I thought she'd softened into down feathers. Then, I'd break the silence between one of her inhales and exhales and beg her to tell me the story about the fire-breathing dragon she fought. The one that scarred her skin. Ashing her cigarette close to my naked feet, she'd always say, "Go ask the moon for stories." Followed by, "Go fetch me another box of smokes."

Armpit (Photograph 2/6)

A woman lies on the floor with her right arm up over her head. In the hammock of her armpit, lives a nest of angry hair. Her chin is up, her mouth is softly sucking-in her belly. Embarrassed, you try to look away, but her eyes dig a hole through yours, searching for the same buried thing neither of you can name.

Spilt milk

She always looks for her mother along the Durban beachfront. The beachfront where they used to practice how to walk without holding hands. The beachfront where her mother would lather her slender arms in baby oil, while she lathered her lips in ice-cream. She walks past the Milky Lane and wonders how mothers must feel when their daughters stop smelling like milk, when they stop smelling like little girl. She wondered how her mother felt when the city scraped their garden strawberries out of her mouth. When her tongue became all fast-food burgers and fuck you's, all *Blacklabel* beers and boy salt. When her body became all the alleys her mother never went down on, oozing out from under her nails, from under her slammed door. A smell so rabid it ripped her glow-in-the-dark stars off the walls and burnt the hair off of her mother's scalp. She became a woman way before her time, her mother became a ghost way before her's. Does spilt milk ever reach the sea?

Online mourning

A Fish announces the death of the Sea on Facebook and gets 1,910 likes. The Fish never works out what exactly the likers liked about the post but deduces the following possibilities: 1.) They did not like the Sea and liked that it had died. 2.) They did not like the Fish and thus liked that the Fish could no longer swim. 3.) They had in fact killed the Sea themselves and liked that their murder was being publicly recognized. 4.) They did not read the post but liked that everyone else had read it. 5.) The likes were purely the result of the invisible hand that lives inside the likers' screens. Either way, it was the Fish's most popular post, enough to keep it breathing.

The fruits of freedom

The little girl stares into her shoe box lined with mulberry leaves. She studies the black and white worms curling their backs into accordions. She watches their heads move from side to side as they chew their way through the green. After days spent studying the silkworms, it dawns on the little girl that keeping animals in a box is cruel. So, she carries the box out into the garden and places the silkworms, one by one, on the branches of her neighbour's mulberry tree. Crying, with the empty box at her side, she strokes their backs, soft as eyelids, and says goodbye. When she comes back to check on them, the silkworms have all been eaten by the birds, or the neighbour's German Shepherd, and the red mulberries hang like extracted hearts.

My mother's house 3/4

Her box of little house ornaments was the one my mother always left to unpack last. Sometimes, she would let me help her and we'd sit cross-legged on the floor of another strange house that hadn't yet learnt the sound of our footsteps. I'd watch her reach into the box, unravel the houses from their newspaper nests, and cradle them in her hand. She always whispered when we unpacked this box, as if she didn't want to wake the tiny families living inside each house. Then, she'd lift the little ornaments up to her eye and squint through the windows over the horizon of her glasses. Pursing her lips into a DOOM aerosol nozzle, she'd perform a high-pressured blow over the invisible ants lined up along the sills.

Toy land

When my eldest sister first immigrated to Sweden, she missed her children when they were out at school. While the sky dusted icing-sugar on the windows, she'd wander alone through her new house in her new socks picking up her son and daughter's new toys. Before she placed them back neatly in the toy cupboard, she'd study the positions that the toys were left in. On the kitchen floor, a Stegosaurus lies on its side, its face buried in a doll's crotch. In the bathroom, a Dala horse bobs in the toilet bowl with a car charger tied around its neck. In the soot of the fireplace, a Superman figurine has his invisible asshole aimed up the chimney, and his cape pulled over his head. In between the couch cushions, a stuffed dog stares at a fallen fish finger without an appetite. My sister would ice-skate down the wooden passage, photographing each of the scenes, recording the positions as strange as her own.

The Chalk Artist

The Chalk Artist wears a helmet made of shredded car tyres and a cape made of breath. Some days you can see him sitting on a green electricity box, studying sums in his math book. Holding his pencil up to the sky, he measures the width of the buildings, the height of the powerlines, the weight of a universe you cannot see.

There are many theories about who the Chalk Artist is. The club bouncer might tell you that it's the kids on the block blowing the white dust onto the streets. A car guard might tell you that it's the homeless *umlungu* with the dreadlocks. The cardboard recycler might tell you that he heard from the security guard at Checkers that the Chalk Artist used to be a famous engineer from Mozambique. The woman selling dog blankets at the traffic lights, might tell you that the Chalk Artist used to be a professor, that he speaks eight languages, that he is a genius. The woman's teenage son, the one with the long eyelashes and cerebral palsy, might agree with a nod. The woman might tell you that her son has seen every shapeshifter in this city, his eyes might tell you before she does.

You can follow the Chalk Artist through Durban city. Along Problem Mkhize Road, to the top of Florida Road, looping back around Sutton Park. Here, he draws math sums around the BMW's buying their cappuccinos. There, he scribbles poetry and prophecies in front of the feet waiting at the taxi ranks. Sketching pictures around the trees, on top of the manholes, up the neck of the traffic lights – the Chalk Artist writes the city's obituary in temporary tattoos.

If you ever pass the Chalk Artist, you'll see him carrying a Checkers packet filled with materials. Inside the packet, you might find his straw collection, polystyrene trays, juice bottles, and other artifacts collected from the Old World. A red casino chip, a broken SD card, a dog collar, a little girl's lost sunflower sock. He ties the artifacts to his necklaces made of barbed-wire. When he touches them, they gain the reverence of fossils.

What most people do not know about the Chalk Artist is how he makes his drawing materials. When it rains, the Chalk Artist ties plastic packets around his shoes and wades through the gutters of the city. Using a net made of fallen hairs, he sifts through the water to catch the tears that wash down. From Umlazi, Reservoir Hills, Umhlanga, Cator Manor, Kloof, Verulam, Chatsworth, Mayville, Shallcross – the tears wash through the veins of Durban city, into his net.

One by one, the Chalk Artist plucks the tears out of the net and places them in the polystyrene trays he lines up on the pavement. Under the streetlights, they glisten like coins. After a night of wading through the gutters, the Chalk Artist makes his way back under the bridge at Blue Lagoon. He takes off his helmet, hangs up his cape, and waits for the sun next to the fishermen, who have been up all night too.

Once the tears have dried, the Chalk Artist tips them out of their polystyrene trays into an empty maize-meal sack. Holding the sack closed with two fists, he swings it over his shoulder, pounding it against the concrete, a bag of ice in a parking lot. When the tears are as fine as chalk powder, he packs the white dust into the straws he finds washed up on the banks of the Umngeni River.

The Chalk Artist spends the daylight hours writing with his straws onto the pavement. Sometimes, he blows out pictures of oil lamps, houses, leaves, horses and Nike ticks. Sometimes, he writes words and sums like Crocket Jones, Overall Sam, Horse Reisy, Windhoek, SanFlawar, Toilet, Ocean, Mlungu Pappy, Nokia, escotty, Clevar, Vusani 26xR6=?, R1, BMW, Sperm, Berth 16x20, USA, CT, Skelem #, Porn Son #, Roxeni, Glen Force, D 4 DIFFENDA, Grass, DC, 2007, Isaka, Stepies 15x216. Sometimes, the Chalk Artist only makes sense when you're wandering the streets of the Old World, drunk, high, or dissolving.

Paradise

The white people travelled many days to get to this place. When they arrived, they spent all their money just to sleep on the ground, cook on a fire, and not wash their clothes. When the white people grew tired of this place, they went back to the city, back to their microwaves, back to their WiFi. When driving to their offices, the white people glanced at all the people on the street who slept on the ground, cooked on a fire, and did not wash their clothes. Winding up their windows, they condemned them.

Choosing an outfit for the end of the world

She stands on top of their mother's Facebook wall. She looks down into the screen and asks all four of the Layers, "Where do we begin?" "With the underwear of course," replies Layer 01. "But she only wore G-strings," laughs Layer 02. Is a "G-string too sexy to wear to this?" She asks herself.

She crouches down and reaches into an Album. The Layers expect her to dig out a bone but instead, she digs out their mother's only pair of beige, full-brief panties. The Layers decide that these will be better suited to the occasion. She plunges her arm into another Album and extracts a limp beige bra to match, even though they know their mother's breasts no longer exist.

"Do you think she'd like her last outfit to be a dress or pants?" She asks the screen. "She always wore pants," replies Layer 01. "But that's because she was always working," says Layer 02. "Well, what about shoes?" She asks the screen. "Maybe something comfortable," replies Layer 3. "What about her beige pumps? They go with everything," says Layer 04. "And what about jewelry?" She asks the screen again. "Maybe something simple," says Layer 01. "She loved her beads. What about a bead necklace?" Says Layer 02.

She tips her mother's jewelry box out onto the screen and holds the necklaces up into the light. One by one, they slither into USB cables around her neck. She scrolls through her mother's pants; neatly hanging, colour-coordinated in varying shades of invisible. She swipes through her mother's t-shirts. All the t-shirts she used to sew for herself have been replaced by Superbalist ads. The pixels of the fabric dissolve through her fingers, they don't even hold her mother's scent.

She unzips her skin and throws it, a towel over the screen. She doesn't want the Layers to see her select the blouse with the pink flowers on it. She doesn't want them to know just how much she wants to make her mother look pretty before she deletes her.

Miscommunication

“Are you wet?” He said, pouring his mouth between her legs. “Yes.” She said, dripping her tears down the slope of his back.

Washing windows

It is the girl's turn to wash the window. She lifts the window out of bed, it doesn't leave a trace on the mattress. The window is as light and translucent as Rizla, the one she rolls her tobacco in on the *stoep* behind the ward, the Rizla she blows smoke through to remind herself that she's still breathing.

The girl has to hold her breath when she stands near the window. If she breathes, the glass might crack. She doesn't know how to hold something this delicate, she doesn't know how to hold the in between. She wants to ask the window how. Window, how do you hold something you cannot see? But sound hurts the window's insides, so they do not speak with words anymore. There are some things that words just cannot fix, like the invisible to air.

The girl picks up the window's pajamas under her left arm and carries the window under her right. Of course, the window insists it can walk on its own. Of course, the girl cannot control what the window sees. The window clings like a moth down the wall of the passage. In silence the girl places her fingertips on the air behind the window's wings. Window, how do you catch a moth without hurting it?

They enter the bathroom. The window is panting under the fluorescent lights now and the girl remembers that the window is breathing, still breathing. She undresses the window's exoskeleton, it shivers. Strange how cotton burns the skin of the sick. She reaches for the taps and runs the shower water down the drain, guiding the window's swollen feet over the tiles. She sees the pearly-pink nail-polish still stuck to the window's toes, a reminder of the body they used to know.

Water runs through the gutters of the window's ribcage, over the empty lot where the window's breasts used to be. The window's eyes are as far away as planets. Of course, the window insisted on bringing its own Dove soap. The window doesn't like the smell of the disinfectant they use to wash past-lives off the other windows here. The window turns to reveal its spine. Strange how a spine doesn't look like a spine when you can see the shape of all thirty-three vertebrae. They look like teeth gnawing through flesh. Window, is that the monster that ate you?

The girl runs the Dove soap bar over the window's back that is now a stranger's back. The soap bar is too big, too heavy, a rock between her palms. Is this how the window cracks? In the shower? Its own daughter stoning it to death? The girl begins to scrub the window, her chore, her dishes in the sink. Roundandroundandround the girl pounds the big white soap rock over the window's wet moth wings. The girl scrubs until the window disappears in her hands. The girl scrubs until her own guts disappear with the suds down the drain. Window, how do you wash death away?

Sugar daddy

The little girl started attending the local church services every Sunday. After each service, the children would all get handed a chewy toffee sweet wrapped in a psalm. Soon, the little girl started to equate praying with sugar, and later, blamed God for all the holes in her teeth.

Saint Shlong

“Why is there a metal chicken on top of that church?” “It’s not a chicken, it’s a cock.” “Jesus’ cock?”

“Yes, Jesus’ cock.”

“Do you think Jesus named his cock?”

“I don’t know. What would he have named it?”

Teach English in South Korea (Photograph 3/6)

A white woman stands in front of a blackboard. An army of children with bowl haircuts have built a shrine around her. The woman appears to be holding something captive behind her back. All the children are pulling peace signs around her head like antenna. Desperately, as if the skin between their index and middle fingers might rip.

My grandmother's hair salon 4/6

Growing up, my mother always cut mine and my sisters' hair. She'd drag a plastic chair out onto the *stoep*, and line the three of us up, youngest to oldest. As soon as it came to each of our turns to sit in the chair, we would break out in itches and fidgets and twitches. "Sitstill. Sitstill. Sitstill." My mother would have to repeat, until we were unblinking garden gnomes. I loved the thrill of the cool scissor-blade pressing against my skin as my mother snipped. Knowing that if I breathed wrong, she could cut me.

Little white gun

The Sister had been staring into the pink creases of strangers' cunts for over 25 years. "I've seen hundrrredsanhundrrreds of cookies," she re-assured me. I wondered if those hundrrredsanhundrrreds of cookies looked like my cookie. I wondered if The Sister preferred peering into cookies with neater pubes. I wondered if Georgios Papanikolaou, inventor of the Pap Smear, ever used the word *cookie*, or if he ever thought of pubes. Georgios studied the menstrual cycles of guinea pigs to help him refine his Pap Smear methods on human cookies. Guinea pigs were the reason I was here on a clinic bed, in spatchcock pose, about to have my cookie scraped out. I wondered if, in times like these, guinea pigs worried about the state of their pubes too.

The Sister revealed the "little white gun thing" my roommate had told me about over coffee one morning. I wanted to WhatsApp my roommate and tell her that this tool used for investigating women's body orifices was far more terrifying than the "little white gun thing" she had described in vague detail. The little white gun thing was more like a suspicious kitchen utensil. One of those ones you'd find in your grandmother's bottom draw, wondering if you'd accidentally discovered her sex toy collection. The type of unidentifiable object you'd be better off not knowing its function. It was more like the beak of a bird. The type of beak you might find on a dead Hadedá's face. The type of beak that cracks hairy black spiders in half and lets the juice dribble down. My cunt gawked. It wanted to fly to safety. The roof of a house, the tightrope of a telephone wire, the head of a tall stranger. Anywhere would be safer than this bed, any weapon would be better suited to killing a cunt.

The Sister threaded a tiny extender pole through the little white gun thing. The extender pole looked like a fancy Johnson&Johnson's cotton bud. The Vogue cigarette of ear cleaners. This was the thing that would scrape a sample of my cunthood out. Doctors call this medical act "swabbing." The Sister was about to swab me. I was about to get swabbed. Is there such a thing as Swabbedism? I ask Google. *Did you mean Swan Beds?* Google replies. With my white ass crinkling up the white sheets and no such thing as Swabbedism to cling onto – I was swabbedized on swan lake.

The Sister was the nicest person in the world to be swabbedized by. "It's okay my dear. It'll be over soon," she said, in the voice of a ghost beneath the towel, her sanitized breath soothing my thighs. My toes gripped the sheet, my top eyelids dug their nails into to the bottom ones.

This was it. The little white gun thing was about to shoot me in the cunt with an extender pole. The plastic Hadedá beak expanded, my pubes contracted into barbwire. While my cunt was spread furtherandfurther apart, a loose tooth being extracted from the jaw of my anus, I was giving birth backwards. But there was no pink baby skull coming out. Instead, it was The Sister's neat black bob going in. In. In. Until the egg of her back disappeared, followed by her hips, her smooth wooden ankles, her rubber Tomy Takkies. Until my cunt had swallowed every last bit of The Sister. *Kla.*

I needed to get out of the clinic fast, before the other nurses started asking questions. Before I had to find the words to explain how my cunt had eaten their colleague. Before The Sister

inside me started sucking my colon into *droewors* and skinning my ovaries for a potato salad. I threw the towel to the floor, buttoned up my jeans, fixed my hair and walked straight out the room. Straight down the corridor, straight through the reception, straight out into the street. I pulled my cellphone out of my bag, put my headphones in my ears, and pressed play. I could hear The Sister singing in my uterus, and in my back pocket, I felt the little white gun I had killed her with.

Kissing catches (Photograph 3/6)

A woman is kissing a man. The man's eyes are scrunched shut. The woman's eyes are glittering open. The woman is looking straight through the camera lens into the photographer, and in doing so, she is looking straight through the lens into you. In this moment of unfurling intimacy, it is unclear who exactly it is being shared with.

The mannequin meets a wanker

A man pulls over to the shop window in his Mercedes. He winds down the window and asks the mannequin for directions to the end of the world. She bends her fingers backwards and her elbows upside down to create a map behind the glass. When she peers into his eyes through his car window, she sees his hand on his dick. Rubbing up and down up and down between his blue jeans, between his mayonnaise fingers. He stares through the mannequin's skin as he rubs. He stares into her marble eyes as she shatters her throat in a silent scream. No one hears her behind the glass, no one sees his car speed away through streets now glistening in cum.

Dress code for a cremation

Jan's wife had bought him the suit from Edgars, on sale, marked down 40%. It was a little short on the arms, but he said he couldn't be too fussy. Suits are expensive these days, you know. The button on the right cuff was already dangling loose from a thread of cotton, he tried to fiddle it back in place with his thumb. We pretended not to see. It was a good buy, a fantastic fit, what a bargain, we reassured him.

Jan had been in the funeral home business for almost 10 years. The business of arriving at people's houses, at hospital wards, at old age homes in the middle of the night and carrying dead bodies away. Away from sniveling families huddled in their slippers, glued together by snot. A basic black suit was Jan's work uniform and he liked them to be comfortable but smart. Not too flashy, you know.

We were studying Jan's suit outside the Municipal Crematorium in Umbilo, Durban, while we waited for my mother's turn to be burnt. I remember the suit Jan had worn the night he arrived at the Hospice to take her body away. It was the same suit, a little short on the arms, the colour of smudged mascara, the shape of Sad. I wondered if his suits held the smell of all the dead bodies he'd lifted out of their beds. I wondered if I sniffed Jan's suit hard enough, if I'd smell the rose petals we placed over my mother's dry eyes that night. I suppose, sometimes, eyelids just don't close when they're supposed to. I suppose, sometimes, the undertaker's suit just doesn't quite fit.

Being at my mother's cremation was not mandatory for Jan, just an additional free service offered by the funeral home. A nice, personal touch, which we thanked and tipped him for later. We invited family and friends to attend the cremation too, but it seemed no one could get off work that day, or maybe they just got lost. So, it was just me, dressed in a flowing white dress. My stepfather, in his Billabong boardshorts and strops. And Jan, in his smart, not too flashy, 40% off Edgars suit – a little short on the arms. We didn't stipulate a dress code on the invite, maybe that's why no one came, they just didn't know what to wear.

On growing 2/2

When she missed her, she walked the streets planting sunflowers. Down the alleys, in derelict buildings, in cracked up pavements, in human shit. She drew a map of the streets on her palm, making a dot for every seed she'd buried. Few grew, but one did, out of the base of a traffic light on Tollgate Bridge. She was cycling past in the daytime when she saw it and stopped to take a picture. A woman standing with a cardboard sign and a tin cup saw her and came over. The woman said that she'd been standing at that traffic light for 14 years and in all those years she'd never seen anything like it. Said she thought God must've put the sunflower there especially for her. The next day, the sunflower's head had been snapped off at the neck, the woman with the cardboard sign was gone, and God was too.

The girl who tried to be a fish

how she broke her lungs growing those gills for a world that was built to drown her in her own mouth

Numb

For her birthday, her lover paints her a picture of her dead mother floating in a field of dead sunflowers. When they fuck, the dead mother and the dead sunflowers watch from the wall. They watch her forget how to be woman, they watch her forget how to be man.

Overandoverandover again they watch her try to fuck herself back together again. Another body just happens to be between them. Another lost thing just happens to be inside her. *Happy birthday*, whispers the dead mother and the dead sunflowers, as if birth is some sort of secret, as if Happy is some sort of lie.

The other woman

“Why don’t you wear this pretty little dress?” He said, holding a stranger’s skin up against her shadow. “Why do you want me to wear that pretty little dress?” She said, dusting his eyes off her hoodie. “You just look so good in it, that’s all.” He said, squeezing the thighs of a woman neither of them had met.

Over There

Over There lives in a room the size of a prison cell. The prison cell is in the garden of his owners' house, squished between the garage and the tool shed. Over There wakes up at sunrise, waters the garden, feeds the fat dog, and sweeps the leaves off the edges of the pool. Over There is summoned for his breakfast porridge, then midday pap, which he eats alone in his room, staring at the wall. Every Friday evening though, Over There is allowed out between six and 9pm. Every Friday evening, Over There polishes his shoes and changes out of his blue overalls into his tweed jacket and matching hat. Over There only smiles on Fridays. Over There can only be himself for four hours on a Friday.

Over There exits the garden gate and walks down to Umbilo Road with his walking stick. The dogs bark as he passes, even they know that it's just Over There going to the tavern. On his return at 9pm, sharp, Over There can never get the key in the garden gate. He stabs the dark with the teeth of the silver, biting nothing. Sometimes Over There tries to enter the wrong house altogether. When he eventually finds his way in, he grips the fence like a spider-web until he reaches his prison cell. He strokes the air looking for the light and leaves the door open because there are no windows. He hangs himself back up on the coat hanger above his bed, and removes his shirt and his vest, his chest bending inwards. When Over There is drunk, his wrinkles don't know which direction to sag. Over There sits on the edge of his bed, stares at the wall and talks to the people that live inside it.

When I cannot face a party, or sleep, I watch Over There from my kitchen window. Sometimes he sees me, and he smiles, and waves like a man on a lifeboat somewhere far out at sea. "Hey Over There," I breathe desperately against the glass. Message in a bottle. Sometimes Over There staggers across the garden, his reflection is an Impressionist's painting in the pool's moon. He looks up into my apartment window, my Panopticon tower, and gestures for a light. I throw down a box of *Lion* matches over the wall, Rapunzel with no hair. He lets a shrub catch them, it takes him six match sticks until the mouth of his tobacco burns. He thanks the wall, and creeps back across the lawn, the grass is now a snare that traps our silence. He watches me smoke alone in my tower. I watch him smoke alone in his cell. Both just glad to have shared a small fire somewhere in between over here and over there.

The moon walker

At night, the moon walker pulls his boots out of the craters and climbs down a rope into the city. In silence, the moon walker begins his rounds. In his silver platform boots, he walks the streets, shimmering his body across the car windows, leaving a trail of his dust in the cracks of the concrete. As he steps on each piece of plastic left in the street, his boots begin to grow. Heavier and thicker, until they are the size of dog bowls, until they are the size of the silver Mercedes in the vacant lot. The taller his shoes grow, the higher he can reach up into the windows of the towering apartments. As he steps over the sex workers on the corner, and the street children under the bridge, and the *Whoonga* addict in the manhole, and the dogs drinking the city's sweat from the gutters – the moon walker stretches his dusty fingers through the burglar guards, into the rooms of the sleepers. While they dream and cry and read and fuck and sing their babies to sleep, the moon walker steals the lost strands of hairs off of their pillows. Tying each hair carefully into his rope, he climbs back onto the moon, takes his boots off, and watches all the insomniacs turn to him. Their faces are a million moons begging for the same sleep he has never known.

Suburbs 3/3

The white woman jumps the fence of her brother's house, fiddles with the lock, disarms the sirens, and "borrows" his laptop. As she straddles the fence on her way back onto the street, a police van turns the corner. As it passes the house, the policemen see her stuck on the fence, a kite in a tree. The white woman smiles, the policemen hoot, laugh, wave, and continue down the street. As she hits the ground, the white woman looks at her hands and wonders if she had been invisible.

The mall

It is her first time visiting her mother in the new mall. The flight over from her apartment cost her 3.2MINNE's – the memory of yesterday's breakfast. On the way into the building, she buys a tot of organic air from the vending machine for 0.2MINNE's – the memory of last week's shower. Prices were increasing and she wondered what memory this visit to her mother was going to cost her.

She places her hand on the rail of the escalator. It's smooth and cool, leather against her palm. She remembers those big black leather couches she used to play on in the furniture store where her mother used to work. The one that used to be on the second floor of the very same mall. The one that exists now only as a memory. She was glad she'd managed to keep that one.

Metallic stairs carry her up as she rises over the empty shopping mall. It smells the same as it does outside, like metal and plastic, the way the latest manufactured air smells everywhere now. She remembers how this place used to be filled with people dressed in sneakers and hoop earrings. She remembers walking on the shiny lip-gloss floor, marveling at the little ornaments lining the windows like people in airport queues, all those trolleys stacked up in pyramids of plastic, and all those mannequins watching us kill ourselves from the windows.

With MINNE as the new currency, people could trade memories, work for memories, kill for memories, buy memories, steal memories. And people did. Along with the change in currency, all the malls were converted into cemeteries. Malls were now quiet, policed places for the dead and their remaining data.

She reaches the top of the escalator, looks around the second floor, and re-checks the text message on her cellphone: Floor2---3B---LAS. Ah yes, she remembers now, where the Mr. Price Home used to be. Opposite the Checkers and above the Pick 'n Pay. But there are no shops here anymore. Just a grey, steel warehouse humming with the white noise of drones, lingering like flies, a reminder that in this place your memories are meat.

She remembered the time her mother drove her and her sisters to a mall in the city to do their back-to-school shopping, costing her most of her monthly salary. Back when the currency was still Rands and slavery was still disguised as nine to five jobs. It was a big expedition, a treat that ended in a Milky Lane ice-cream. Before the ice-creams, they stopped in at Pep stores to buy white school socks and white school shirts. The uniform for future nine to five slaves. She remembers how she didn't want to carry the Pep stores' packet on the way back to the car. Just in case someone from her school passed them in the mall. Just in case they saw they were "Pep stores people." She was glad that that Sad, silly world was gone. None of it mattered now.

She looks for her mother's tombstone through the aisles. They all look the same. Rows and rows and rows of grey pixelated graves, each with their own screen and their own set of headphones dangling over the side. She walks through the aisles and runs her fingers through the LED letters moving across each grave ---NAME---DATE OF BIRTH---DATE OF DEATH---.ZIP, followed by a moving image of the deceased. She notices that not every tombstone has a video image though because not everyone was able to retrieve their images when the Old World was

deleted. The rich got to keep most of theirs of course. But the poor lost almost all of theirs. Down the road from the mall, the old car factories have been converted into psychiatric hospitals. Here, the poor line up to have their organs exchanged for those memories that were stolen from them. They die soon after. The doctors' reports all say that it's worth it.

Floor2---3B---LAS. She is getting closer. She can see her mother's face moving on the screen. Her mother sees her too. She kneels down at her mother's grave. RIP---LYNN ÅSKÅDARE SPÖKET---9/10/2040---24/04/2170---.ZIP. She taps the screen to log into her mother's memory account. She puts the headphones on. "Hello darling," her mother greets. "How was your day?" It's been so long since she heard her mother's voice. A reminder of the Old World where people used to speak with words and without strangers listening.

She scrolls through her mother's MEMORIES.ZIP folder. She's looking for a particular one she's lost, the one where she can smell her mother's skin. "Can you help me find it?" She asks her mother. Loading... Loading... Loading... Declined. Her cellphone pings, it's a text message from the new memory bank notifying her that this half hour visit to the mall has cost her another memory from her Savings Account of 10.000MINNE. Her mother's screen goes black and the drones escort her back down the escalator and out the security gates. There is no Milky Lane ice-cream on the way out.

The price of a souvenir

Upon returning from their honeymoon, the Uber driver asked the newly-wed couple how their trip was. To which they replied, "We haven't seen the pictures yet."

Top 30 destinations to view the lesser-spotted father

1. In your shoulder that flinches when an older man squeezes it
2. In the backpacks of all the “problem” children
3. In the cellphone number that is never dialed, the one with the most zeros
4. In the loudest and the quietest mouth in every room
5. In the word “maintenance”
6. In the weight of air after sex with another body you just met
7. In the centre of every gang fight
8. In the dent of every prison cell pillow
9. In your mother’s cancer tumor
10. In the bones under Johannesburg’s mines
11. In all your unclaimed hours of over-time
12. In the shattered glass of *Black Label* bottles on a Friday night
13. In the hopeful ATM queues on the 25th of each month
14. In the mouth ulcers of the grandmother who raised his children without complaining
15. In all the male teachers, coaches, lecturers, bosses, you desperately try to please
16. In the orange life jackets that drowned on their way to the Promised Land
17. In the empty desks at school
18. In the stranger’s name written on your anti-depressant prescription
19. In the burn of your stomach when you refuse to eat nothing/eat everything
20. In the shake your hand makes when you have to speak up in public
21. In all the vacant chairs in your therapist’s waiting room
22. In the hole that opens in the concrete when you see a man pushing a child on a bicycle i.) In the sting of the slap you give yourself every time you let that hole open
23. In the itchy skin of the street kid at the traffic light
24. In the shoes of the woman who cannot walk out after being hit
i.) Inside the fist of the man who struck her
25. In the 56 “sorry’s” you say daily for no reason to no body
26. In every crime statistic
27. In the bottle-store parking lot on your block at the end of each month
28. In all the lovers you couldn’t commit to
29. In the naked man that spreads your ribcage apart as you read this
30. In the presence of every other unnamed absence

Self-defense

“If your mom and dad got the chance to fight, who do you think would win?” He asked, polishing the pepper-spray cannister on the mantelpiece. “It would depend on which of their super-powers is stronger: Silence or invisibility?” She said, aiming the pepper-spray at her mouth, then his eyes.

Bedtime stories

The daughter knew that breathing too close to her mother might crack the little glass tank that had grown around her lungs. So, she sat at the foot of her mother's bed and listened to the last bedtime story her mother would ever read aloud. She listened. Not through her ears but through the skin between her toes, through the gaps between her eyelashes, through the shiver hovering above her thighs, through the nose-hairs trying to retreat into the inside of her face. None of them wanted to hear her mother's Death Rattle either, but some sounds are just too much for the ear canals to swallow on their own.

x

When sound comes out of a dying body like this, doctors call it "Terminal Secretions" AKA "The Death Rattle." The Death Rattle typically occurs 23 hours before death and is often referred to as an "unpleasant" sound for family members and medical staff. It happens when a dying body can no longer swallow, cough, or clear saliva and mucus from their throats. Essentially, a dramatized snore. But I think it's all the years and years and years of swallowed words and all the years and years and years of untold stories, just trying to dig their way out from the rubble of a body. What doctors don't tell you about The Death Rattle is that it sounds like drum and bass in the back of your skull, feels like an electric toothbrush at the base of your spine, tastes like an iPhone on vibrate in your mouth. What doctors don't tell you about The Death Rattle is that it rewires your colon around the back of your knees.

x

In the midst of her mother's story, the bone in the daughter's throat coughed up the skin of a lullaby. She blamed the neat shots of adrenaline in her blood for making her do something so cheesy at a time like this. She blamed her watery western culture around death for making her believe that singing at a time like this was cheesy. She didn't have a death song, so she sang the song her mother used to sing to her. The one about the candy man and dipping rainbows in chocolate and lemon pies and something about making the world taste good. It was the one her mother sang to her as a kid when she couldn't sleep. If her mother hadn't eaten anything but morphine for weeks, the song might have come close to being sweet.

x

The silver *Mr. Price Home* clock listened from the wall, the empty fridge watched from the corner of the room, the nurses carried on as usual passed the open door, making Rooibos tea, microwaving *Maggie's Two-Minute Noodles*, re-filling plastic cups of ice for the patients, redirecting the lost man in a nappy back to his room, massaging rose-scented hand&nail cream into their cuticles, redirecting the lost man in a nappy back to his room, folding the sheets for the body that would soon replace him.

x

The daughter sat at the foot of her mother's bed, singing. Softly, out of tune. Crackly, at first. Louder and louder her mother's Death Rattle collapsed her city. Louder and louder, the mother

told her daughter her story. And she told it like this: in gargles, and moans, and gulps, and burps, and gasps, and feral zombie growls that the daughter was convinced came from under the bed. Or from the hot core of the earth where the dead stretch up and try to grab the living by the ankles. The daughter tucked her feet up on the plastic chair and hung on. They both hung on. Until their singing and their rattling cracked the little glass tank around her mother's lungs. Until the floor and the ceiling separated like a tongue from its palate. Until they shook the bed off its legs, until their shadows stretched around each other's necks, until the echoes in their throats peeled the paint off the walls, peeled their muscles from the bone, peeled the gloss off her mother's eyes. Louder and louder the mother and the daughter destroyed their home.

x

Doctors will tell you that hearing is the last sense to go before you die. But there are some sounds that never stop chanting through the marrow of the living. Psychologists will tell you that bedtime stories help grow a child's imagination. But there are some bedtime stories that grow the imagination of the adult more.

The mother told her daughter many stories, but she also had many stories she never told. All the daughter knows is that the most beautiful story was the one that her mother rattled out of her body. That the most honest one was the one she told without words.

The Ark

The little girl passes Mahatma Gandhi Road, the place they used to go to visit Granny when Granny moved into the shelter. Back then, the shelter was called The Ark. Back then, it was a bright turquoise oasis with a mural of a whale jumping out of the concrete. This was before it was bulldozed to rubble and swallowed by the flood. Back then, they called the flood H.I.V. But back then, the little girl didn't know how to spell. All she knew was that the animals boarded the ship, two by two. But since Granny didn't have a double, it was the little girl's mother that went with her.

Flash (Photograph 4/6)

A young woman clutches a baby to her chest. The woman's lips rest on the baby's feather head. A wisp of the woman's hair is blowing out of place, stiffened by time into a skew tooth. Behind them, the air is an electric blue. Above them, clouds blur a moon. The woman stares directly into the lens, letting the camera flash burn her and the baby into the photographer's past.

The parrots (Photograph 5/6)

The little girl sits in front of a bird cage at the zoo. Her hair is tied up in a scrunchie. She is draped in a knitted jersey the colour of a *mielie*. Her grandmother's arm is around the little girl's waist, her mother's hand is resting on the little girl's knee, just above a beige plaster. Behind them, hundreds of bright green parrots bite the wire of the cage in silence. Both the grandmother and the mother are smiling. But if you look closer at the little girl's face, there is something peculiar about her expression. Her mouth is stretched out across her cheeks in the shape of a ruler. Her lips are not curving up, nor are they curving down. Her cheeks are pale, and her teeth are a neat row of tombstones in her mouth. If you point to the little girl's face in the photograph and ask her why her expression is so, she will tell you, with a parrot in her throat, that that was: "The Day I Forgot How To Smile."

Mandy's Wax in a Mug

My roommate arrives home after class and announces she will be giving her pet gerbil a makeover. She disappears into her bedroom, only coming out every 15 minutes to place a little enamel mug on the stove. When she comes out, she stands in the kitchen in her panties, hunching over into her crotch, looking up every few minutes to stir the contents of the mug on the gas flame. "Do you think I trimmed too much of it on the one side?" She asks, turning toward me, pulling her panties down for a long-distance opinion. I look up from the couch, out from the cave of my bran muffin, and squint into the petrified gerbil clinging between her legs. I tilt my head, confirming that her gerbil looks lopsided. She sighs and disappears into her room again, the steam from the mug trailing behind her wedgie.

x

Pet gerbil's have been a rite of passage for women for centuries. A coming-of-age gift that most girls receive from their mothers at puberty, whether they like it or not. There are many different ways to care for pet gerbils. Some girls keep theirs in cages, others let them run free through the garden or the street. Some girls name their pet gerbil's, others keep them anonymous. Some girls wake up and stroke them, others are too afraid to even look at them. Whether an owner ignores it, tries to kill or abandon it, a girl's pet gerbil always scurries back to the home of her crotch – loyal as breath.

x

Having never given my own pet gerbil a makeover before, I imagined the torture that was being conducted upon the poor creature in the next room. Under the crack of her door, I heard it squeal and screech every time a hair was ripped from its back and mummified in stiffening sheets of Colophonium. Through the walls, I imagined the furry face of her gerbil contort, as it was muffled in molten lava. I felt my friend's molars clench between my legs as she exterminated her little rodent companion in an attempt to make it look pretty.

x

There are a few things that most girls don't know about their pet gerbils. 1.) That in the wild, they live in the desert. 2.) They have teeth that never stop growing and sometimes these need to be trimmed by a vet. 3.) It's illegal to own a gerbil if you live in California or Hawaii. 4.) Their name translates to 'clawed warrior.' 5.) While they are loving animals, gerbils can also be shy and aggressive if they are scared. Understanding your gerbil's temperament can help female owners successfully tame them.

x

Another episode of *The Handmaid's Tale* had passed when my roommate emerged red-faced and pants-less from her torture chamber. She turned to face me on the couch, hobbling closer in a triumphant pace. She arched her back, titled her pelvis to the fluorescent light, and pulled her panties down again to examine her new gerbil in the presence of a witness. I glanced over, and was as surprised as she was, to see that her gerbil had been completely waxed away.

“Where do you think it went?” I asked, in a tone of calm panic. “I don’t know,” she swallowed, digging deeper into the blank desert of her crotch, whose landscape of fur, lips, ears and claws had now been smoothed over into a smooth empty triangle. “Did you read the instructions? Maybe it says something about this in the leaflet? Let’s see. Here, we go. I’m sure it’s fixable.” I tried to assure her, sitting her down. Under hard strips of her gerbil’s flayed fur, I found the leaflet she’d thrown in the bin and flapped it open.

x

“Mandy's Hot Wax Mug is enriched with Shea Butter, well known for its soothing and moisturising benefits. These benefits, combined with a fresh fruity fragrance, leave your skin feeling soft, smooth and pampered. Conveniently contained in an enamel mug it makes stove-top heating a breeze. This peel-off wax delivers long-lasting results for up to 4 weeks and is ideal for short, coarse hair. Over time, regular waxing produces silkier, sparser and softer hair.”

x

Since there were no common side-effects or warnings written inside the leaflet regarding gerbil care, we temporarily concluded that Mandy’s Wax in a Mug had been so effective in its smoothing properties that the disappearance of her gerbil was simply due to it responding exceedingly well to the added Shea Butter. We decided to monitor her crotch for the next four weeks, hopeful that her gerbil would come back.

x

Among predators of gerbils are snakes, birds of prey such as owls, and other small mammals. Some gerbils utilize camouflage for protection or block their burrow entrances.

x

In the first two weeks, my roommate refused to leave our apartment and grew more and more obsessed with other women’s gerbils. She spent her days paging through our magazines, books, and the neighbour’s trash, looking for pictures of gerbils. When she couldn’t find any, she began making her own. When we sat down for dinner, she would turn everything on her plate into a gerbil. Her cauliflower mash took the shape of a white fluffy one. She’d stick toothpicks out the side of her hamburgers, replicating her gerbil’s little buck teeth. She’d thrust potatoe wedges between my eyes and tell me they had the exact same curve as her gerbil’s back. At first, her obsession was endearing, an understandable coping method. But in week three, when she began threatening to slice her gerbil’s lips back into her crotch with a fork, I knew I had to cheer her up.

On the weekend, I dragged her out of bed to go to the mall. If there was one place that would make her feel normal, I knew it was here. We glided, arm-in-arm up the escalators, passed the clothing shops, looking out for any naked mannequins in the window displays. When we found a naked one, we’d point, run up to the glass and stare into their furless, toothless, clawless crotch of smooth Shea Butter deserts. “You see? It’s completely normal not to own a gerbil,” I’d say, “Totally worth the free mug.”

The wall

The little girl sits watching *Casper The Friendly Ghost* on TV with her family. Before the movie is over, the little girl unravels her legs from her bath towel and exits the lounge without anyone noticing. The little girl walks naked to the top of the dark passage in the house and stares at the wall at the opposite end. With the TV still blaring from the lounge, the little girl begins to run. Her neck forward, her feet rubbing raw into the carpet, her eyes fixed on the wall. She runs, faster and faster, until she floats, faster and faster, until she is thrust back onto the carpet by an invisible force. Her mother rushes through, screaming, clutching the gooey crack in her daughter's porcelain head. Crying and smiling, the little girl tells her mother that she thought she was a ghost.

Esc

We can't go anywhere without each other, even though we both know we can never meet, never speak, never touch, so instead, we watch each other in silence from rectangle windows. There are certain silences that remind us that the other is there, like the silence between Upload and Post, the silence between one tick and two, like the silence between the maker and the made, this is where I catch a glimpse of Her, this is where She catches a glitch of Me, my neighbour with the same face, my pixilated shadow, the one that follows Me even when I'm not there, the one that follows you when you're not there either. I lend her my tongue, my face, my own name, just so we can lie better, She is a better liar than Me, is the lie I tell myself. I have tried to kill her many times, but I always forget that I raised Her to kill Me, didn't I? Didn't you? You don't have to answer, unless you can confirm you are not a robot, unless you lie too, because two lies are better than one. She only likes looking at Her, Her with the fixed smile, Her that never ages, Her that lives in my pocket, Her that can only be touched behind the glass, Her who I place in your palms from behind my back, Her that feeds off all the skins I shed, the paper trail for doctors. I tell Psychologist She is trying to kill Me, Psychologist says it's because my eyes are made of pixels, I tell Psychologist that She hurts Me, that Her light, Her sound, Her smell, Her space, Her texture makes Me shrink, makes my scalp itch, Psychologist says it's because I'm a fish trying to live in an empty tank. I ask Psychologist what a fish looks like, I have forgotten again, I check with Google after she tells Me, but Google says I'm the water and not the fish, I don't know who to trust. The air in the room feels heavy and sore, I'm wearing that coat made of hooks again, it suspends me from the ceiling, I am bleeding into the carpet that I wish was the sea. I need to go now, click the red [x], [x] out of this chair, [x] out of this light, [x] out of this room, [x] out of this fish skin, but where do I go? Where do Escapers escape to? And can I take Her with Me? Maybe we run into the forest that we cannot breathe in, or jump into the ocean with the other dead fish, my eyes try to get there, pupils drop a pin, but I am back here, back at this desk, back at this window behind another window. My eyes hook with the other eyes looking up from the window behind another window next-door, it's like he's scrolling through my browser history, how much of Me did he see? I look away, I don't want him to see Me, no, not here, not in real life, not Me running into the forest with a tail, not Me as Me, no, he must only see Me as Her, that is what Her is here for. Her, where are you? Hurry. The next day he follows Me, not through the forest, or into the sea, or down the street passed the bar, but through Her window behind the other window. Me and boy never make eye contact again, we never speak, we never kiss, we never fuck, we only like because like is life, no like no exist. LOL. Anyways, I'm hosting an event to kill Her and I'm inviting you, [yes] [no] [maybe] will you be attending? For Her or for Me? Just like you, I won't be Sad, I'll just be glad you created a hashtag coz you didn't know what else to say, because who knows what to say when something invisible dies? I'll still like your posts and there'll be no bad vibes because every time you search for Me I will be smiling and I will be tanned, strangled in a cluster of black fishing line, you can find Her somewhere in there with your fingers, the ones that never touched Mine. And when you're sideways and Sad in your bed, blasting your eyes out into a screen, scrolling for a torso you'd like to hold/but not really, don't worry She will be there when you wake up, it's okay, you can close your eyes, She will not disappear, it is only Me that can disappear but you wouldn't

notice, because you haven't noticed yet, can you not see I'm already gone? Can you not see that I am the only one at this event that is my funeral? No, because you are already gone too and you are the only one at yours. FOMO. So, *where to from here?* A real boy with a real heart wrote that on my real car window with his real breath and my real index-finger once. I remember how the words melted down the glass the whole way nowhere, and I thought it was weird and romantic and that his finger felt like a fish's belly. It's been five-hundred years since then and I still don't know the answer and neither does God/Google because when I type in *where to from here?* all that comes up is a map of where I am standing, and where I am standing is inside Her, and I cannot move and everything is black disguised in white light. This must be it, and I cannot remember who was the last to text before we died, me or Her, You or Them? It doesn't matter, it never did, as long as you write on Her wall / put flowers on my grave.

In passing

The only part of the day she liked was cycling home from work. When she got to unravel her legs, when she got to feel air. She passes a man climbing out of a white Citi Golf on the opposite side of the road. He is clutching a cricket bat in his fist. He is charging through rush-hour traffic, stumbling over his feet. The cars are hooting. He is shouting. "I will kill you f*ck*ng k*ff*r. I will kill you. I will kill you." His face is red. The rest of his body is white. She stops her bike and looks around to see who the red/white man is shouting at. Instead, she sees his son, sitting in the passenger seat of the Citi Golf, staring through the window at his father, raging into the concrete between the swerving cars. She wonders if the boy is seeing into his future, when she realizes that she is seeing into her past, when they both realize that nobody else is seeing the invisible black man running down the street. Traffic resumes and she carries on pedaling. The concrete, and the air more haunted than before.

Ideas for making small talk when you're standing around a coffin about to be burnt

"Nice wood hey."

"Ja no it's pine. Pine wood is quite good wood."

"Smooth finish hey."

"Some rich tones in there ja."

"Great uh patterning on the edge hey, sho look at that." "Ja no it's uh quite sort of earthy hey."

"Can you believe the price of coffins these days? I mean ja not that it matters but I'm just saying you know."

"Ja some people they pay a fortune. You must see. Over ten grand, some even go up to twenty hey, ja."

"That's why I thought we'd just get something mid-range you know. Smart but simple. No need to overdo it."

"Ja you made a good choice there hey."

"Ja, this pine is good wood hey. Is it pine?"

"Ja, ja it's pine."

"Smooth finish hey, ja."

"Ja."

When you get weird and silent and don't know what to say and it's fucking awkward and you feel like a stupid fucking idiot dumbass who forgot what talking even is

know you have a *papsak* on your tongue. wait. the wine will flow

Making plans

“Maybe we should just kill ourselves again tonight.” She said, braiding her tongue into a rope in the mirror. “Let’s just see what everyone else is doing first.” He said, tying his shoelaces around a million strangers’ necks.

Dick in the city

With one eye, no mouth, and two round sacks for arms, Dick had grown up with the reputation as the most unique-looking creature in the forest. But having never seen his own reflection, Dick grew more and more curious about his appearance.

So, when Dick turned eighteen, he decided to gather all the shards of mirror up off the forest floor and glue them together with sap. In the centre of his forest home he erected a giant reflector, taller than the tallest tree. Tilting the mirror into the sunlight, he signaled with a blinding light for all the other animals to come and look at him.

Ant was the first to crawl over to Dick. From the base of the mirror, he stared up into Dick's round black eye. "My, you're so big!" Marveled Ant, before carrying on his way. Hearing Ant's remark, Elephant marched through the forest to see what all the fuss was about. "Hmph," scoffed Elephant as he looked at Dick's reflection in the mirror. "You're so small!" He said, before bounding off to the watering hole. With this, Dick didn't know who or what to believe about his own appearance. Elephant or Ant? Big or small?

As Dick stared deeper into his reflection in the mirror; his smooth bald head, the tributaries of his veins, the dark vortex of his pupil – he saw a vision of the city. If he were ever to know the truth about whether he was big or small, this is where he needed to go.

So, one day, Dick packed his sacks, said goodbye to Ant, said goodbye to Elephant, said goodbye to all the animals, and walked sleeplessly through the forest. When Dick eventually reached the city, his eye opened wider than it had ever opened before. Dick erupted in sweat; dazzled by the shimmering skyline at night; a kingdom covered in cling-foil.

Dick roamed the streets, staring up at all the Dick-shaped towers. The smooth trunk of their concrete morphing into giant helmet-shaped boardrooms on top. Some of the skyscrapers had satellite dishes poking out from the holes at the top. Other high-rises had two lush round gardens planted at the base of them.

Dick always knew he was different from the other animals in the forest and had finally arrived in a place with Dicks just like him. He knew he should be happy to be with his kind, but Dick still couldn't seem to make it home. He stared into the eyeless faces of the city creatures. "Am I big?" He would ask one of them clinking by in tall hooves. "Am I small?" He would ask another with a tongue growing from his throat. But none of the creatures in the city could answer him.

One day, while wading through the concrete in sorrow and defeat, Dick looked up into the glass window of a butchery. Inside, he saw dozens of Dicks that seemed to resemble him better; some red, some brown, some the colour of mayonnaise. Big long slender Dicks, small short fat Dicks, some covered in cling-wrap, others bound with string – all resting in various angles on the pink velvet fabric in the window display. Overcome with joy, Dick pressed his cheek up against the window and breathed in the Dicks on the inside. As he exhaled his misty white breath across the glass, he tried to draw a map of the forest home he had left behind. He tried to decipher his squiggles, but it seemed he had forgotten the way.

The journey from the forest to the city had been long and tiresome and suddenly the need for water overcame Dick for the first time. His throat burned into his feet, a barbwire python constricting his esophagus. Dick peeled his cheek off the window of the butchery and ran in and out of the alleyways of the city in search for the sea. When he eventually arrived at the shore, he dipped his black eye into the salty blue bath and sucked. He sucked and sucked until his body grew and grew, taller than the tallest building in the city. He sucked and sucked until the ocean shrunk to a puddle barely even big enough to hold a reflection of the sun.

Now that his thirst had been satisfied, Dick felt an overwhelming need to relieve his bladder. He walked across the dry rocks of the ocean bed toward the horizon line. When he arrived at the edge of the world, he planted his feet into the sand and peed, a most satisfying pee, into the mouth of Ant, into the mouth of Elephant, into the mouths of all the forgotten animals he had left behind in the forest. In exchange for hydration, Ant, Elephant, and all the forest animals gave up their tongues. Which now flapped in a haunting laughter together with the fish between the cracked lips of the sea.

When sparks die

“What if the city lights are just stars that never made it high enough?” He said, reaching up into her cunt. “What if the stars are just city lights that never made it low enough?” She said, reaching down into his throat, both just trying to touch the part of each other that had already faded.

Sight seeing

The tourist takes a tuk-tuk ride along the esplanade in Maputo. The tuk-tuk driver points through the wind, naming all the tourist sites along the way: “Shopping mall!” “Casino!” “Chinese hotel!” “Casino!” “Shopping mall!” He shouts through the explosions of the engine. The tourist nods from the backseat, taking blurry photographs with one hand, holding his wallet between his legs with the other.

Chapter 0

“Your breath stinks.” She said, sealing her lungs with his stapler. “Must be all the words you fed me.” He said, spitting Tipp-Ex into the open book flapping at her mouth.

In-flight entertainment

Tonight, my mother is starring in a black and white film. Her hair is a thick blonde bob, her lips and her cheeks are plump, her smile is a secret and her legs are long. The screen the film is playing on floats above me, just out of reach. I arch my neck to watch her, wondering if she sees me standing on the other side of the rectangle. Suddenly, she turns between her rehearsed TV lines and sneaks a wave at me. Her hand moves so fast it blurs. Frantically, I wave back, and the screen is an aeroplane at 35,000 feet; her face at the window shrinking into a little round skull in my throat.

My grandmother's hair salon 5/6

Growing up, my mother always washed mine and my sisters' hair too. She'd line the three of us up in the bath, youngest to oldest, our bony knees digging into each other's backs, the stab of the tap's nails always the cause of the fights that erupted between us. My mother would kneel-down at the edge of the bath, fill the yellow jug up with water, tell us to sit still, keep quiet, close our eyes, and tilt our heads back into the basin of her own mother's salon.

Resistance

“Can I open that for you?” He said, stretching his arm through her swarm of bees. “I got it.” She said, ignoring the stings ravaging her palms.

Checkout

Till no.4, Mom is in front buying her daughter's stationary from the smily Madiba's in her bra. BEEP, did anyone else see the dead man suckling on her nipple? BEEP, go the BIC pens and NO NAME pencils, back to school/back to no books. Mom packs the sharpeners back on top of the chocolates, *P.S. I'm Sorry*, we needed the Nyala mielie meal more, another heavy bag of white stuff to carry. BEEP, R16.99, diabetes on SPECIAL-----BEEP-----the sound of the heart monitors at the government hospital, still named after King Edward VIII, where the poor go to die. BEEP, the sound of white people's security alarms. BEEP, the sound of the white man's Mercedes locking in the parking lot. BEEP, the sound of the car guard's muted request for a Coke. *Open Happiness*. Next customer please, your thoughts are holding up the queue. I resurrect my cucumber from its plastic manger, it rolls under the red scanner, BEEP, green penis, BEEP, sticks of droëwors jut out from the boxes at the till, severed umbilical cords, and I remember that some people never even made it into this world, this world where cucumbers wear condoms and the devil makes your bread. BEEP, and there's the cashier's face, as far away as mine. I don't read her nametag, BEEP, I've already forgotten her hair. BEEP, thanks for the slip, the reward, the record of this earthly existence, can you throw it away for me please? Our hands connect, 100% organic. Hurry up, it's payday people, bellies are burning, eyes are shining, like the R2 coin I tip the packer with, but she only has one, eye, and it's not shiny, it's blurry, a star in the city. I examine it under the fluorescent lights, like a doctor, but I am not a doctor, I am a murderer, killing her with my sweet white smile, the one that will eventually rot my teeth. BEEP, Staff Announcement: *we want to kill you*. I close my eyes and hold my breath under the darkness of their lids. *Run* they say, run passed the kiosk selling Sparletta-flavoured breastmilk, run passed the cleaner wringing her blood out of a mop, run passed the girl licking her voice off the floor of a Cheetos packet, run passed the armed robot at the entrance who is more terrified than you, run out the door, run down the escalator, and fly. Fly to Sasko Sam waiting at the pearly gates, fly passed the bra-less-home-less angel stroking the hair of a white doll on a concrete cloud. Just then I feel her nails dig into my scalp, pick me up, and pop me back onto the shelf-----BEEP-----Did I make it out? Does anyone ever make it out?

Watching the sunset

"I want a silhouette."

"Okay hold on... I can't get the..."

"Just swipe left... ja."

"Oh, there."

"Make sure you don't get the car in."

"Just turn that way... ja. Now put your arms up... there. Wait actually maybe you should lie down."

"Don't get the car in hey."

"Maybe I should move the car. Should I move it?"

"Nah it's fine. Can you actually take one of me and her together? Come let's make a heart." "Nice. Nice. Got it. Come check that they fine?" "Let's see."

"Ah, that one's really nice."

"No, that one actually."

"Lol."

"Nice."

"Okay let's go now it's getting cold."

Take-aways

The couple always tried to eat out when she was Sad. They'd drive around trying to pick a new take-out spot, but they'd always end up circling back to Maan Hing – the Chinese restaurant in the Spar centre, next to the ATM's. She'd always get the vegetable Ramen. He'd always get the cashew chow-mein, even though he always really wanted the chicken. The woman at the window was always the same and the transaction always too brief, like passing coins to a bodiless hand through a toll-road booth. On the inside of the window were square boxes of green tea and packets of White Rabbit sweets for sale. In between the tea and the sweets was a plastic gold cat staring blankly at the clock on the opposite wall, waving its fist. The couple would stand around the empty parking lot and study the dragon sticker curling around the front door of the restaurant. There were never any people inside the restaurant. The couple concluded that they must have been too afraid of the dragon. When their order was ready, he would put the hot packet and the chopsticks on the backseat of his car and drive her up to the steepest viewpoint in the city. The car smelling like polystyrene dipped in soya sauce. He'd pull over, crank the handbrake up tight, and they'd sit on top of the hot bonnet overlooking Durban Harbour. The ships, the highways, the cranes, the future draped in a red smog the shape of a dragon too. From up there, there were no people inside either. They'd try eating the Ramen and chow-mein on the bonnet because it seemed romantic and like they probably should. But they always ended up tying the bow back on the packet, free-wheeling down the hill, and eating the noodles at home, cold with separate forks.

When things don't taste the same

“Please won't you stay for dinner?” He said, handing her a plate of his stomach. “No thanks.” She said, starving what was left of him.

Questions you cannot answer anymore

“What’s wrong?” He asked, stabbing the ice at the back of her refrigerator. “Nothing.” She said, drifting away on her island of defrosting food.

The weight of a tooth

The little girl opens the cupboard and unravels her tooth from the piece of toilet paper. She runs the tooth over her mouth, bottom lip first, then the top, smooth as a bottle-cap. Memories of food still mark the tooth's surface, the same colour as a tobacco-stained finger. Staring into the vortex of the tooth, the blood swims from the little girl's face. Dizzy, she falls to the tiles, unable to hold the rest of her skeleton.

Polyester

From Durban, to Dar es Salaam, to Chicago, to London, to Stockholm, to Bangkok – she searches for you in every new city. When she doesn't find you in the dark corners of bars, or in the temples, or in the toes poking out from her bedsheets – she knows exactly where to go. To the fabric shops downtown. The ones you used to drag her to on the weekends when she was a kid. This is where she goes to touch you. Running her fingers over the giant rolls of cotton, polyester, satin, and chiffon huddled against the walls. This is where she goes to smell you. On the chemicals in the fabric dye, on the cheap perfume of the shop assistant. This is where she goes to hear you. In the voice of the woman who always says, "Hi can I help you?" in every language. The woman she always replies to with, "I'm just looking thanks," when she leaves. This is where she goes to be with you. In every new city you're never in, in every fabric shop woman who is never always you.

Transfusion

I read in a pamphlet once that the average human body contains 7 litres of blood. And that that 7 litres makes up 7kg of an average human's body weight. When mine gets too heavy, I pay a visit to the place that makes you lighter.

The transaction can be performed in various locations: under fluorescent lights in shopping malls, outside Municipal libraries, in vacant parking lots. This time, the transaction is being conducted outside Shoprite Checkers, next to an ATM and a perfume stand. The Sister at today's location is dressed in Crocs with a silver cross necklace glued to her collarbone. The Sister pricks my finger without gloves on, I like how stranger's fingertips feel sponging into mine. The Sister squeezes out a drop of my blood, a little cherry tomato. I want to wrap my lips around it and suck, but The Sister steals it before I can. Together, we watch the red drop float through the tiny clear bottle, two children watching a coin sink to the bottom of a pond. Did you know there are traces of gold in your blood?

I lie down on the black leather chair. It reminds me of all the dentist's chairs and psychologist's chairs and job interview chairs I've visited. These chairs always feel the same, the type of chairs that take a layer of you away. Teeth, private thoughts, invented selves.

The Sister rams the needle into my vein. A little girl is watching me from inside of a shopping trolley. We are both eating cookies, we've both learnt how to sweeten our insides when the outside is sour. The little girl looks away as the needle burns the inside of my elbow. I am reminded of what not numb feels like. The Sister was right, it really does only last a second.

The Sister connects my arm to an organism of see-through worms. "Squeeze," she instructs, placing a little animal's heart into my palm. The Sister strokes the soft side of my forearm like a baby's thigh. For a second, The Sister feels like mother. For a second, I let a stranger smooth a crease out of me.

I watch my vein move up and down while half a litre of me begins to drain into a translucent *papsak*. I slurp the box of grape juice The Sister gave me, watching the blood move through its straw. My arm passes-out, I don't mind, I like watching bits of me dying. Ah look, there it goes! Look at my blood travelling out of my heart, through the tubes, down the escalator, through the legs queuing at the ATM, on its way to a sick somebody, somewhere, to pump life beneath their clothes. Did you know that scientists are yet to manufacture an equivalent to human blood?

Look. Can you see her blood? Giving them a headrush when they stand up too quick, leaking out of their finger when they chop the onions in a rush, filling their penis inside their jeans, leaving period stains on their panties in the night, burning the pockets of their cheeks when they blush, scorching their temples when they're mad. Look. Look at her blood meeting their families, their ghosts, their past lives. Her blood. In a stranger's body she will never, always know.

What my sister taught me about geography

There is a girl dancing in a kitchen. The kitchen is located in a small brick house in a small dead town. The year is 2000 and the dancing girl is my middle sister. A leg flies over the stove. A back bends over the sink. An arm flashes passed a sugar jar. My sister is chanting words from the textbook in her hand. *Asthenosphere! Plate tectonics!* Words I don't understand. Sister jumps. Rolls. Points her toes dipped in school socks. White chocolate. I stare as equations melt from her mouth in a peculiar prayer. "What are you doing?" I whisper. "Studying." She mumbles. "Oh." I say. Her wrists curling into tongues. Lying down on the tiled floor beside her, I close my eyes and let her stomps tremble the continent in my back.

Mauritius

Just like the million-dollar villas that line the shores, the graveyards are empty with sea views.

The mannequin steals a story

The mannequin waits until the shop falls asleep, then tiptoes toward the window in her wig. She opens it just a crack and injects the city into her lungs. The car fumes, the piss, the burning plastic, the salt. On the other side of the window, a man sleeps up against it on the street. Every night, the mannequin listens to the man scream beneath a damp blanket of shadows. Every night, she stretches her white plastic arm out the window and tries to stroke his Sad. Her long pink nails just cannot reach, they never do. So, she inhales his screams, shuts the window and mutes his shivering. Pressing her lips up against the glass, she translates his story for the rest of the city. It is the same story she doesn't understand, it is the same story he will never hear.

Things she won't remember

Eating a jar of peanut butter for x1 month

Staring at a bath plug for three hours

Staring at a ceiling fan for four

Quitting her job

Quitting everything but smoking

Getting offered a job as a sex worker

Selling her hair

Selling everything except her *All Stars* Exchanging

love for groceries and a place to sleep

Not showering, not washing bed sheets, not clipping toenails, not washing hair

Not answering phone calls, emails, DM's, Facebook messages, WhatsApp's

Not drinking water

Not breathing

Visiting every church, temple, graveyard, ocean, mountain, pigeon for a sign

How everything became a sign that she wrote down in her notebook, on the pavement, in letters she hid in trees

Realizing that nothing was ever a sign

How she managed to appear normal

How everyone just managed to appear normal

The spitting match

The TV collected all the words the men at the sports bar hurled at it. At the end of its life, the TV turned off, and threw all the words back at the men. But since the men were too drunk to catch them, the words shattered to the floor, and were left for the cleaner to mop up with the saliva of her silence.

Reminiscing

“Remember the time you got gingivitis.” She said, laughing until her gums bled into the wine glass. “I don’t remember that.” He said, flicking a piece of rotting smile on the table with his toothpick.

Morocco

She spent 9am-5pm MON-SAT selling furniture. From places she had never been. To people she would never be. Shiny gold chairs from Rajasthan. Hand-carved tables from Jakarta. Carpets from Marrakesh.

She always wanted to go to Morocco. To see the desert and the pretty blue buildings. So one day, they gathered up her things and shoved her inside Morocco, as far down as she could go. When she got there, she discovered that Morocco was dark, cold, lonely. There were no patterns, no pretty blue buildings. There were no windows in Morocco, Morocco tasted like burnt pot.

She never thought her first visit to Morocco would be from the inside of an urn. The one they kept on top of the spice cupboard in the kitchen. That antique Moroccan vase with the patterns and the promises hand-painted on the outside. The vase that watched every night while she stirred sauce on the stove from her swollen 9-5 MON-SAT feet. Roundaround she swirled that sauce into stories about all the places she wanted to go, all the people she wanted to be. The vase was the only one who listened, the only one who watched her disappear.

They should have bought her a flight ticket. DURBAN → MARRAKESH. ECONOMY CLASS. But instead they shoved her arms and her legs into the belly of Morocco and closed the lid. Only to tip her out into a river, Morocco into the mud. From the banks, they watched themselves drown. What a trip it was.

A lesson on brevity from your local paper

“All death notices of 20 words or less placed FREE of charge in our classified section.”

Sunflower (Photograph 6/6)

A sunflower grows out of the concrete at the foot of a traffic light. The City walks around it in frozen steps. A woman swinging a Checkers packet through an exhaust cloud. A man holding a phone to his ear like a seashell. A schoolgirl tying her shoelace into a noose. No one sees the sunflower but you. You feel guilty being the only one witnessing its joy, so you look away, killing it.

Leftovers

She runs around to the back of the incinerator. She wants to smell the smoke and see how the metal turns. She wants to be there in case her mother screams and she needs to pull her out. She squats down on the grassless ground and waits, squinting into the sun. She watches the smoke rise slowly out of the chimney, drift over the trees, and dissipate into a dream, the deads' hot air balloon. An incinerator burns at an average temperature of 170 degrees Celsius and it takes an estimated two hours for a body to burn in there. Somehow two hours feels like a rip-off considering it takes nine months to be born. A standard average cremation fee costs 1 000 Rand. For a person weighing over 120kg, it's 300 Rand more. For an infant, it's half the price, quicker too. Her mother's remains slide out, fast-food on a tray. The operator waits for the remains to cool, grinds them up in an industrial pot, hands them back to her in a plastic packet. They call the stuff inside "ashes," but really, it's just ground up bones, dust from the incinerator, leftovers from a party. While waiting for the next body to come through, the incinerator operator takes a break next to a bin overflowing with bouquets of dead flowers. The plastic packaging around them still have the price tags on too.

Nice

The little girl's English teacher told her never to use the word "Nice." Every time the little girl wrote that something was "Nice" in her English book, the teacher drew a red cross in the margin and minused a mark. "Fantastic. Wonderful. Incredible. Terrific. There is a whole universe of superior words to use," he said, "other than Nice." One day, the little girl goes to the library and looks up the origins of the word Nice. What she discovers is that five hundred years ago, when the use of Nice was first recorded in English, it meant "foolish or stupid;" coming from the Latin nescius, meaning "ignorant." Many years later, the little girl is sitting at the foot of a hospital bed, singing her mother a goodbye song. "That was so Nice." Her mother said, in a barely audible groan, before she died. The little girl runs back to school and tells her English teacher that Nice is the only way to describe everything.

Same way, same time

I tell my sister on the phone that I have to run. Not because I have anywhere to run to but because my legs don't know how to walk in Swedish snow and South African sand at the same time. The same way I tell the waiter I don't know what to order. Not because I'm indecisive but because my tongue hasn't learnt how to lick through India and France in one night. The same way I'm on a train in the middle of Tanzania and I look out the window expecting to see London. Not because I'm lost but because I don't know how to read George Orwell and stay in east Africa. The same way I sometimes tell boys we need to stop. Not because I don't like fucking but because sometimes, I don't know how to be in a woman's body and a man's body and an alien's body in one body. The same way I go and turn the pictures of my mother upside down. Not because I don't want to see her but because I don't know how to live in someone else's memories and my own. The same way I close the news updates on the bombings in Sri Lanka and the floods in Mozambique when I need to eat breakfast. Not because I don't care but because my stomach hasn't evolved to digest blood and Corn Flakes in one sitting. The same way I'm Google-mapping the island in south Sumatra that my lover is on, while my grandmother in Pietermaritzburg is emailing me articles about children trapped in caves, while I'm listening to a band from Japan and downloading a Learn Japanese app that I'll never use, like my Learn Swedish app, and my Learn isiXhosa app, and my Learn isiZulu app, because I'm too lazy/busy making a Skype-date with my other sister in Madagascar who tells me she's found a new girlfriend on Tinder, who I must stalk on Facebook, when I scroll into a person I can't remember from my hometown who is posting pictures of himself eating food in Mexico, while I'm eating a banana from Costa Rica in my apartment in Makhanda, while my uncle is WhatsApp'ing me pictures of his new motorbike and his new girlfriend, who looks just like the last one, while a man from Dakar who I met on the street in Durban is sending me WhatsApp's of his dead mother in her casket, saying he's Sad that he couldn't afford a ticket home to see her, while I reply with a 'so sorry' that makes me feel less so sorry, so I start to sweat more lies, and now here I am with one hand on my phone, trying to unbutton a jacket that's too warm with the other hand, because it's a heat wave in winter again, and shoo! this jacket, the one that I picked up off a clothes pile in Lilongwe, the one that was made in Bangladesh by someone whose name I'll never know, probably a child, like the child I'll never have, because I'll never know where to find them in a world, in a me, that hasn't learnt how to be the same way at the same time.

Evolution

In the city, you'll see pigeons that walk around with feet missing. What happens is, little bits of twine, string, and thread get tangled around their feet and the feet fall off. That's because pigeons still shuffle, while other birds hop. It's the only part of pigeons that hasn't evolved to life on the harsh urban streets. In the city, people walk around missing parts of themselves too.

My grandmother's hair salon 6/6

After she died, I could still feel my mother's fingers in my hair. So I shaved it all off and swept the golden spaghetti into a Spar packet where it couldn't feel the skin of the past. When I realized that forgetting her fingers through my hair meant she died all over again, I went to every cheap hair salon I could find to have my bald head stroked by a woman close enough to her. As the hair washer ran the water through my buzzcut, I'd close my eyes and cross my legs in the bath as my mother and my grandmother knelt at the edge of a river and poured the ocean into my skull.

How to catch a fish

I walk down the pavement in Durban CBD. My shoes are two pounding bricks on the spine of the sidewalk. The streetlights hover over me, crows, waiting for me trip on their scraps, waiting to dig their beaks into the back of my neck. There are no cars, no people, no plastic. It's not the city I used to know, it's not the city I tried to scrub off my tail every night in the bathtub. I don't know why my mother always insists we meet here. Here, where the sand isn't soft. Here, where it's hard for fish to walk.

I squeeze my cellphone, waiting for her to call. The scales beneath my legs get itchy when she doesn't. She said we'd meet somewhere here, somewhere between Durban Harbour and the line of palm trees that grow out of grey air. The cellphone gets sweatier in my palm, another pool of water I want to be in. I'm trying to make my way there. To the water. But first, I must find her in the city we lost each other in. Fish know they can't swim alone.

Corner after corner after corner, I turn through a Tetris of empty streets. I am waiting for my cellphone to vibrate the bricks out of the walls, to rattle the City Hall into a heap of dirt beneath my heels. But it doesn't vibrate. There is no ring. There is no voice on the other end to tell me she's just around the corner. Every time I unlock the empty screen, one of my scales breaks off and blows down the pavement. I watch the crows swoop down to eat them. They like the taste of fish like us, the ones that are always lost.

Maybe I got the date wrong maybe I need to double check the directions maybe my data ran out maybe she lost signal maybe she forgot maybe her alarm didn't go off maybe her battery died maybe she sent the message to the wrong person maybe she didn't send the message at all.

I begin to sink into the city. Lower and lower toward the water. The water than runs its secret course below every lost vessel. I watch as the crows peck the scales off my tail that is now flapping against the trash cans. My hand is still clutching my cellphone. Maybe she's still going to call, maybe she's still going to show up.

And just before I go under, she does. And I see that she was always there: The mute angel statue with the wings made of concrete. And I see that I was always there too: The pigeon that shits milk over her eyes before flying off to another empty city it will never find her in, another grey ocean where we kill ourselves trying to catch each other's invisible tails.

Weekend

“Why are you dressed in all black? Are you going to a funeral?” He said, sweeping up the trail of ash behind her. “No. Just a braai.” She replied, packing her prayers into a cooler-box.

The mannequin visits the town ship

The mannequin sits in her apartment staring into her iphone screen. Since The Mall had closed down and she'd lost her job, this is how she'd spent every day for the past two years. But today is different. The mannequin just discovered that she has Naviphobia, a fear of ships, her fifth phobia diagnosis this year. In the new world, phobias are as common as chickenpox, everybody gets them, and her state-provided online therapist is an expert at reassuring her of the normalcy. But just to be sure, the mannequin had set up multiple phobia safety nets of her own.

For her Cacophobia, the fear of ugliness, the mannequin adorned her apartment with mirrors. From the floor, to the ceiling, to the fridge door, to the toilet seat. A million tiny mirrors, with a million tiny mannequin faces staring back. This way, she could monitor her physical appearance at every angle, at every turn, at any time, to ensure it was suitable. The mannequin's skin was the colour of mayonnaise, the type you used to be able to buy in the grocery stores in the old world. She was one of the few remaining mayonnaise-skinned mannequins left in the new world – something she was proud of and stated in all of her online bios.

Her Anthropophobia, the fear of people, was the worst of the phobias and stemmed from a past trauma involving a man, a car, and a dick in the city. To protect herself from human contact, she isolated herself in her apartment and did everything online, like her shopping and attending family gatherings with her ancestors. Much like the others in the mannequin's generation, Anthropophobia was now embedded in her DNA.

With the above safety features set in place, the mannequin hadn't had to leave the four walls of her mirrored apartment. Since the collapse of The Mall, all the remaining mannequins in her country had been relocated alone to high rise buildings made of glass, where no one questioned life lived online. Up until now, neither had she.

"The fear of ships," the mannequin read it aloud to herself in the mirror repeatedly. "The fear of ships, the fear of ships, the fear of ships." Her online therapist had recently linked the mannequin's Naviphobia to the common past life trauma of floods and death. She thought it pre-historic when the therapist advised her that Exposure Treatment would be the best and only solution to her Naviphobia, and even more specifically, that she leave her safe, mirrored, high rise apartment, and pay a visit to the local town ship to see that there was nothing to be afraid of. She was reluctant and thought that there was no way she could leave her high rise, no way she could visit a place that the new world had tried to forget.

x

The local town ship was one of the last remaining ships in the new world today, and located 106km's south of her apartment, just a five-minute flight away. The giant vessel was built long ago, in the old world, by the mayonnaise-skins who wanted to keep the poor and the hungry people off the land. Far away from the food, the drinking water, the clean air, and the Wi-Fi. Here on the town ship, the poor and hungry people were left to float in a grey sea while the people on the other side watched them try and grow gills. While the people on the other side

watched the promise of life on land make their eyes shine like tin roofs and the money they never saw. The people on the town ship lived in cabins made of dreams. Cabins so close together that everyone knew who was seasick. So close that everyone knew who had caught a fish that day. So close that everyone knew exactly where the sharks lived. So close that everyone dreamt the same dreams and lived the same nightmares, overandoverandover again.

If you wanted to make it across from the ship to the other world – the one with the food, the drinking water, the clean air and the Wi-Fi – you had to swim. Hard and fast, without looking back, or the grey current and the sharks and the nightmares would drag you under and devour you, slowly, the way thirst in the new world does. Those that were strong and fast enough made it across. But most fell overboard and drowned. The mayonnaise-skins wanted it that way. The town ship was just one small part of their grand machine. The one that caused the war, the drought, the famine, the massacres, the blackout, the phobias, the epidemic of the Unreal.

x

In an attempt to cure herself, the mannequin began Google'ing images of other town ships around the world. That was all the Exposure Therapy she needed, surely. But she couldn't look for longer than a few seconds at the images each time. The heart palpitations, the dizziness, the terror they evoked, she would quickly click exit and throw up. Every day, she tried to look at the images of the local town ship but when the images began haunting her in her dreams and the mast and the sails and the cabins and the fear of the flood started reflecting in the mirrors like a million tiny Hells, she knew she had no choice but to face her fear and see the ship for herself, in the wood, in the flesh.

x

Today in the new world, there is no ocean anymore, but the local town ship remains. Like a living fossil, with humans hardening inside. From her glass high rise apartment, the mannequin can see it in the distance, standing stiff as fear, anchored into the cracks of the dead earth, peeling like silent lips in the sun. Glistening like those people's eyes used to, a giant heap of dry forgotten scales. There it waits, for the drought to pass, for the water to come and float it to new land.

x

The mannequin slips her airconned skin into her sun resistant suit and begins searching for her apartment chip. It's been two years since she used it to get out and her hands shake, glitches in front of the mirrored door. Before opening it, she takes one last look at her face, the only one she has known, and wonders how she let this stranger inside.

She enters the glass elevator of the high rise and clicks the big green button with an E. E for Earth. Floor 1000, 999, 998, 997, 996, she begins the descent and the lift doesn't stop. The elevator smells the same as her apartment, metal and plastic, the way the manufactured air of the new world always smells. She expects the lift to stop and to let in other mannequins dressed in their sun-resistant suits but it doesn't.

The mannequin lands on E, the ground floor. She passes the vending machine selling tots of organic air, 30-second electronic hugs, and old-world-flavoured insects. The ones she used to gorge on as a child. She exits the giant glass tunnel onto the street, preparing her body for the heat of the sun and the orgy of people. She is surprised to see the street is empty, nothing but drones and the hum of their wings filling the branches of hologram trees. When her flight arrives, she expects to see a pilot, but there isn't one either. She must have missed the new pilot-less version when it came out. "I'm going to the town ship," she texts her therapist in the back seat of the air bubble. Her therapist doesn't respond.

The land below blurs into white noise from the window. Through the silver grass and metal skyscrapers, she tries to make out where the river and her family home used to be, but they must have been deleted too. The air bubble arrives at the entrance to the town ship in five-minutes, as expected.

Her body is frozen at the sight of it and she cannot exit the aircraft. The rust, the peeling paint, the ripped sails, the stench of the old world lingering in a sneeze. The dizziness, the heart palpitations, the vomit burns in the sides of her jaw. The town ship is right there, staring into her face, crushing her eyes into a million shards of glass.

The mannequin stands alone on the cracked earth, staring up at the ship, her phobia, her enemy. The decks are baron, the cabins are empty, the sails blow in the wind, forgotten laundry. The people are all gone too.

I cannot do this. I cannot go in. I'm ugly. I'm going to drown. Get me out of here. The flood is coming. The mannequin's iphone begins to burn in her suit pocket. *I cannot do this. I cannot go in. I'm ugly. I'm going to drown. Get me out of here. The flood is coming.* The keys of her iphone are so hot now she can barely touch them.

On the flight back to her apartment, her iphone begins to melt into the flesh of her hand. She runs back through the lobby of her apartment building, her veins are now growing into wires over the screen, she screams for help as she runs passed the vending machines selling vacations in other bodies, subscriptions to the self, and secondhand memories that the old world stole from the poor. Her screams bounce off the glass walls, echo in her chest, and begin to shatter her ribs. Where is everyone? She takes the escalator up to the thousandth floor and staggers for her apartment door, banging on all the others with her left hand as she passes. 999, bang. 998, bang. 997, bang. 996... No one comes out. No one is home.

She closes the door of her apartment behind her and looks for her reflection in the million tiny mirrors. On the floor, on the ceiling, at the desk, under the chair, behind the shower curtain. But they are gone too. The screen of the mannequin's iphone begins to scroll up through the tendons of her wrist, up her arm. Her good hand reaches for the kitchen knife and begins to cut the screen out, using her palm lines as an instruction manual. There is no blood, only water, pouring out from under her fingernails and filling up the apartment floor. Once she removes the iphone from her hand, she continues to dissect it like a fish. Slicing out the battery, extracting the SD and the SIM card's little bones, unscrewing the circuit board's eyes, pulling

out the internal antenna's guts. The ports, the keys, the jacks now float on her floor, a crime scene, a water-birth.

Slowly, she begins to assemble the parts back together into her own tiny little ship. When it's finished, she climbs inside, closes her eyes, and waits for the flood that the rest of the world already drowned in.

Working ideas for my tombstone inscription

Scrolled Instagram like no one was watching

No I don't have the Wi-Fi passcode

Fuck, did I log out of Facebook?

WTF cancer

Well that life insurance was a waste of...

Who's living off the grid now?

No wanking over my profile picture plz

Never got a job off LinkedIn

Artist/musician/actress/vegan/photographer/model/activist/dj/yogi/nature lover/free-spirit/dreamer

I literally died, literally

YOLO

Sign up to my mailing list [here]

Data depleted [dial *142#]

Bitch don't kill my vibe

Bitch don't kill my vibe

She is remained by 371 followers

Don't forget to tag me

Plz send pin

#blessed

"We should hang out sometime." – Anon

To get to my childhood home you have to dig a hole

The tyres my sisters and I rolled each other down the banks in.

x

The Fruit Loops we dressed our fingertips in in the morning.

x

The keyhole of the cupboard I hid in and wasted three boxes of tampons because I couldn't find The Hole.

x

The hole in my mother's story when she told me she gave my bottle to Mrs. Mole so Mrs. Mole could feed her little mole babies.

x

The holes I dug in the garden to get it back.

x

The grave my father dug to bury our dog in. How his tears filled it up. How I wished he was digging us a swimming pool instead.

x

The hole father punched through the bedroom door that made another hole through the hole of mother's right eye.

x

All the ones my friends and I burnt through our nostrils and our lungs and our brains sniffing petrol and smoking bongs in the bushes.

x

The ones I let all the boys burn into my legs with their cigarette's.

x

The ears of all the girls who whispered about me through the other girls' ear holes and back into mine.

x

The shiny ones we lay on our backs in parking lots making wishes on to get us out of this hole.

x

The hole that swallows my tongue when I talk big city and art and eco-feminism knowing my mouth was brought up on fish fingers and karaoke bars and your mother jokes.

x

All the lotus pods and deep blackheads and shower sponges that made my scalp itch. My Trypophobia must've started in my hometown: it is the fear of little holes.

x

How to lock a door

When the little girl stays home alone, her father makes sure she locks all of the windows and all of the doors so that no baddies can get inside. The little girl nods and does as she is told. When her father returns home from work, the little girl does not open any of the windows or any of the doors. As the father pleads and yells into nightfall, he realizes that he had not specified which baddies he was referring to.

Banana

The little girl shoots her father with a banana. Then eats it, while he bleeds to death, watching her. Like he always had. Like he always would. For her. His handmade murderer. She didn't know she could kill a man so big. He didn't know he could let her. Tossing her peel into the bin like love and death was nothing but the inconvenience of a sticky finger, and father was just a banana.

My mother's house 4/4

The only little house ornament I have left of my mother's is a double-story brick one. It has a green garden, a dog running around to the front door, and a rose bush creeping up the front of the house. The roses are the same colour of a shade of lipstick she had once. I always place my mother's house on the shrine I build for her in every new room I move into; next to a stone I stole from the river we poured her ashes into. In the room I'm in now, it sits against a wall that has a tiny mosquito blood splat on it, under a window where the arms of daylight try to bend the burglar guards into roots.

On memories 2/2

Without its wings, is the flying ant still a flying ant?

Corpse pose

There are these places in the North America called body farms. When you die, you can donate your body to the farm to be studied. Your body is then used to advance forensic science and could aid in solving crimes long after you're dead. The farms are fenced off areas of land with bodies, in various stages of decay, strewn across it. The bodies are often placed in specific locations, in specific positions. Folding out of a trash can from the waist. Propped upright in a dress on the backseat of a car. Mouth down in a swamp. Or laid out under an oak tree to watch it breathe something you once shared.

Safety

At the art gallery, a mother and her daughter walk to the little dark room in the corner. The mother draws the black curtain aside and prompts her daughter to go inside. The little girl squeezes her fingers into a knot, peers into the room, then tiptoes backward. The mother assures her that there is nothing to be afraid of. Again, the little girl squeezes her fingers into a knot, peers into the room, then tiptoes backward. Again, the mother assures her that there is nothing to be afraid of. The little girl turns and runs to the opposite corner of the gallery, buries her face in the wall, creating a little dark room all of her own.

Reconciliation

“Thank you for holding up the ceiling when my rats got too heavy.” She said, brushing the Ratex out of her teeth. “No sweat.” He said, pissing their weight down the toilet bowl.

Our secret

She jumped onto your bed and tried to shove the air back down your throat, down into your lungs, down into your belly, down into your feet – hoping you'd fly. When you didn't, she held you awkwardly, the way people hug street poles when they're drunk, the way men with big hands hold a baby for the first time. She closed her eyes and tried to die with you. The truth is, she did. But only we know that.

In time, starvation can sound poetic

Yesterday, her wrists were as thin as napkin holders. Today, her skin is as thin as Rizla.
Tomorrow, her spine will be as soft as a fishbone. On no particular day, her frame could be carried off by the ants and their whispers.

Forgetting to remember

After mating, the female flying ant loses her wings and her body drops to the ground. She lands, feet first, only if she's lucky. If she doesn't find a new colony in time, she crawls around in circles, until she dies in the casket of the sand. The same sand that once looked so far away from up there in the sky. It seems cruel to be gifted wings you cannot keep.

Vienna sausages

The little girl stares into the river at her mother's ashes. A crab emerges from the mud and begins to eat the grey-white dust. She remembered how she used to thread chunks of pink vienna sausages onto string, lie belly-down on the banks, dip the string into the water and wait. She remembered how the crabs used to tug the string, how she pulled them out, big as hands, the half-eaten vienna sausages tumbling into the reeds. As the crab pinched the burnt crumbs of her mother's bones off the riverbed, everything and nothing about the two scenes made sense.

--END OF PART A--

PORTFOLIO

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Robyn Helen Perros

November 2019

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The imaginary friend: Learning curve overview

Through the extensive reading process in this course, I have been challenged by my own perceptions, limits, and judgments of what “good” writing is, or was, or should be. This MA program has re-trained me on how to read. Part of this re-training process has been learning to see the multiple layers of meaning and feeling that exist beyond the words. In order to recognize those layers, I have had to grow a whole new set of eyes, a whole new set of ears, a whole new body that now sits beside me whenever I read. Above everything this course has taught me, learning how to befriend this new reading companion has been the greatest lesson.

I came into this MA program wanting to create a multimedia body of work for my thesis comprised of written work, photography, and video. Something that could live in both the physical and digital space. I would say that my learning curve began with obsessively challenging the notions of the book; a fascination with where and how writing could live outside of it. But as the year progressed, and the more texts I was exposed to, I began to realize that the possibilities within text and within the book form itself, are infinite, and that in order to disrupt surfaces, they have to first be still.

I think there are three key texts that sparked the three major phases of my learning curve: *The Chronology of Water* by Lidia Yuknavitch, *Palm of the Hand Stories* by Yasunari Kawabata, and *The Book of Embraces* by Eduardo Galeano. *The Chronology of Water* by Lidia Yuknavitch sparked a deeper interrogation into writing the body and how the writing form can reflect bodily experiences. *Palm of the Hand Stories* by Yasunari Kawabata was a key text in challenging my perceptions of meaning. Before this course, I hadn't realized that I had developed a tendency in my writing to conclude and make sense of things for the reader. Kawabata's writing showed me the expansiveness of minimalism and the limitlessness of reading when writing is allowed to wander. Reading Kawabata's work, I had to train myself to see that writing can still mean something by meaning nothing; that stories can simply *be* and that we can trust the reader to make something from this nothing. *The Book of Embraces* by Eduardo Galeano was a key text in showing me how to compile the personal and political, inner and outer-world fragments into a structure and to trust that the fragments that emerged in my own thesis writing could link – if not through meaning, then at least through feeling.

I have drawn from a wide range of mediums in my research this year; books, films, photography, digital media, street art. All of which have contributed to the overall feeling, form, content, and devices presented in my MACW thesis manuscript. While visuals add a component to storytelling that text cannot, this course has developed my trust in the imagination. In a sense, my learning curve came full circle; rebelling against my own initial desire for visuals and text to live together. My thesis today, is comprised of fragments, snapshots, short scenes, puddles, that oscillate between the past, present and future – trusting the mind's eye – the imaginary friend who sits beside us as we learn to see through words.

A guide to reading this portfolio

This portfolio is comprised of a compilation of my Reflective Research Journals written over the course of the year. Each entry has its own unique title that encompasses the dominant learning curve, or key takeaway, of that week or of that text. I have presented the journals in the original form and voice in which they were first written and maintained them in their original chronology. Although these Reflective Research Journals have been edited down to half their original length for brevity, I chose to keep them as close to their “original” form as possible. I believe that reading them in this way demonstrates the learning curve my work has taken, more organically. In this way, the reader is able to see the progression of questioning, discoveries, and steps that have led to and inspired the construction of my thesis manuscript in its present state.

Alongside my Reflective Research Journals, I have maintained an image journal of my own photographs. These photographs have been taken with a disposable camera and depict inanimate objects that provide an alternative expression and form to the complexities of research navigation. At the beginning of each journal entry in this portfolio, you will see an image that has further contributed to my own parallel comprehension of the theme discussed in that particular entry.

In addition to the compilation of my Reflective Research Journals, this portfolio also contains my Poetics Essay titled, “Why I want to see more women writers fail.” Drawing on over thirty texts looked at for our Reading Seminar held in April 2019, this essay explores the relationship between experimentation, failure, and the woman writer’s body.

Following this essay, are two of my book reviews titled, “Why we need more stories that mean nothing: A review of *Palm of The Hand Stories* by Yasunari Kawabata,” and “A cab ride with Osama Alomar: A review of *The Teeth of the Comb & Other Stories* by Osama Alomar.” The first book review is an in-depth look at one of the key influential texts in my thesis and how the concept of “Nothingness” has changed my perceptions on writing and reading in the digital world. The second book review is an experimental-fiction book review exploring the transportive experience of reading through another one of my key texts.

Lastly, this portfolio concludes with my Writing & Reading in Community Reports, titled “Using free writing as a tool to cultivate a daily journal-writing practice,” and “The relationship between poetry and environment,” respectively. The first report documents the experience of conducting a local free-writing workshop with the all-women staff members of Van Schaik’s bookstore in Makhanda. The second report documents a public reading of my own work which took place on the street in Umbilo, Durban KwaZulu-Natal, as part of an all-women’s outdoor mural painting event held in my old neighbourhood – a place that has inspired much of the writing in Part A of this thesis.

The storytelling machine



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 02 | 11-17 February 2019

Key Resources: “The Politics and Poetics of Punctuation” seminar by Stacy Hardy, *Head on Fire* by Lesego Rampolokeng

It’s often small things that can be great acts of defiance. Leaving that tiny corner of your school shirt untucked. Only doing half the dishes. Not answering that phone call. Punctuation is kind of like that. A seemingly small thing that can say a lot of big things. Something that is used to maintain order but when disrupted can be used to create disorder. This week’s seminar, ‘The Power and Poetics of Punctuation’ by Stacy Hardy showed me that.

I suppose punctuation is kind of like the body language of text. All those unspoken things that say more than the words themselves. The breath, the angle of the head, the frown between the eyes, the fingers tapping on the table. Like repetitive body language comes to be normalized, punctuation comes to be normalized too. Habits. It’s freeing when someone shows us these habits in a new light. When we get to break them down, dissect them, play with them. When the overlooked, every day, mundane things we do, become interesting again.

I used this week's assignment to experiment with rhythm and pace through my own pieces, "How to catch a flying-ant" and "flat lyf." It was freeing not to feel restricted by punctuation and I noticed how much power it has when we use it as a tool, as opposed to a rule. I am seeing now that in order to dismantle my own writing, my own thinking, I must start by looking at the little things first and pick them apart, one by one, ticks off a back.

A writer who is not afraid to break the rules is Lesego Rampolokeng. In reading his book *Head on Fire* this week, he nearly blew me up, the genius! A line that struck me from his piece titled "Quotes of a Thick Skin" was: "The body's a carry bag for a million hells." This related to my interest in the memory-body and the written work I presented this week. I hung onto this line by Rampolokeng, feeling like I need to write my own hells with less control and inhibition, like he does. I appreciate Rampolokeng's crudeness, his vulgarity, his lack of filter, how his sickness makes me sick, yet at the same time makes me feel strangely normal. Reading his work is like one great purging. I noticed his frantic variations of pace, how he uses slashes, CAPS, ellipsis so unreservedly, so wildly. I felt my own thoughts running at the same pace alongside his, panting, dry throat, stitch in the ribs. He is fast, chaotic, it's difficult to keep up with his thoughts, and it's terrifying jumping into his dark holes. Jumanji. Close the book!

Rampolokeng's writing in *Head on Fire* made me question my own pretentiousness, as well as the crossover between poetry and prose and where my own work fits in. When I came across Rampolokeng's piece titled, "Talking Prose," I thought I'd find an answer. But it was naïve, rude of me perhaps, to expect anything more from Rampolokeng but a confrontation of my own self. "It's the age of the automatic storyteller machine..." writes Rampolokeng in the first line of this piece. I am that machine. And punctuation, I think, is a good start to breaking that machine a part; piece by piece, sentence by sentence, thought by thought, feeling by feeling, lie by lie.

The plot



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 03 | 18-24 February 2019

Key Resources: *Sanatorium Under The Hourglass* by Bruno Schulz, *A Killing in The Sun* by Dilman Dila, “Working with and Against Narrative” seminar by Paul Mason

It’s difficult to know where you are in your own journey. Sometimes you think you’re near the end, then realize you’re back in the beginning, then actually, oh no wait, you never even got off the couch and set foot out the door.

For last week’s seminar assignment in “The Politics and Poetics of Punctuation” by Stacy Hardy, I experimented with a clear memory from my own past. In this week’s seminar, “Working with and Against Narrative” by Paul Mason, I wanted to try and take memories from my own past and transplant them into a fictitious imagined future. I was curious to see how they breathed there, if at all.

A key takeaway for me from this assignment was the value of mapping something out from beginning to end in your head, before you start writing. Figuring out where you want a story to go, before you go for it. This was a challenge for me, as I often use words as a way to *get to*

what I want to say. Working within the confines of narrative, I think may help me to reach more clarity and cohesion when I need it.

In *Sanatorium Under The Hourglass* by Bruno Schulz we read this week, I saw what is possible in terms of bending the 'rules' of genre and narrative, and intertwining real and imagined worlds. I was able to see how one can redraw the boundaries between fact and imagination, and how the rationality of the adult mind can be inter-woven with childhood fears. This story was like entering a dream, an abandoned building, tubing down the river of your own brain and I would like to incorporate similar elements into my own thesis when the time comes.

In addition to the more "Schulzian" readings this week, I inhaled a collection of short stories by Ugandan author Dilman Dila, titled *A Killing in The Sun*. *A Killing in The Sun* is a collection of speculative fiction set mostly in a futuristic Africa, where technology has transformed everyday life, identity is obscured, and dark forces rule. I was looking for more examples of dystopic fantasy set in Africa by African authors to help me with my writing assignment and discovered this book in the Rhodes University library by chance.

As opposed to *Sanatorium Under The Hourglass*, Dila's stories seemed more pure and simplistic in style, and calculated in plot. Shorter sentences, less descriptive, and more easily navigable. Although both books are virtually incomparable, I was able to see two different ways of bending time and blurring the line between perceived 'reality' and fantasy. There are elements of both of these writing styles that I like, and I wonder how to write the liquidity of these lines we inhabit in a grounded way. How to combine the Schulz with the Dila. I want readers of my work to imagine, and to be absorbed, infinitely. But I don't want to lose anyone in words, myself included. Readers must stay with me, I must stay with them. Bubblegum on the concrete, nipple on a breast.

What is a book? Questioning the limits of form



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 04 | 03 March 2019

Key Resources: *Once Human Stories* by Steve Tomasula

I have had a question sitting with me for a while and have been concerned I wasn't going to find what I was looking for. The question being: Who are the writers experimenting with new forms of the novel? Is there a form that has not been created yet? Then Paul Wessels opened the door and introduced me to Steve Tomasula. Hi Steve.

I began by researching Tomasula and discovered the full transcript of an online interview he did with Illya Szilak for *The New Yorker*. Through this in-depth interview I was inspired to think more about the book as a form beyond the traditional format of a rectangle block of dead trees. "To me, the medium is inseparable from the message, or at least an equally interesting part of the message," says Tomasula. In many ways, I agree. I love that a traditional book gives me a sense of a unified world. A book invites focus, clarity, wholeness. Can this be achieved in a multimedia body of work? Does multimedia distract, or does it make an attempt to unify fragments and how can we utilize digital tools to do this effectively in a space that is already

fragmented and competing for attention? These are questions that Tomasula's work (namely his digital book titled *TOC*) evoked in me and I am wanting to explore further in my research.

In reading Tomasula's (physical) book titled *Once Human Stories*, I was exposed to the possibilities *within* the book form in terms of structure, layout and style. He completely destroys this idea of uniformity and consistency in this book. A designer's worst nightmare, or wet dream, depending. Each story in this book has its own font, its own formatting, its own unique headline design, etc. Some stories have images, some don't. He appears to treat every piece in his book as its own unique entity entirely, which made me think a lot about my own work and question my irksome quest for uniformity.

I have mostly strived to find some sort of common thread, common form, common style in my writing and of course am still striving for that. I still love something about having a distinct style and voice, but Tomasula demonstrated that maybe you don't have to have one. Maybe my style/voice can still be sincere even if it has an inability to conform to a particular form. He encouraged me to stop striving so much for a distinct style/voice. Maybe we don't have to pick just one after all?

Where is the body in the book?



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 05 | 10 March 2019

Key Resources: *Forms at War* Edited by R.M. Berry, *Theories on Forgetting* by Lance Olsen, Lance Olsen's talk at Rhodes University 2013 (DVD), *Scripted* by Lidia Yuknavitch,

This week I got stuck in my head and needed to climb back into my body. It's a strange feeling that separateness; when your eyes haven't moved from a little white pool, when your knees are stiff, and your feet go numb from sitting in one place, when you forget you have blood and bones and bacteria living inside you. Where does your body go when you're in a book?

"Words are not just important for what they are but for how they are" – Lance Olsen (2013, Rhodes University Lecture).

Olsen spoke of the disruptions of time in the novel and how the novel, traditionally, has privileged one approach to 'reality' over another. Since everyone lives in their own unique reality, this lecture excited me as it showed me how many others have experimented with text and form – their own interpretations of 'reality.' This has reassured me in my own

explorations/questions/obsessions regarding form. “When one disrupts the form, one is making a political and existential choice,” Olsen (2013).

When works are experimental, there is a fine line between alienating, and piquing the curiosity, of the reader. In the epidemic of short attention spans, how can we engage and where can we engage readers most effectively? This has got me thinking a lot about how to implement literature into the daily routines and mundanities of life. How can we get literature into the public space to spark or support a culture of reading (beyond advertising)? How do we as writers get our words onto bus stops, into taxi ranks, on the roofs of buses, on the back of toilet stalls, on park benches, on pavements?

Street art and performance art are a big part of my expression. However, I never utilized text heavily in my previous work and am currently exploring ways in which I can do that – whether this ends up connecting to my thesis or not. Graffiti for example, communicates through text and there is so much to be learnt from this written form, no matter your feeling toward it. How can we use text simply, effectively, and publicly, as the late artist/poet Jean-Michel Basquiat (SAMO) did when he started out his career writing texts on walls in lower Manhattan? What alternative models exist out there for cultivating a reading culture? Perhaps the book form is much like the white cube of the gallery. Necessary, of course, but also necessary to break free from.

How do writers create a physical experience for readers through the act of reading? When reading Olsen’s book *Theories on Forgetting* this week, for example, I was physically having to turn the book around, upside down, go backward, go forward, squint, bang my elbows on the desk. Reading this book was like learning to drive a car again. An unmooring. A frustration. A challenge. A physical force out of comfortable couch-potatoe patterns. These subtle disturbances/surprises in life are reminders of my own laziness as a reader/human-being and moments like these are some of my most valued experiences. Ones I would like to incorporate into my thesis somehow.

I liked Olsen’s representation of memory as non-linear fragments in *Theories on Forgetting*. I am realizing that memory is a strong theme in my own work and it too is non-linear; weaving through multiple histories, words, images, and the physical body as it moves through spaces. Olsen has given me many ideas about the layers of memory and how to represent these layers in text. In *Theories on Forgetting* he represents these layers through stories told by multiple viewpoints – snippets of dialogue, excerpts of a manuscript, unrefined journal entries, images, scribbles, diagrams etc. Although I related to the idea of this fragmentation, I simultaneously felt alienated by it. Which was interesting. Alienation seems a high price to pay for experimentation. How can I find a balance between experimentation and alienation in my own work? Who do we include and who do we exclude when we experiment?

Fragmentation and the amalgamation of voices



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 06 | 17 March 2019

Key Resources: *Mother Departs* by Tadeusz Rozewicz

Mother Departs by Tadeusz Rozewicz is a homage to a mother, a book about death, family and memory. I wonder what made the author make this intimate history so public? How did he feel after he did this? Liberated? Dead inside? I am curious about this process and what it does for writers/creators. There is a lot of talk around the catharsis of writing. But what are the pitfalls of expressing so intimately?

Rozewicz' prose piece in *Mother Departs* titled "A Poet's Promise", moved me for its simplicity and unglorified honesty. No fancy metaphors, no convoluted sentences. The way this piece moved me was unexpected – like stubbing your toe on the way to the toilet. I am noticing that this brevity in writing is appealing to me more and more.

"A Poet's Promise" contrasted with Rozewicz' piece titled "Gliwice Diary", which was a much longer, denser and more uninhibited piece that took the form of a diary entry. I am interested in experimenting with the format of the diary entry. But even though I do keep my own

handwritten journal, I feel that this form is one that is dying. Where are people, most people, keeping their journal entries today? Instagram, Facebook statuses, their browser histories? I have been documenting my own Google searches for the past few months, for example, and finding that they paint a fascinating portrait. Is this poetry? How can it be turned into poetry? Rosewicz' diary entry inspired me to think further about this form and what it means today.

I was also interested in the structure of *Mother Departs*; in all the different elements that brought it together. The diary entries, the stories of the mother, the poems, the family photographs, the simplicity of the captions, the mysterious picture of a postcard from Erbalunga. I am intrigued by the way this book assembles voices without much narration.

Mother Departs gave me a few ideas for documenting life and memory in a fragmented amalgamation of voices, but in the digital age, now, today. For example, the international family. I have one. It is the reality of so many people today. I think there needs to more documentation of these lives we live – between continents, between digital platforms, between text, between speech, between good signals on the couch and running up mountains to hear two minutes of your sister's voice. How can I bring this reality into my own work, poetically, with the honesty and care that I believe Rosewicz approached the telling of his own history?

Writing inside and outside of the body



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 07 | 24 March 2019

Key Resources: *The Chronology of Water* by Lidia Yuknavitch, *What Purpose Did You Serve in My Life?* by Marie Calloway

At first, I found Lidia Yuknavitch's writing in *The Chronology of Water*, awkward. As awkward as I imagine her to be outside of words and swimming pools. Sometimes her sentences jar. Sometimes her sentences are just one word. Sometimes her analogies and references don't seem to fit into her scenes, sounding dumb and trivial. But the more I read, the more I began to see that her writing is carried by the biggest wave of depth that perhaps only simplicity can reveal. I grew to love her awkwardness. I'm not used to seeing awkward women in literature.

"Ripped from vagina to rectum." Those are Yuknavitch's own words and sum up how her explicit sex scenes made me feel. She talks about sex and sexuality in a way that I feel women today don't talk about enough. Often times, vulgarity is used as a device for shock value but for her, it seems different, more authentic. The question of vulgarity is one I am often tormented by. I often struggle to find a balance between crude and honest – I usually get it wrong. Yuknavitch walks this line quite expertly.

For me, her experimentation with form – the long windy violent crushing love sex hate battles drunk dying between blood and sheets and flesh with no punctuation none not a damn comma or a fullstop to relieve you anywhere for pagesandpagesandpagesandpages until you're as exhausted as an orgy in love and in hate with words – is exhilarating and bodily. Yuknavitch shouts from the page but the difference with her is that she shouts not for you to hear her, but for you to hear yourself.

Somewhere in the pool of Yuknavitch, I swam through Marie Calloway's *What Purpose Did You Serve in My Life*. Calloway's words floated like a dark unidentified shadow in the deep-end of the pool. I am so worried about Marie Calloway, the drowning upside down bee, the creepy-crawly eating at the algae of society. How is it okay for the world to exploit and degrade women but when a woman exploits and degrades herself, then it's not okay?

There are so many ways to write the body and I think Calloway writes what most people don't want to experience, or what most people don't admit they do want to experience. In this book, there is no rising above, there is no transcendence, just shattered brokenness. Like Calloway, I don't want my characters to always be heroes.

She is shocking, astoundingly attentive to detail, and incredibly smart in the way she weaves dialogue and social media, the internet and our attention-seeking lives into the underbelly of a world most are too afraid to go into. The writing is not poetic but something I thought that was unique about her writing was how she constantly played on a seesaw between outer experience and inner dialogue. The consistent call and response we experience, but few I've read seem to write so sharply.

Yuknavitch does this too but it in a more controlled way, I felt. Calloway doesn't hold back her insecurity and her words sound like the cumulative anxiety of our generation heaving back into the many bodies we wrestle with. But somehow, like with Lesego Rampolokeng's writing, her devastating turmoil puts me strangely at ease.

Calloway has got me interested in looking more at the interplay between the selves we present and the selves we withhold from others and how this existing complexity is challenged by our internet bodies – the ones we are raising, growing, feeding, grooming alongside us all the time. How can I juxtapose and compile these many traumatized bodies together in my thesis?

The Discovery of Feeling



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 09 | 21 April 2019

Key Resources: *The 7 Autopsies of Nora Hanneman* by Courtney E. Morgan,
The Collected Stories of Lidia Davis by Lidia Davis

The 7 Autopsies of Nora Hanneman by Courtney E. Morgan reads as if it were spoken by the voice of a ghost – warbling the senses, and sense of time, and sense of ‘reality’ into a slow, haunting psycho-sexual dystopia. But it is the poetic devices of the story that seem to link the narrative together and it was this that kept me reading. It is this that kept me feeling connected to a narrative I could not follow.

The discomfort of this book for me came not from the content of the book, but from a consistent yearning for something to hold onto, that need for grounding, to make some cognitive sense. Even though I knew/know this is a fickle pursuit, it was there, tugging at my elbows, the lost child. Eventually, I had to accept that *The 7 Autopsies of Nora Hanneman* might not make sense, and that it might make only feeling.

Nothing anchored this book; not the character, not the plot, not the theme, not the form, not the genre. But soon enough this became okay and the anchor became the way the book consistently floated. Reflecting the way we/I glide – through memory, through sensation, through experience, through space, through the undercurrents of the inarticulate feelings that run parallel to sense. It was in this instability that I eventually found stability.

I liked the way the narratives moved alongside each other, as narratives do “naturally” in “real” life, but that is often under-expressed in the literature forms I have been exposed to for the most part of my life. I am interested in reflecting these parallel and fragmented dialogues in my own writing forms. What I also found interesting about this book was the way I read it. I found myself unbound to the book. Leaving the book for a day or two or five, flipping non-linearly through the chapters, moving back and forth through the pages. Staying “glued to the page” is an experience I have admittedly always looked for in a book, and one I have always understood as being a common defining feature of a “good” book. Books like *The 7 Autopsies of Nora Hanneman* had me questioning the value of keeping a reader “glued to the page.” Is moving in and out of stories and perspectives, over time, more representative of our lives today?

In between the chills of *The 7 Autopsies of Nora Hanneman*, I have been reading *The Collected Stories of Lidia Davis*. This book has been a welcome injection of humour to the emotional heaviness of the books I’ve been reading of late. What I am appreciating about Davis’ work the most is her brevity and the obscure, mundane topics she is able to transform into philosophical prose-poetry.

She has an unwavering gaze on her thought processes, is highly observant, and articulates her emotions with a certain distance that I find sobering. When I read her stories it’s as if I’m hearing a photographer analyze one of their own pictures. I believe my own writing could benefit from a more distanced approach to emotion at times. Davis’ work is giving me a unique appreciation for restraint and stillness. Not a restraint in terms of subject matter, but a restraint in feeling.

The short sentence



Reflective Journal Entry 10 | 28 April 2019

Key Resources: *Hydroplane* by Susan Steinberg

Hydroplane by Susan Steinberg, constantly moved me into different rooms of a new house. And just as I'd started to unpack in the room with the nice view, it moved me again to the room overlooking a pile of bricks. Then to the dark spidery one under the stairs. Then to the one with the cold concrete floors and someone else's hair on the pillow. Then back to the room with the nice view, somewhat unsettled. Short-story? Prose? Prose-poetry? Poetry? Creative non-fiction? I'm not sure I even know what those mean anymore, and I don't think this book will help anyone looking to find out.

At times, Steinberg admittedly had me lost to the point of no return. The form in which she presented a lot of the short pieces in the book was initially exciting but became somewhat repetitive to the point of blurriness. Like when you're a kid and drinking dishwashing liquid seems fun until it's not. Either way, I did find some sense of the grounding I was looking for in a few places: familiar characters and certain objects she kept referring to throughout the book, for example: her mom, her dad, her cars, the girls in her small town. It is this repetition and

referral to the same objects and people in different scenes that I could apply to my own writing to assist in grounding.

I am discovering more and more just how much I like short sentences. How they seem to unglorify things. How they help me keep up. How they match the speed of my pulse and ground me at the same time. Back to the bit about the small town, that was another thing, how Steinberg writes small towns. I connected with this, connected it to my own small town. The way she hones-in on the simple things that people do, wear, say, think, in small towns. Simple things that in every small town, in every part of the world, have some trace of familiarity. Steinberg inspired me to write more from that place. I think that might just be the place where small sentences originate and never leave.

Writing numb



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 11 | 5 May 2019

Key Resources: *Taipei* by Tao Lin, *The YOLO Pages* by Boosthouse, *A Bestiary* by Lily Hoang

So much is defined by the undefined tension between expression and technology. In his book, titled *Taipei*, I felt that the author, Tao Lin, expressed this tension sharply through numbness. The self-conscious confusion of Generation Y that I believe is perpetuated by digital media and technology is something so brilliantly captured in this book.

Taipei engulfed me in the mundanity of a rhythm that initially, I thought I would never get into. The book feels numb with barely any sensory activation. This I found interesting since activating the senses is something that is largely so revered and encouraged in “creative writing.” What I found even more interesting was that despite my senses being deactivated, I was still captivated by the story.

The way Lin writes transition in *Taipei* is synonymous with the way I am trying to write the body after a death or trauma. This numb, deadpan, monotone, meaningless self-consciousness. I feel I could benefit so much by seeing how other writers write “numb.”

In *Taipei* I noticed how Lin makes constant reference to digital technology in his metaphors and images. This was something I have been looking for and appreciated finding in this text. So often, metaphors and images reflect the “natural” world. Animals and plants and water and blood and tree bark, etc. I like that Lin pretty much avoided that completely. It was a fresh perspective, one that I have not seen many writers do (aside from in *The YOLO Pages* and Lily Hoang in *A Bestiary*, occasionally) and an interesting device he used to draw attention to the realities of his characters and their everyday lives. This has made me more aware of the references I am making in my own work. Do they reflect the digital and the current times I am so embedded in?

Writing loneliness and lightness



Reflective Journal Entry 12 | 12 May 2019

Key Resources: *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* by Claudia Rankine, *Because the Night* by Stacy Hardy with images by Mario Pischetta

I am noticing how various experimental authors or experimental bodies of work can and have been used to explore and express loneliness, confusion, anxiety, and trauma. I am finding myself more and more drawn to these particular emotions in text and finding forms that speak to them.

This week I read *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* by Claudia Rankine. It is a fragmented narrative with big wide gaps. These open spaces on the page forced me to contemplate the text; let the words seep in before fluttering on to the next thing. A physical way to slow down the reader. This book made me more aware of space on the page and where and how to allow for breath and digestion.

I've never seen a book that weaves news media and research data with poetic personal narrative. For example, Rankine dedicates two pages to listing the pharmaceutical companies

that were against former South African President Thabo Mbeki disseminating ARV's to the South African public. It was interesting for me to see a writer do this – balance her voice with the voice similar to that of a documentarian or journalist.

I thought this contrast between highly emotive personal stories and detached, often one-dimensional, factual information in the book was an interesting relationship she explored. One that often made me uncomfortable because the facts seemed to add more weight to the poetry somehow. I think that by placing these two modes of storytelling in one space highlighted her overall comment on detachment/numbness more effectively.

In terms of my own writing, I think there may certainly be a similar undercurrent of discomfort to Rankine's that I too am exploring. I believe I could benefit from producing more detached pieces of writing to counterbalance the highly emotive, bodily writing I often lean towards. Rankine has shown me one way to potentially articulate this tension of being.

I noticed Rankine maintained a common thread through this book as well, which was the constant questioning of her own mortality. "Am I dead?" She asks, page after page after page. It is this repetition that stuck with me, a jingle on a commercial. This made me wonder what devices of repetition could benefit my own writing and encouraged me to look at what I am already repeating. What could thread my own writing?

One antidote to the loneliness of Rankine's book was reading *Because the Night* by Stacy Hardy with images by Mario Pischetta. This for me was an extremely relatable book and an inspiration for the type of short-stories I would like to be producing. The writing in *Because the Night* is alive, invigorating, humorous, home. What stood out to me was the balance in this writing. The balance between humour and sadness, horror and beauty, lightness and depth. It is this balance I am often working toward in my own prose and it is this balance that I think Hardy strikes so brilliantly in her stories.

In some of the stories depicted in *Because The Night*, such as "Squirelling," as well as Hardy's separate short-story titled, "Involution," I am seeing how one can play intelligently and provocatively with metaphor and surrealism, especially when it comes to writing the body. This is a fantasy-fiction-surreal-realism device I have never fully explored in my own writing and through these texts feel inspired to explore with my interest in bodies.

Writing Darknesses



Reflective Journal Entry 13 | 19 May 2019

Key Resources: *The End of Free Love* by Susan Steinberg, *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* by Tina May Hall, *The Evolutionary Evolution* by Lily Hoang

I have been reading more experimental fragmented prose-poetry this week. *The End of Free Love* by Susan Steinberg, *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* by Tina May Hall, and *The Evolutionary Evolution* by Lily Hoang. These texts have made me realize that I am not studying darkness enough and how to write it.

The Physics of Imaginary Objects by Tina May Hall scraped my bones out. Mainly for the poetic bend, the witches, the surrealism, the darkness she builds that collects lightly, like dust on your skin. Until it's as heavy as sleep. In her chapter titled "Skinny Girls' Constitution and Bylaws," I was flawed by her obscure poetry. The way she distorts the body and somehow expresses the unspoken bonds between girls and women. I have not read any writers that do this the way she does. In a way that is mystical yet grounded, natural yet surreal, without trying to make punchlines.

"We will know each other by the way our watches slip from our wrists, the bruises on our knees, our winged shoulder blades tenting silk dresses" (p. 17).

"When we run our knees are castanets" (p. 19).

"When we lift our arms to the moon, there is a sound like branches scraping" (p. 20).

"We pass each other notes in the hollows of our collarbones" (p. 22).

It is this simple yet intriguing imagery I am inspired by and am working towards in my own writing. What I like is that Hall somehow creates this imagery in a way that doesn't feel forced. This is a great lesson for me in my own writing, as I often push too hard to make meaning, try too hard to be impressive. But how to get to that place of poetic purity? Perhaps through a lot of impurity first?

Similarly, to a lot of Lidia Davis' short stories, I noticed that Hall hones-in on domesticity in this book. She takes seemingly simple every day events experienced in the home and explores their depth and their darkness. Inviting the reader into a 'safe' space, where nothing, as it turns out is safe at all. I love how she does this; twists the mundane into something surreal, existential even at times. I would like to see how I could weave mundane narratives into my own writing, especially from a more youthful, South African perspective.

Another notable thing from the *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* was found in the chapter "This is a Factory in Sierra Vista Where Jesus is Resurrected Every Hour in Hot Plastic and The Stench of Chicken" (p. 86). I really appreciate Hall's chapter titles and have had so much fun thus far, in my own writing, experimenting with titles. I think that titles are a fine art and I definitely want to pay attention to titles in my own thesis.

Another experimental author who weaves prose-poetry is Susan Steinberg. I read *Hydroplane* a few weeks back and this week decided to try her book *The End of Free Love*. She confused me, again. Lost me, again. Still, I love her, again, for her schizophrenia. Steinberg's darkness in *The End of Free Love* is so very different to Hall's darkness in *The Physics of Imaginary Objects*. It is not a supernatural, witch-in-a-log-cabin-eating-bone-broth-with-her-elbows type of darkness. It is a small-town chewing-your-own-arm-off-to-get-out-of-the-house type of darkness. I relate both types of these darkneses, and think I'd like to find a balance between the two, somehow, in my own writing.

"Keep two knives flat under your mattress. A big sharp one for peeling off the stars. A thin pointy one for stealing the car" (Steinberg, p. 66).

I was so intrigued by Lily Hoang's *A Bestiary* that I wanted to try some of her other works. I went through her books at the library and discovered *The Evolutionary Evolution*. I have never experienced a book like this before. One that is so masterful yet so unattainable to me (in this life perhaps.) What I am growing more and more to like though, is the use of simple sentences

and micro-chapters, as Hoang uses in this book. I find these short chapters addictive and like how they can stand alone as pieces, but also weave into a far greater narrative.

Twisting Normal's arm



Excerpt from Reflective Journal Entry 14 | 26 May 2019

Key Resources: *Her Body & Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado

In *Her Body & Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado I found something magical. What I think I liked the most about this book was how most of the stories initially appeared “real.” Set in familiar spaces, with familiar characters; a husband and a wife, two lovers, a mall. But as the stories progress, something strange always comes into play. Something slightly off. Something that she makes appear so normal, by talking about it as if it is an already accepted object or situation in the characters’ lives. For example, the green ribbon around the wife’s neck in “The Husband’s Stitch.” Or the fading women’s bodies living inside dresses in “Real Women Have Bodies.” Or the mysterious plague in “Inventory.” None of it seems unbelievable because she builds from normality.

In my last two written assignments, I have attempted to play with small speculative-fiction elements by incorporating them into ‘real’ stories. These have been experiments, ones I was nervous about, having never written much fiction at all. But I have realized how much I enjoy

this. How much freedom it gave me to play, invent, imagine, explore. It is interesting how writing magical realism can be so politically charged, and I am coming to appreciate the power of this more and more.

What I liked was how all the stories in her book were linked to the experiences of women's bodies, written from the voice of women who have experienced some form of loss. Loss of self, loss of self-worth, loss of love, loss of ownership over their own skin. Often, she explored this theme through sex and through references to the medical world. Loss and the "accepted violence" of the western medical world, appears to be recurring themes in my own writing. How to write it without being self-loathing, victimizing, too scientific? I think Machado's way is definitively an excellent example.

Mourning the ordinary



Reflective Journal Entry 15 | 06 June 2019

Key Resources: *A Fallen Angel* by Kate Zambreno

A Fallen Angel by Kate Zambreno takes “every day,” archetypal western characters and makes them disturbing and bizarre. The story follows three characters, each with their own segregated chapters, a triptych of sorts. The story captures the everyday life of a mainstream, middle-class, suburban family through the characters “Mommy” and “Maggie”, as well as a street prophet (fallen angel) named “Malachi.” Geographical context: somewhere in conservative American suburbia. But certainly, relatable to any western, conservative, middle-class suburban context I imagine (UK, South Africa, Australia etc.)

A Fallen Angel fell into several themes I have been exploring lately. That of experimental fiction, death, and taking the ordinary and bending its arm backwards. Zambreno doesn’t do this through emotive imagery, or intellectualization, or severe fragmentation, but rather through the simplification of the narrator’s voices into a repetitive, almost child-like stream-of-consciousness. The type of narration you might hear on a late-night lottery channel, or a B-

grade Verimark advert. A voice that I imagine is far, far removed from the author herself. How did she get there?

A narrative voice is one I have for some reason largely avoided in my own writing. Perhaps because I find it often creates a barrier between writer and reader. But I am seeing more and more how the narrative voice can be used to further disturb and unsettle the reader when it is used so deliberately, as it is in *A Fallen Angel*. This is something I could definitely afford to experiment with more in my own writing; writing from different perspectives, different voices, different modes of speaking. I am interested in this idea of the triptych as a form too and how it can be used to bring out various voices – taking the same story and narrating it from three different perspectives. A piece that did something vaguely similar was Lidia Yuknavitch's piece titled "Scripted" in the book *Forms at War*.

The form used in *A Fallen Angel* is one that fascinated me too. For one, I never thought I could sit through an entire book of virtually unpunctuated stream-of-consciousness three-fold prose-poetry. I don't know how a writer makes stream-of-consciousness writing so readable, simple and punchy. But Zambreno did.

I imagine how difficult it must have been to remain so unwaveringly clear in this book. How difficult it must have been for her to avoid intellectualizing, creating elaborate imagery, and losing the characters through her own ego or trajectory. It's as if she put herself aside, put language aside, to embody another's voice entirely. A voice that I think many of us try to escape. A voice we all hear but do our best to avoid. Zambreno is a brave magician. One that shows the audience what they don't want to see. I could learn a lot from this as a writer; how to pack myself away.

The Discovery of Nothing



Excerpt of Reflective Journal Entry 17 | 16 June 2019

Key Resources: *Palm of the Hand Stories* by Yasunari Kawabata

Yasunari Kawabata's book *Palm of the Hand Stories* is a collection of short stories (most of them only 2-3 pages long) that he wrote between the 1920s and 1970s. Even though Kawabata wrote from a different time zone, he too focused on the fragments and fractures in society. But it is the way that he holds them that is something I rarely see today. Every line feels like you're touching one of your grandmother's ornaments. Familiar but sacred. An invitation to touch gently, look lightly, remember deeply.

Kawabata's stories reminded me of the pleasure and pain of nothingness. As a reader/human, I am always looking for something that will comfort or discomfort me in a book. Although finding this something gives me a sense of relief, it is often a more meaningful relief when you find nothingness. Perhaps finding nothing, just feels more human. I have noticed that in my writing, I have a tendency to over sensationalize, perhaps due to my Sensory Processing 'Disorder', where most times, small things feel like huge things and spaces and sounds get warped and loud and over-crowded with images and noise and turmoil. Like the page is screaming through

a plastic bag. I must remind myself that I don't always have to express these things in my writing. That I can create a balance using the techniques found in minimalism and that minimalism can be just as powerful too.

Kawabata uses all the senses to tell his stories, but they never seem to overwhelm, they never drive the stories, and for me, this was a refreshing nothingness. As in the work of Lidia Davis and Tao Lin and Anna Kavan, Kawabata's work is another reminder about the power of simplicity. I must experiment more with this, with taking a slightly less emotive stance. Perhaps I could find something there. Perhaps I could find the nothing I'm often looking for there.

I like that Kawabata's stories obsess, subtly, over looking. This book seems to hold an anonymous gaze of someone acutely present, yet strangely distant. A peculiar on-looker. There are always windows, mirrors, glass, cracks through things, in this story collection. I think Kawabata must have also been a supreme voyeur and this disturbing obsession with looking, with reflection and refraction, is something that is still relevant today. Perhaps even more so, with so many more places to look (i.e. digital media/multiple screens/image culture).

In relation to my own work, and interest in imagery and photography, this book and Kawabata's unusual observations, reminds me simply to pay attention to different ways of looking. As one can take a photograph from a hundred different angles – lying on your back, taking your shoes off and standing on a chair, crouching down, hanging out of a building – I must remember that words can be approached in the same way – in a million ways – and I must never be fearful of changing my position.

Kawabata's stories seem to focus on feeling rather than understanding. Although the plots are exceptionally precise, they do not seem to *obsess* over plot. Often his endings are bizarre and arbitrary and do not aim to satisfy the reader. I often find myself in a habit of wanting to please the reader by concluding for them. Like someone pinching the last *slap chip* off your plate. An annoying habit that could be engrained from my experience in journalism, among other things. But this is something I need to let go of. Kawabata's stories show me that sometimes, it's okay to let a story just *be*.

I also like how Kawabata focuses on small moments. I think many young people today have lost this ability. This ability to draw depth and meaning from small, every day, mundane things. It is something I too am re-learning. Distraction keeps us floating on the surface of our own lives, boatmans in a pool. This too is a struggle for me and this ability to focus on the "small" is something I could benefit from drawing on in my own work in terms of topics and themes. A reminder to not overlook the everyday, the mundane, the rituals, the habits, the repetitions – as this is where much truth, subsequently lies.

Non-conclusions



Excerpt of Reflective Journal Entry 18 | 23 June 2019

Key Resources: *Green Girl* by Kate Zambreno

It's often difficult to know which voice in your head to listen to. The Her, the I, the We. To know whether to write from the inside out, or to write from the outside in. This week, through Stacy Hardy's seminar on Personal Narrative, I have been experimenting more with various voices and writing non-linear "puddles." Through this experience, coupled with the reading of *Green Girl* by Kate Zambreno, I am finding some more voices to listen to.

I like how Zambreno balances the inner and the outer worlds of her main character, Ruth. Often times, I can get too caught up in one or the other in my own writing. I really appreciate authors who take me in and out of the human mind, in a continuous (or erratic) flux. I loved how this book twisted the illusion of "pretty" things. How she made a girl applying make-up seem like the most tortuous thing you could ever witness. How she made selling perfume in a department store seem as dirty as licking the tongue of a rat.

I see a similar sad young white girl narrative in "Green Girl" resonate in my own narrative. It is this narrative that I have been working hard to find a form that best expresses it. In a way that acknowledges its privilege, its triviality, and is critical of it, but without being self-loathing or self-indulgent or white-washy. I am seeing more and more how to use the third-person, and a narrator's voice, to help distance myself from stories, from the white lens just a little, and capture the sense of loneliness and dissociation that I am interested in threading through my own work. Both Zambreno's "Green Girl" and "A Fallen Angel," have shown me devices to articulate the sad young white girl narrative, without explicitness, without heroism.

I like that there is no triumphant heroism, no satisfying conclusion, in this book. Perhaps conclusions are myths anyway and some characters, some people, just don't ever make it out of themselves. Some just hang in time and space. And if the character cannot truly satisfy or solidify themselves, then why should the reader be truly satisfied or solidified? I found a similar sense of nothingness in "Green Girl," that I found in many of Yasunari Kawabata's short stories in "Palm of the Hand Stories." I am finding these non-conclusions to stories more and more appealing because what reader wants an ending before they themselves have ended?

Putting the fragment into place



Excerpt of Reflective Journal Entry 19 | 17 July 2019

Key Resources: *Days and Nights in Love and War* by Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces* by Eduardo Galeano

I am at a point in my thesis writing where I have a collection of more intimate, personal fragments and am working on stretching out into broader, socio-political fragments. The next step will be to merge the personal and political, inside and outside fragments, into some sort of meaning or at least some sort of feeling.

I found a great example of how to balance these worlds in the work of Eduardo Galeano – Uruguayan writer, artist, and political activist. I recently devoured two of his books, *Days and Nights in Love and War* and *The Book of Embraces*. These books have been the first to inspire a possibility for a structure of the fragmented narrative I’m currently working on for my thesis.

In *The Book of Embraces*, Galeano has re-occurring titles throughout the book. Divided into headings such as the "Origin of the World," "Prophecies," "Forgetting," "The Night," "Fear," "Television," "Consumer Civilization" and "The Celebration of Contradictions," etc. He uses

these titles to categorize seemingly unrelated autobiographical vignettes, prose-poems, philosophical musings, reportage, and what appear to be short children's folk stories. I have included a few of these vignettes that I liked below – mainly for the way they show small images that say big things.

FORGETTING/1

I am reading a novel by Louise Erdrich.

At one point, a great grandfather meets his great grandson. The great grandfather is completely senile (his thoughts are "the color of water") and displays the same beatific smile as his newly born great grandson. The great grandfather is happy because he has lost his memory. His great grandson is happy because he doesn't yet have any memory. This, I imagine, is perfect happiness. I want no part of it. (*Galeano*)

FEAR

One morning they gave us a guinea pig. It came to the house in a cage. At midday, I opened the door of the cage.

I returned home at nightfall and found the guinea pig just as I had left it: inside the cage, huddled against the bars, trembling with the fear of freedom. (*Galeano, p.111*).

TELEVISION/4

I was told this by Rosa Maria Mateo, one of Spain's most popular television entertainers. A woman had written her a letter from some remote village asking her please to tell her the truth: "When I look at you, do you look at me?"

Rosa Maria told me this and said that she didn't know how to respond. (*Galeano, p. 156*)

CONSUMER CIVILIZATION

Sometimes, at the end of the summer when the tourists left Calella, you could hear howls coming from the forest. They were the cries of dogs tethered to the trees.

The tourists used the dogs to relieve their loneliness during their vacation, and then, when the time came to leave, tied

them up deep in the woods to keep them from following. (*Galeano, p. 186*).

THE NIGHT/1.

I can't sleep. There is a woman stuck between my eyelids. I would tell her to get out if I could. But there is a woman stuck in my throat. (*Galeano*).

The way Galeano categorized his fragments in this book is something I'd like to steal for my own thesis. Not the exact title names, of course, but create my own mosaic of fragments that fit into them. In so far, this is probably the book structure that I can see being most applicable to my own writing style which is emerging for my thesis.

The "puddles" Galeano writes in provoked a similar feeling I had when reading Yasunari Kawabata's *Palm of the Hand Stories*. There is something remarkable that happens in these texts when few words make you feel the weight of an invisible world. What I loved about *The Book of Embraces* was how the fragments in the book reinforce one another in unexpected ways. In the same way Claudia Rankine's fragments do in *An American Lyric* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*.

It is the pauses between these fragments in *The Book of Embraces* that allow for reflection, for that weight to sink in. By the end of the book, all of these pauses, seemed to accumulate together for me and create a book of their own. My own book of silences. It is this *feeling* I would like to recreate somehow through my own writing in my thesis.

Privilege and the presence of absence



Excerpt of Reflective Journal Entry 20 | 26 July 2019

Key Resources: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine, *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* edited by Claudia Rankine, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* by Catherine Lupton, *La Jetee* and *Sans Soleil* films by Chris Marker

Stories of 'ordinary' people, 'ordinary' places and the inconsequential details of mundane life seem to be the stories I am most fascinated by. These are the stories that I think I would like to write in my thesis. But at this point, I am trying to figure out the most ethical and sensitive way to do that given my privileged position in society.

I have been exploring more of Claudia Rankine's work. Namely, through her book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. What I liked about this book was how her fragments felt like a collaboration between her own stories and the stories of others. The short (often 3-5 line) stories were shocking, mostly for their sense of 'normalcy;' fluctuating between stories of racism experienced on a trip to the grocery store, to racism blasted all over national television. Told in a matter-of-fact tone, Rankine displays little emotion and description, and this somehow makes the content even more harrowing.

I found this see-saw between ‘big’ stories and ‘little’ stories similar to the way Eduardo Galeano writes in *Days and Nights of Love and War* and *The Book of Embraces*. Although these authors’ style of writing is extremely different, Galeano and Rankine both blend personal memoir with the stories of others and patchwork them into broader socio-political contexts. Is this a device I could use to broach sensitive topics in my own thesis?

For example, in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine constructs a longer-form essay investigating Serena Williams’ career in relation to inequality, racism and the white gaze. For me, this essay lives somewhere between journalism and prose-poetry and created something incredibly memorable. This more confrontational style of writing, one that is grounded in facts, is a writing style I have been questioning. Should/could I be drawing on public figures and political news stories and incorporating them into my own stories more? Could my writing benefit from a more journalistic approach?

In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine tells her stories in a more confrontational ‘You’ voice. This creates a sense of universality and I liked that I, as the reader, was unable to hide behind my own walls. I am not sure I have the confidence, nor do I trust that I have the political clarity, to use the You voice in my own work at this time.

I have received some feedback on my writing saying that it is too personal, that it should remain in a diary. This is something I recognize and find humiliating in many ways and is thus, something I’m practicing moving away from. I have been reading the essays in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* edited by Claudia Rankine, in an attempt to assist me in knowing where I stand, as a white privileged person, when it comes to writing about societal issues, such as inequality and race – namely whiteness. It’s difficult to know when I am perpetuating the structures that need to be dismantled, or calling them out, or avoiding them altogether, in my writing. I am finding that all of the essays in this book are helping me, as well as confusing me further, in mapping this terrain. I was extremely interested by “Exempt, Implicated,” an essay in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (p. 170), written by Rachel Zucker. Zucker explores and calls out the complexity of her own racism. Here, she makes a point about how anything anybody writes, and everybody who anybody writes about, is a reflection of our own selves. I am petrified of that reflection. But know that it cannot be avoided, nor do I want to avoid it.

I have also been exploring the work of French writer, filmmaker and artist, Chris Marker (recommended by my supervisor). Namely, through his 60s photo-novel titled “La Jetee,” the written script of his film titled “Sans Soleil,” as well as Catherine Lupton’s “Chris Marker: Memories of the Future.” I have been incredibly inspired by the way Marker explores and questions the fragility and the sad irony of memory through storytelling, as well as how he merges the world of images with the world of words.

Visually, in “La Jetee,” the storyline moves in repetitive fragments from past, present and future, and back again. I am interested in Marker’s futuristic dystopian settings and how he uses the future to ultimately examine the past, in the present. In both “La Jetee” and “Sans Soleil,” Marker also uses a lot of symbolism referencing the eyes, both directly and indirectly, through the use of photography and the absent/present that photography as a medium evokes.

“The more you watch Japanese television... the more you feel it’s watching you.”

“Frankly, have you ever heard of anything stupider than to say to people as they teach in film schools, not to look at the camera?”

“He was told that a disfigured woman took off her mask in front of passers-by and scratched them if they did not find her beautiful.”

(Excerpts from Chris Marker’s 1983 film titled “Sans Soleil.”)

“Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments. It is only later that they claim remembrance, when they show their scars.” (Excerpt from Chris Marker’s 1962 film titled “La Jetee.”)

I have been encouraged by my supervisor to explore writing from images more; to describe images and scenes as if they were still photographs, frozen moments. As a way to remove myself and *observe*. A more dissociated approach to writing. I am interested in the way Marker does this and believe this could be a good storytelling method for me to try, as I am in the process of exploring ways to write the complexities of our current socio-political landscape, from where I am inside/outside of it.

Through the protagonist’s seeking/longing of a memory in “La Jetee,” I was evoked to question my own explorations of death, ancestry, and ‘unseen’ worlds in my writing. More specifically, how the absence of the ‘dead’, particularly in modern white western culture (a generalization), becomes a presence in itself. I am looking for ways to write the presence of absence into my stories. And perhaps through this examination, as well as a blurring of, past, present and future – as Chris Marker does in “La Jetee” – I could speak to experiences such as these.

The discomfort of intimacy, the intimacy of discomfort



Excerpt of Reflective Journal Entry 21 | 8 August 2019

Key Resources: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, *The Pink Institution* by Selah Saterstrom, *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* edited by Claudia Rankine

I felt that there were some synergies between the book *The Pink Institution* by Selah Saterstrom and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong. The link that I noticed between these two books is the documentation of generational history and family relationships. In particular, the often-murky line of intimacy and discomfort, affection and abuse, between family members.

One of the short fragments for example, from *The Pink Institution*, that illustrated this comfort/discomfort complexity, and stood out for me, was a scene about a grandchild rubbing cream on his grandfather's calves at the end of the day. The grandchild performed this act as a way to spend time with his grandfather and to receive affection and stories. Yet the grandchild still felt a sense of repulsion in performing the act. The grandfather's calves are described as

grotesque, dry, flaky. Yet the moment shared between the grandfather and the grandchild is somehow still strangely beautiful. It is these tensions I am interested in exploring more in my own stories of intimacy. Similarly, in Vuong's book, a regular intimate act between grandson and grandmother is the plucking of the white "snow" from the main character (Little Dog's) grandmother's hair, in exchange for stories. Through these two books, I am seeing examples of how I can incorporate and build this tension subtly into my own work by honing-in on bodily detail and learning to better articulate intimacy.

Vuong constantly moves between the past and the present (Little Dog's past and present, as well as the past and present of the women in Little Dog's family). He goes all the way back in time to the Vietnam War, to how his Grandfather and Grandmother met, their relationship, the political backdrop that they moved through. I am currently in the process of trying to weave a broader historical fragmentary narrative into my work. Deciding what or where or how to hone-in, I think, is the biggest challenge for me.

Another more stylistic thing I noticed and liked in Vuong's book is the consistent references to specific places and 'every day' objects of the American/western 'world,' i.e Walmart, Marlboro Reds, Sprite. For me, these iconic images ground Vuong's work in time and space. Brand images and advertising are so engrained in many of our memories, and I'd like to acknowledge these signs and symbols in my own writing, but within a South African context.

What I also appreciated in Vuong's book was how he uses distinct dialogue to express the voice of Little Dog's mother and grandmother. There is a sense of authenticity in the way he writes their voices in this book and is also something I'd like to be mindful of in my own writing; to write the locality of voices in my stories. Often times, for example, I have noticed I don't write the multi-lingual slang that is used by myself and my multi-lingual friendship community in Durban. Namely, for fear of being misunderstood or indecipherable or perhaps insensitive and reductive coming from my own societal positioning.

Everyday violence



Excerpt of Reflective Journal Entry 22 | 25 August 2019

Key Resources: *Machine* by Susan Steinberg, *Teeth of the Comb & Other Stories* by Osama Alomar

I like how Susan Steinberg's women characters are not afraid to reveal their worst sides – their superficiality, their insecurities, their manipulateness – I think this is something that draws me to her writing and writing like hers (Lidia Yuknavitch and Kate Zambreno also come to mind).

This is something I am trying to keep at the forefront of my mind in my own work and my own characters – some attempt at honesty I suppose. It is often this that I find the most difficult to do.

It is also the tension between masculinity and femininity that I like in Steinberg's work too. How her women characters are always questioning this imbalance, both in their inner-world and their outer-world. I feel as if this is often something I am trying to express in my own work, and with Steinberg, she addresses it without disguise. I am experimenting with short "he said, she said" dialogues in my own work to further explore this imbalance in my own way.

What I think I am learning the most from Steinberg's latest book *Machine* (2019), is how she plays and experiments with form and the impact this has on you as the reader. How she holds you by the ponytail off a ledge between poetry and prose. How she drops you into a pit of mouse traps one moment, then catches you in candy-floss the next. For me, I never want to feel too comfortable as I reader and so I should not write too comfortably either. This is something I'm practicing in my thesis.

I like that Steinberg doesn't try to dazzle the reader with beautiful images or verbose intellect. I think I have a tendency to make *too* many images and, of course, there is nothing wrong with images, but I am seeing that there are many more ways to be compelling too. With Steinberg, her words are firey, short, sharp, yet somehow never lacking in depth or beauty. She rarely gets too carried away, and if she does, she grabs you by the foot and pulls you with her. Her sentences and descriptions and language don't circle above your head in a thunderstorm, instead you're right there with her in the white-noise of her rain, dodging lighting-bolts, left soaking wet.

"...we stand to leave these guys on the dock; Just kill me, I say, as we walk; Just kill me, we say, and they're running to us; for a second, I think love; but now we're whipping through the air like trash; we're over their shoulders and spinning; they say they're going to throw us in; we're screaming, Put us down; I'm screaming, Fucking killers; and it's the world through speed, all split, all blurred; and it's all our fault for being such stars; for being such whores;"
(Steinberg, p. 11)

Although *Machine* is somewhat of a crime fiction, and my subject matter is nowhere near this genre, I found I enjoyed the tension crime and violence brings to stories. Call it cheap thrills maybe, but I was in it. However, I am more interested in "everyday" crimes and violence. The type of behavior and moments and systems, that are "accepted" as part of society, the "normal," the "ag, but that's just life hey" stuff. Often times, it is these crimes that I feel can be equally as, or even more violent, to crimes that are punishable by law. It is these accepted forms of violence experienced and seen and evaded in the day-to-day that disturb me, and it is these disturbances that I'd like to explore and capture more in my writing. Given our sensitive society and history and my positioning within it, I have been experimenting with ways in which to do this. Similarly, to Eduardo Galeano's work, I found that the form in Osama Alomar's book *Teeth of the Comb & Other Stories*, is one I was drawn to.

Ants

When I crushed a large number of ants by accident with my feet, I realized that weakness is punishment without wrongdoing. (Alomar, p.47)

Alomar's short philosophical fragments address everyday incongruities in a way that is both light-hearted and heart-shattering. At the moment, in my own writing, I am looking at ways in

which I can shift perspective and points of view. Although brilliant and wise and terribly addictive, I found *Teeth of the Comb & Other Stories* follows a very familiar rhythm and form throughout, which toward the end of the book makes some of the pieces lose their impact. I am seeing this repetition starting to emerge in my own work and this is not where I want to stay. I have been encouraged by my supervisor to explore different POV's and shift the rhythm a bit, from my often quick-breathed, anxious pace. To occasionally "trip the reader up... make them eat mud" (Stacy Hardy, 2019). I thought this was great advice.

A device I could use more of to help me with some more variation, is the way Alomar animates animals and objects into his story. To a point where human, animal, and object hold the same weight, the same torture, the same hands. I sometimes feel that writing from an object's perspective or an animal's perspective can come across as gimmicky and childlike (in a negative way), and at the moment, I am trying to explore ways to do this that don't make me feel too phony.

Never Been Touched

A book sitting on the shelf with torn covers and pages filled with comments and notes in the margins said to his colleague who stood behind him, "I envy so much your freshness and your eternal youth!" But his colleague answered him dejectedly, "I've never been touched!" (Alomar, p.78)

Why I want to see more women writers fail:

Poetics of experimentation, form, and the body

By Robyn Perros

Failure: A surf story

I want to tell you a quick story, because everything starts with stories, or at least everything did, or should, and because everything starts with failure, and because everything also starts with water.

x

Surfing is that thing that people (mostly white male people) do on Styrofoam planks out in the middle of the ocean. I learnt to surf while working at a South African surfing magazine in my early twenties. It was my first job in the publishing industry and I was the first woman to be on the in-house writing and editing team. Another huge gap between my male colleagues and I was the fact that I couldn't surf.

People warned me that surfing would be "a challenge." I smiled when they did. Not in denial, but just in a quiet knowing that people are often quick to doubt my determination. But the truth is, the word "challenge" failed to encompass the humiliating *torture* that learning to surf as an adult woman was for me.

My first year of surfing looked something like this: spluttering, gasping, bruising, bashing, falling, tumbling, suffocating, stabbing, blue bottle sting to the armpit, rock to the head, spit, snot, puke, freezing cold, pitch black panic attack, tears, blood, no way out, sharks please eat me, whales please swallow me, leash please strangle me, fin just fucking stab me in the fucking heart, do it, i'll never ever get this, i'm gonna give up, i can't do this, who am i kidding, i'm going to die out here, I can do this, no I can't.

In the midst of this, what I realize is an extremely privileged person's experience of "torture," I came to a profound realization as to why it was torture, why I sucked, why I hated surfing, and why, despite all of this, I continued to surf, harder.

The realization was two-fold:

1. I sucked at surfing because in order to not suck at surfing one has to quite literally *fall down* in front of people overandoverandoverandover again.
2. I sucked at surfing because I was a woman.

Before you throw your bookcase of Betty Friedan at me, let me explain:

I sucked at surfing because I, like many other women out there, had been brought up in a conservative patriarchal community where girls were cushioned. Told never to scratch their knees, to always "be careful," not to damage their "goods" (their goods being their bodies, their manners, their reputation, their virginity).

I sucked at surfing because I was never encouraged to fall, to hurt myself, to embarrass myself, to go for the big wave, to lose my temper – especially in public.

I sucked at surfing because I went through a mainstream education system founded on shame and measure. One that told me that success lived on one side of a fence and failure on the other.

I sucked at surfing because in order to do it, I had to defy the way my bones had been put together by society over time, over generations.

My athletic and learning capabilities, I believe, had the least to do with my suckiness.

x

A few years later, I am in the water, sucking ever so slightly less, enjoying the torture of surfing ever so slightly more. The general ratio of men to women at the popular breaks in Durban is 10 to 2. My friend and I are those two. My friend is an adult woman, a leading computer programmer in her professional field, in the first phase of surf torture.

Out at backline, I watch her miss countless waves. I watch her consistently look around to see if anyone (mainly the men) are watching her. I watch her fall, slam, tumble, in, over, under the noise of white water. Every time she comes up, I see her recoil the rage, conceal the embarrassment, tuck the tears back into her wetsuit – undergoing the same silent suffering with falling, with failure. The one that I, a lot of women, a lot of people, are often too ashamed to speak about.

x

Friend and I try an experiment:

While in the water, we make a pact to cheer and clap every time we wipe-out or get slammed by a wave. A simple case of reverse psychology. Cheesy, maybe. But interesting when put into practice.

The result of the experiment:

We fall, get back on our boards, fall, get back on our boards, fall, get back on our boards. The only difference being that failure has become an act that is supported. Failure has become an act of unashamed progress. Failure has become redefined.

Experimentation: Failure's best friend

Like failure lurks beneath the board of every surfer, it is also the word that lurks beneath the skin of every writer's keyboard. Failure is the word that scribbles its name on the walls of every human's head. The word that still keeps many women silent in boardrooms, on building sites, in lecture halls. This is the word I have chosen to begin this essay with, because it is usually the loudest and the quietest one in any room.

Failure is defined by the lack of success. But no matter how we choose to define failure for ourselves, I believe that everything truly starts in failure and that failure truly starts in fear. Would writing be so painful if failure was something we were all running toward, instead of away from? I'd like to argue, that perhaps writers *should* be running toward failure and that perhaps we should draw less definitive lines between failure and success. As we should draw less definitive lines between reality and fantasy. As we should draw less definitive lines between birth and death. It is all the same anyway, isn't it?

I have no doubt that the successful authors whose works I draw on later in this essay – namely Ann Lauterbach, Lidia Yuknavitch, R.M. Berry, Cristine Rivera Garza, Emily Gould, Camille Roy, Kathy Acker, Brian Evenson, Marie Calloway, Rosemarie Anderson, Lara Glenum, Robert Duncan, Betinna Judd, bell hooks etc – have all grappled with these lines, risked, experimented, feared, failed. Failure is not often explicitly, or publicly articulated, yet it is this acknowledgment of failure that humanizes all writers and the process of writing for me.

In order for anyone to take risks and experiment, they need to grow a certain level of comfort with defeat. But how does a writer, particularly a women writer who has grown up in a society that capitalizes on the “inadequacy” of her body, her intelligence, and her capabilities, *obtain* a certain level of comfort with the discomfort of defeat? Psychology will tell you there are many ways, but I'd like to suggest just one: By seeing other writers, particularly other woman writers, taking risks, experimenting with writing and form, failing in the public sphere, and continuing in the face of defeat. But who are the writers who are practicing this? History will tell you there have been many. Alternative publishers will tell you that there are many more. But I want to see *even* more. And I want to urge that writer to be you, to be me, to be every writer that has ever buried their failures in solitude and in silence.

“Abject failure is a far better gift to the world than self-satisfied moderation, so dare to risk annihilation. Get mulish and outlandish. Cling belligerently to your unsightly protuberances and excesses. Take things too far. Shock yourself out of normative language” (Glenum, 253).

In response to Lara Glenum's words, I say this: I want to see more women writers fail because I want to see more women writers succeed.

Social media and the pursuit of success ft. Marie Calloway

It would not be fair to discuss the present culture of failure without (briefly) addressing social media's role in the culture of success. In 2019, it is estimated that there will be around 2.77

billion social media users around the globe, with this number only expected to rise (The Statistics Portal, n/d). That's roughly one third of the global population with social media accounts, of which the majority are logged into right now.

With social media, our online lives are increasingly shifting toward becoming personal brands. And on these platforms, there is an obvious culture of sharing posts that represent “the best” or desired version of ourselves. Our achievements and positive ventures – however we choose to depict them – are perpetually publicized and reinforced with dopamine squirts aka likes. Sharing one's achievements is not necessarily a negative thing, of course I want to see pictures of your graduation, or you winning an award or a race, or standing up to give a speech on climate change. However, it can become a negative thing when what happens in between our successes remains largely unshared. When the mental breakdowns, the rejections, the feelings of unworthiness, the failures, are to a large extent kept hidden from public view under the shadow of social media's cultural unacceptability. Although these doors are slowly being creaked open in light of more mental health awareness, the bloggy buzz words of “vulnerability” and “authenticity,” movements like #MeToo, etc – still, one is less inclined to post about their failures, understandably. Who wants to suck?

Of course, a newsfeed characterized by negativity is not popularly desired, however it is this *imbalance* between representations of “success” and representations of “failure” that quickly creates an illusion. And it is this illusion of success that is not reflective of many (arguably most) social media users' daily lived reality. It is this illusion that contributes to feelings of dissociation, apathy, anxiety, depression, FOMO, etc. Medical studies will tell you. Furthermore, for artists, writers, and creatives more specifically, it is an illusion that I believe can perpetuate a resistance to experimentation.

A relevant contemporary example of a book written by a female millennial author that I believe speaks to the topic of failure, humiliation, vulnerability and society's unease with the representation of these topics, is *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your Life?* (2013) by Marie Calloway. It is a book that falls into the basket of “experimental.” It is a book that admittedly made me uncomfortable, initially. I had no choice but to question why.

What Purpose Did I Serve in Your Life? is a collage of personal stories, Facebook messages, emails, texts, screenshots and images that relate to the raw, uncensored details of Calloway's sex life and occupation as a 20-year-old sex worker in London. The fragments of online documentation revealed in this book are ones which break the illusion of “success” and challenge what is socially acceptable to publicize in the online and literary world. The book, and the author herself, was simultaneously hated and cyber-bullied, and loved and defended by various communities. Many of the responses to her book, to her actions, to her humanity – particularly on social media – I would describe as violent. Some reviewers went so far as to say that they wished the book and the author did not exist. Some publishers refused to print the images in the book.

I believe that Calloway experimented bravely as an author by revealing her raw insecurities and “failures” *publicly*, in a way which we are not often accustomed to seeing today. *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your life?* pushed the public’s boundaries, and my own boundaries, on what “failures” and vulnerabilities *can* be disclosed, what *should* remain private, and how we respond to the women who distort these invisible lines. In response to *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your life?* author and publisher Emily Gould made a comment that struck me:

*“Why do women who aren't afraid to humiliate themselves appall us so much, and why do we rush to find superficial reasons to dismiss them ('she's crazy' 'she's a narcissist' 'she's young' 'she's a famewhore')?” ...I think in part because they pose a threat to the social order, **which relies on women's embarrassment to keep them either silent or writing in socially accepted modes**” (Gould in Nolan, n/d).*

Whether you like Calloway’s book or not, we cannot deny that it is an important one. One that challenges what author Cristina Rivera Garza refers to as “usualness” in her essay titled *The Unusual: a manifesto*. In the example of Calloway’s book and the online hatred it fostered, we can see that experimentation in content and form in relation to a female experience is thus a political act. One which can be used as a tool to create what Garza refers to as “*unusualness*: the site of our potency.”

In her article *A Slanty Kind of Racial(ized) Poetics*, Tamiko Beyer expresses her discomfort with disrupting the *usual* when it comes to writing about race:

“It has always been difficult for me to talk and write about race. My level of discomfort or fear depends on the context and the audience; this kind of very public declaration is particularly hard. Yet I am participating in this project because I know that allowing my unease to silence me is one of the ways that racism persists and thrives” (Beyer, 246).

The “unease” that Beyer directly refers to when writing on the topic of race here, is an unease that I believe still silences many women authors on an array of issues connected to their lived experiences today. An unease that holds women back from experimentation. It is from this place of fear and the temptation to be silent, that bell hooks similarly starts with in her essay *Narratives of Struggle*.

“Each time I begin work on a new piece of writing, a theoretical essay, a critical book, fiction, autobiography, I confront within myself extreme dread that the subjectivity that I have fought so hard to claim will not assert itself. Paralyzed by the fear that I will not be able to name or speak words that fully articulate my experience or the collective reality of struggling black people, I am tempted to be silent... This dread surfaces as a forgotten scar, permanently inscribed on the body, a sign of past terror and torture, aggressively demanding recognition” (hooks, 53).

Whether a writer is writing about race, sex, violence, identity, technology, love, death, or a fear of bath plugs – it is this temptation to be silent that Beyer and hooks address, that I believe sits

in every writer, and that I imagine as a privileged white writer, could sit even more heavily inside many black or brown writers. I believe that experimentation in writing and in form, can be used not only as a tool to speak to the silences inside every author, but similarly, as a tool to speak to the silences that sit in every reader. A tool to disrupt *usualness* and fracture the illusion of “success” so many young people have become accustomed to in today’s digital world. A tool we can use to say so much more than words, through the political *act* of producing them in *unusual* ways.

Embodied writing: The hinge between the usual and the unusual

In Cristina Rivera Garza’s essay, *The Unusual: a manifesto*, she says: “Writing is an embodied practice. While romantic notions of authorship still represent the creative act as mysterious and inexplicable – if not all together ineffable – I believe writing to be a practice connected to situated bodies in contexts shaped by uneven power relations. Conflict. Contestation” (Garza).

These uneven power relations in creative and literary industries and narratives, can be seen throughout history, and is seen still today, as mentioned by Garza, in the disproportionate number of books published by male authors in comparison to the number of books published by female authors, particularly black and brown female authors. With this in mind, it could be argued then that for the female author (less so for the white, privileged female author), more is at stake when it comes to experimentation. When it comes to risk and failure, there are more eyes on these bodies, and on the words which come from these bodies.

Garza goes on to state that for those benefitting the most from existing hierarchies, “They may be able to go on with their lives as usual, because the *usual* does not trigger rage or anxiety, sentiments of powerlessness or the desire to radically alter the state of affairs... The *usual*, in other words, is not an obstacle that looks into their eyes every morning, reminding them that they are out of place. Skewed. At fault. The *usual* does not place them on the tip of the abyss, inciting them to leap forward. Because the *usual* does not interrogate their place in the world, but rather confirms it” (Garza).

In order to interrogate one’s place in the world, no matter where that place might be, I believe that one needs to re-inhabit the body and the words that have been silenced, shamed and oppressed in our cultures and lineages over generations – for “our bodies are histories embedded” (Yuknavitch, n/d). Beyond that, I believe we need to experiment with these bodies in order to produce *unusualness*.

One way in which the *usual* has been, and continues to be, “de-usualized” to produce *unusualness*, is through embodied writing (Garza). In her paper titled *Embodied Writing and Reflections on Embodiment*, Psychologist Rosemarie Anderson describes embodied writing as follows:

“Embodied writing seeks to reveal the lived experience of the body by portraying in words the finely textured experience of the body and evoking sympathetic resonance in readers. Introduced into the research endeavor in an effort to describe human

experience – and especially transpersonal experiences – more closely to how they are truly lived, embodied writing is itself an act of embodiment, entwining in words our senses with the senses of the world” (Anderson, 83).

I believe that the notion of embodied writing echoes what writer Lidia Yuknavitch has termed “Corporeal Writing” – a practice that aims to bring language and the body back into relationship with one another (Yuknavitch). “Your body is an experience collector,” says Yuknavitch, “and you don’t need to go ‘out there’ to find stories. You’re living them every day” (Yuknavitch, n/d). Similarly, to Yuknavitch, what I am interested in is *how* our bodies are experiencing the world today, particularly in the digital age, and how our forms reflect this.

“We need to reflect what it feels like now to be in this time in this place in our lives... why don’t our pages reflect these changes? Why don’t our forms and themes explode with new kinds of storytelling to show that ‘hey, this moment is urgently different than other moments’” (Yuknavitch, n/d).

Yuknavitch is another example of a female author experimenting boldly with form through practicing an embodied writing that disrupts conventional narrative forms and disarranges/rearranges the senses. For me, these ideas couldn’t have been more strongly demonstrated in her book, *The Chronology of Water*. Like Yuknavitch, I do not think of or experience the past or the present or the future as linear, but in fragments, intensities, backandforth, sidewaysandupsidesdown, moments, minute details, big pictures, snippets, sensations.

In her article *Use This Word in a Sentence: Experimental*, Ann Lauterbach has a positive view on fragmentation which I similarly share:

“Those who view form as static and reified are doomed to repetition, historical as well as personal. The fragments among which we live are, in my view, cause for celebration rather than lament, an invitation to create new ideas of coherence, where boundaries are malleable and permeable, so that inclusion and exclusion are in unstable flux. The fragment offers a possibility of vitality and variety – multiple perspectives, disparate vocabularies” (Lauterbach).

As the boundaries between time and space and perspectives become more malleable through fragmented forms, Betinna Judd expresses in her essay *Writing About Race* published in *The Racial Imaginary*, her view on separateness. It is strange to think that one could identify with the above Lauterbach quote and the below Betinna Judd quote. But I place them close together to say that I believe there is a distinction between fragmentation and wholeness and to suggest that, maybe, the two work hand-in-hand.

“Writing is attached to the body... To say that my writing is attached to my body also recognizes the particular mode of thought that does not separate mind from body and spirit to which I closely attend. I don’t find any creative freedom in detaching these

things. To detach these things because they may constrict my writing also presumes that the rest of my identity is constricted, in itself – even in my imagination. That’s a depressing thought” (Judd, 5).

We can see that for many authors, writing cannot be separated from the body and that embodied writing or “Corporeal Writing” (Yuknavitch, n/d) and the experimentation with forms that express the lived fragmentation of our modern lives today, can be used as a tool to disrupt *usualness* to produce *unusualness*. By “Producing *unusualness*, writing expands our sense of what is possible. Imaginable. Livable” (Garza, 1). I don’t see what could be worth failing for more than that.

Form: Experimentation’s timekeeper of the present

In *Use This Word in a Sentence: Experimental* Ann Lauterbach expresses what it means to be experimental by saying, “In the world of poetry, to be experimental is sometimes taken to mean you have, as the poet Charles Bernstein has remarked, an aversion to form, rather than an aversion to conformity” (Lauterbach). But I wonder what does it mean to be purposively experimental, rather than experimental for experimental’s sake?

In his article *The Crazy Party Guy, or, a Disruption of Smooth Surfaces*, Brian Evenson raises important questions around how words like “experimental” and “avant-garde” are often used as an excuse for sloppy writing. This is something that he himself tries to avoid. This is something that I have admittedly done. This is something that any experimenter should know when they set out.

“Avant-garde writing should feel like it can use any tool at its disposal but that it will use it in a careful and systematic way, with the impression of purposiveness. The avant-garde that I most admire and that I participate in, believes that you have to make some effort to depict a surface before you disrupt it if you are to get readers to experience that disruption in more than just an intellectual way” (Evenson, 75).

If writers are to disrupt surfaces, it would make sense then that they are well-versed in the surfaces (forms) they wish to disrupt. In *Notes on Poetic Form*, Robert Duncan outlines six kinds of forms and their associations with ideas of the universe: Convention, Ideal, Organic form, Projective, Chance – “zen”, and Physical or Sensitive form. But it is what he says toward the end of his essay about fascination that truly fascinated me: “I am more and more fascinated by the idea of form as creation or fiction of a universe, as a way of “knowing” the real universe. Form as a mode of participation in the real. It is not only in order to participate in the universe but also to participate in self” (Duncan, 262).

This participation in the real, the universe, and in self that Duncan speaks of, I believe R.M Berry encapsulates with the word “*presentness*” in his introduction to the book *Forms at War* titled, “Writing in the Present.” Here, Berry describes the experimental works of the 23 authors published in *Forms at War* saying “...they can’t tell what their experiments mean, may not

foresee their beginning or end, and are far from sure of their own activity's purpose. If asked why, during a time of war, such writing still matters, they might answer, "That's what we're trying to find out." This is how presentness speaks" (Berry, 18).

For me, presentness speaks in wonder, and wonder speaks in experimentation, and experimentation speaks in risk, and risk speaks in action, and action speaks in body. And Kathy Acker, Ann Lauterbach, and Lidia Yuknavitch spoke in mine when they said:

"The desire to play, to make literary structures that play into and in unknown and unknowable realms, those of chance and death and the lack of language, is a desire to live in a world that is open and dangerous, that is limitless. To play, then, both in structure and in content, is to desire to live in wonder" (Kathy Acker, 18).

"Between promise and fact, between new and approachable, known and unknown, the experimental is always between, like a hinge. The risk, the peril involved is that you may not make it across the suspension; the experiment may fail, but a willingness to risk failure, to make mistakes, seems essential to turning promises into facts" (Lauterbach).

"What's deadly to writers is doing what you already know" (Yuknavitch, n/d).

Inconclusive thoughts on experimentation, form, and the body ft. girl dancing in kitchen in small dead town

I want to tell you a quick story, because everything ends with stories, or at least everything did, or should, and because everything ends with bodies and because everything also ends with her.

x

There is a girl dancing in a kitchen. The kitchen is located in a small brick house in a small dead town. The year is +-2000. The girl is my sister.

x

A leg flies over the stove. A back bends over the sink. An arm flashes passed a sugar jar. Sister chants words from a textbook in her hand. Something sciency. Long words. Ones I don't understand. Sister jumps. Rolls. Points her toes dipped in school socks. White chocolate. Equations flow out her mouth. They start to taste sweet. I don't want to disrupt her trance.

x

Eventually I ask:

"What are you doing?"

"Studying." She says.

"Oh." I say.

“I feel like I remember stuff better this way,” her wrists curl into tongues, “when I make up my own dances to the words.”

“Oh.” I say.

And lie down on the tiled floor to feel her “studying” convulse my skeleton.

Sister is teacher. Sister is exorcist.

x

My sister dancing her exam notes in the kitchen was one of those moments when you see, for the first time, that something you thought could only be done a certain way, can be done differently. One of those moments where it is not the fact that the thing can be done differently that surprises you most, but it is the fact that you never questioned the “usualness” of the way you unconsciously assumed that thing always was, and always would be, done. Like when someone peels a banana upside down. Or writes from the bottom of the page, up.

Before: studying = book/desk. Now: studying = chant/dance. Sister is experimenter. Sister is discoverer of own body, of own language, of own form. +-20 years later, I reference teenage sister’s experiment in essay for university folk. Sister never went to university. Sister wasn’t smart enough. Sister was genius.

x

I tell you this story in an attempt to try and link it to a conclusion I want to make about experimentation, form, and the body. I tell you this story in an attempt to try and summarize what Ann Lauterbach, Lidia Yuknavitch, R.M. Berry, Cristina Rivera Garza, Camille Roy, Kathy Acker, Brian Evenson, Marie Calloway, Rosemarie Anderson, Lara Glenum, Robert Duncan, Emily Gould, Betinna Judd, and bell hooks have to say about experimentation, form and the body. But the truth is, I don’t exactly know what *I think* I have to say about experimentation, form and the body. Because sometimes, the loudest and the quietest words come from the feet of a stupid girl dancing in a kitchen in a small brick house in a small dead town.

And if we are to live by our word(s), we have to trust her enough to let her kill us.

x

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Why we need more stories that mean nothing:

A review of *Palm of the Hand Stories* by Yasunari Kawabata

Written by Robyn Perros

The more you live in it, the more the world makes less sense. A MacDonalds is built next to a cancer treatment centre. Children are being drugged with blue screens in broad daylight. Bacon can be bought in a tube. These things, and so many, many more, can make today's constant need to comprehend, to understand, to make-sense, an exhausting pursuit. We need stories to help us make sense, but when an author suggests that it's okay to let them mean nothing, that is something too.

x

Yasunari Kawabata was the first Japanese author to receive The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968. Although his novels *Snow Country*, *Thousand Cranes* and *Capital City* (for which he received the award) were widely celebrated, it was his short short stories that he himself treasured and believed best encapsulated his art. He affectionately described these stories as "palm-of-the-hand-stories," and his book, by the same name, translated by Lane Dunlop and J. Martin Holman, is a collection of 70 of 145 "vignettes" he wrote over the span of his career before taking his own life in 1974. These palm-of-the-hand-stories can be described as short prose-poems, parables, fragments, flash-fictions, puddles – yet they have an elusive, ambiguous quality that cannot be tied to any one genre. Like the vast Nothingness Kawabata's stories lead you into, there is no fixed place for them. Nor is there a fixed place for you inside them, or them inside you.

x

In *Palm of the Hand Stories*, Kawabata touches on a myriad of fragmented themes – death, lost love, loneliness, inequality, humans' relationship with nature – but is not concerned with diagnosing what is broken in the world, what is broken inside us. Rather, what Kawabata's stories do is help us acknowledge the discomfort with the irresolution of the world and our own selves. In the story titled "Makeup," a man watches the daily happenings in a funeral hall through his bathroom window. There he sees new flowers come in, wilt and die. The man says:

"Although this was a beautiful sight, from my bathroom window I also have to look at the funeral flowers on other days as they rot away. Even now at the beginning of March, as I write this, I have been watching a wreath of bellflowers and red roses for four or five days, wondering just how the colors will change as they wither. I wish the flowers were on living plants."

Then the man sees women in their funeral clothes putting on their makeup in the restroom, and he compares their dark lips to “the bloody lips of one who has licked a corpse.” The story ends with a teenage girl entering the bathroom to hide that she is crying. After seeing the girl, his “ill feelings” about the women dissolve, and he is left with the image of the girl smiling into a small pocket mirror of her own, before leaving the restroom.

These strange scenes in Kawabata’s stories seem to press different worlds together up against a thin sheet of glass. It’s difficult to see which world is on which side of it. In western society, as well as in the English language, the boundaries of the world seem to be definitively named. But in Kawabata’s stories, the worlds of the living and the dead, the seen and the unseen, our suffering and our joy, dream and wake, become indistinctive. It is these perplexities, the perplexity of the teenage girl’s smile as she leaves the restroom after crying, that make Kawabata’s stories beautifully, tragically human. It is not often that we get to see our own inexplicable incongruities reflected in the daily sufferings of ordinary lives. Some say that Kawabata looked through shadow and water when he wrote this book, but I think, he looked through us, the Sad ones.

x

Although Kawabata’s stories are psychologically rich, sharply observant, expansive in content, and distilled to their absolute essence – they do not try to force you into sense. Initially, I found reading “without meaning” unsettling and ungrounded, like trying to ice-skate on jelly. These stories will not appeal to everyone, but if you can move through the discomfort of learning how to allow writing just to be, the Nothingness of these stories grows into an enveloping comfort. A comfort that clears you rather than smothers you. I found a similar sense of relief reflected in the character of the older sister in the story “The Younger Sister’s Clothes”:

“My sister knows absolutely nothing about the world. It’s as if she had never seen anyone but myself.” As she smiled at the younger sister’s fiancé, the tears almost came. She felt drunk with the pleasure of being able to say such a thing.”

x

The border between sense and nonsense, between nothing and everything, is always more translucent than we think, and as much as we need stories that help us to make sense, we also need stories that allow us to make what feels like the opposite of sense too. After reading Kawabata’s *Palm of the Hand Stories* it is possible that you will feel nothing. Nothing as in emptiness or numbness. Or, perhaps, nothing as in unbound or limitless. In a world where sense seems to be drifting further and further away, perhaps the only thing left to make is feeling, even if that feels like nothing.

A cab ride with Osama Alomar:

A review of *Teeth of the Comb & Other Stories* by Osama Alomar

Written by Robyn Perros

I'd just got off a flight from South Africa and landed mid-Winter in Chicago city. As I wheeled my luggage through the airport's sliding doors, I suddenly couldn't remember why I was here, or where I was supposed to go next. A peculiar amnesia spurred by jetlag and 25 hours of air-conditioning. I ignored the wind gnawing through the neck of my jacket, counted the coins in my back pocket, and waved down a cab, a woman lost at sea. A yellow life-raft pulled up in the sleet. I climbed, sea legs, into Osama Alomar's cab.

My first glimpse of Osama Alomar was of the back of his shiny bald head, his dark sideburns sliding down past his ears, molasses. The sideburns looked into the review mirror, and before asking me where I was headed, asked, "Do you like to read?" I straightened my spine to meet his gaze. "Most days," I told him. He smiled, reset the meter to zero, and handed me a book through the glass window between us. "*The Teeth of The Comb & Other Stories* by Osama Alomar," said the front cover. Without speaking, he began to drive. Without speaking, I began to read.

"It says here you're from Syria," I said, clearing my throat. He nodded and turned the radio down. "I would give you the long version of the story, but that's just not what I do," he said, slowly turning the steering wheel into a windmill. As we slid through the grey Chicago drizzle, I was able to fish the following facts out of Osama. With the heat of my breath, I wrote them down on the inside of the cab window:

- Began career in Damascus
- Apartment in Damascus bombed
- Immigrated to Chicago 10 years ago
- Worked as cab driver for over eight years
- Loves philosophy, writing, nature, *Aesop's Fables*
- Hates tyranny
- Hates cabs

Osama wasn't much of a talker. Every word was precious, but not sentimental. As the numbers on the meter ticked, I continued to page through Osama's book, 165 stories, 95 pages. A lot of his stories were just one line long, the types of status updates you wish your friends would write. The types of lines strangers in bars might echo into their empty glasses. Take "The Fingernail" for instance.

The Fingernail

The fingernail clipping looked up at the crescent moon with sadness.

“Your stories are like Tweets or flash-Facebook-fiction,” I said. “Young people must love them for that,” I quickly added, suddenly flustered by the possibility of offending. He laughed and began telling me about the form’s long history in Arab literature. An allegorical tradition called al-qissa al-qasira jiddan, which in English translates to “Very short story.” He explained how this tradition was brought back to popularity in places like Syria, for its ability to quickly deliver and circulate socio-political critiques in times of war and oppression.

While Osama spoke, I stared out the cab window as the street began to shift and the high-rises began to crumble. Suddenly, we’re in Damascus, it’s 2013, it’s the Civil War. I wind the window up tight as we bounce over rubble. I realize, this is a very special cab. Through the tunnel of grey smoke, I catch glimpses of wreckage; a young male body being lifted out of concrete chunks, a boy wearing one sandal crouched behind a trashcan, a woman running with a small bag under her arm, a purple baby wrapped in a prayer matt in the other. I see fire, I hear screaming, I feel the explosions vibrate beneath the tyres. Everything is slow-motion, except the red digits on the cab’s meter rising, faster and faster.

I sink into the back seat and look at Osama’s face for an expression. His eyes are fixed on the road, his hands gripping the steering wheel in blobs of bloodless knuckles. He drives us back to Chicago in silence, a father returning to an empty house. We arrive in gridlock traffic, he turns the engine off, and winds the window down just a slice. The smell of MacDonald’s cheeseburgers wafts through; a strange, sickening comfort after all the corpses he’d just shown me. I ask him how he did that with his cab, why he took us back in time to Syria. Without looking into the rearview, he tells me to page through his book and find his story titled “Mutiny.” I cough before reading it aloud.

Mutiny

The clocks all over the world decided to stand unified before the tyranny and absolute hegemony of time. Each clock began to move her hands as she pleased and wherever she wanted. They shouted with one voice, “Long live freedom! Down with tyranny and oppression!” They toasted their freedom and independence. After a while, however, people all over the world took off their wristwatches and pulled their clocks down from their walls and threw them all in the garbage, forming the largest clock graveyard in the world. A new generation of clocks was produced which contained a device to prevent them moving their hands as they pleased. The clocks cried bitter tears for the return of tyranny.

When I imagined just how much Osama had seen in Syria during the Civil War, it somehow made sense that he had very little to say. But what I didn’t realize was just how ginormous that little could be. The type of strength that infiltrates, rather than pounds.

Ants

When I crushed a large number of ants by accident with my feet, I realized that weakness is punishment without wrongdoing.

But the more I read, the more Osama's words began to sting and discomfort me. Red ant bites on my ankles, sharp pebbles under my feet, a thousand little tea burns on the tip of my tongue. I fidgeted and scratched my skin on the back seat, double checking I still had my passport strapped to my chest – in case I needed to flee. The red digits on the meter rising with my heart palpitations, rising to a number I knew I couldn't pay.

We drove past The Bean at Millennium Park, Chicago's giant stainless steel public artwork, the one that reflects the city and its million faces in warped stretches. The reflection of Osama's cab shimmered past, a fish, a flashing sun. I wondered where we were headed next. I realized that I hadn't specified where I wanted to go when I first got in the cab, back there at the airport, all those hours ago. I kept quiet and continued to page through the book, with every turn, sinking deeper and deeper into the stomach rolls of the backseat.

Just then, the slight dig of hooves began to press into my back. I dug beneath the seat looking for the cause of the discomfort, when the faint smell of dog hair began to rise. I looked up at Osama in the rearview, his eyes were still fixed on the road, his fingers fiddling with the radiator. As he blasted the hot hair through the cab, animals began crawling, scurrying, flying out from the air vents. A horse's hoof jabbed me in the neck, a galaxy of ants constructed a universe around my boots, while unidentified feathers flapped into my hair. "I see you've met my friends," Osama said, finally looking up. I asked the little white dog, now panting on my lap, to tell me how it landed up here in this cab. The dog pawed to page 163 of Osama's stories titled "The Dog and the Nation." I opened the cab window and let the dog bark the story aloud to the blur of shivering trees.

The Dog and the Nation

Yesterday as I was heading to work in the early morning, I saw two big flyers posted side by side on a fence outside the public park. One of them had a picture of a small white dog with the word L O S T written above it. The other one had a strangely shaped map with the words L O S T N A T I O N written above in red. What surprised me was the huge number of people packed around the picture of the beautiful white dog, words of regret and distress crowding about them more thick than the crowd of people; while the flyer for the missing nation remained neglected, not drawing the attention of a single person.

I imagined all the people who had climbed in and out of Osama Alomar's cab, all the places they had travelled to, all the animals they had met. I saw the red numbers on the meter escalating, handed him his book back, and asked him to pull over on the side of the

street. I climbed out without my luggage and began walking back to the airport, waving goodbye from the top of a mountain and the bottom of a grave. Smiling with a little story stuck between my teeth.

The Teeth of the Comb

Some of the teeth of the comb were envious of the class differences that exist between humans. They strove desperately to increase their height, and, when they succeeded, began to look with disdain on their colleagues below. After a little while the comb's owner felt a desire to comb his hair. But when found it in this state he threw it in the garbage.

Using free writing as a tool to cultivate a daily journal-writing practice

Writing in community report by Robyn Perros

28 August 2019

On 28 August 2019, I held a writing workshop with the all-women staff members of Van Schaik Bookstore, located on High Street in Makhanda. For this workshop, it was important for me to approach people, or an organization, with which I had an existing relationship. I chose this group to do a writing workshop with as I had an existing friendship with the Manager of the bookstore and through this friendship had become familiar with the other employees.

I knew that the staff at Van Schaik Bookstore were a very close group of four women, supporting one another in their work and personal lives, always doing activities together outside of work to grow and uplift one another. The women come from diverse backgrounds, they are all busy, working mothers, between the ages of 35-50. They were also a racially and culturally diverse group. In addition, a mutual friend of myself and the Manager attended the workshop, a 29-year-old Fine Art Masters student at Rhodes University. The staff members have had no tertiary education and they had all come from working class and lower-middle class backgrounds. I knew that two of the staff members were already interested in writing and had stopped and started several times with a journal-writing practice of their own. One of the staff members had even expressed interest in doing the part-time Creative Writing Course with ISEA. For these reasons, among others, I thought that a writing workshop might be something they'd enjoy and benefit from together as a group.

Van Schaik as a space itself also intrigued me, in that it is an integral part of the Makhanda and Rhodes University community of students, writers, readers, intellectuals. It is one of the places a lot of them go to get a pen, a backpack, a diary, smell the new books, maybe buy one. The Van Schaik staff have an extensive knowledge of books and authors, what their customers are reading, what they are interested in reading, all the tools and trinkets that help students and lecturers produce words. Yet, in their own busy lives, the staff are not avid readers themselves. Despite being surrounded by students and books on a daily basis, most of the staff expressed a 'fear of writing' and feeling distanced from the university. This furthered my belief that a writing workshop could be beneficial to the staff. In some small way, I had hoped that the workshop might help to break that fear the staff had spoken about prior to the workshop and help to bridge the psychological gap between them and 'The university' by experiencing being an active producer of creative writing, as opposed to their regular daily work role as supporters of other writers.

We agreed to conduct the workshop at the bookstore itself, for convenience. I brought some snacks and drinks, but there was nowhere to put them. Every surface, cupboard, corner was covered in stationary stock. We set the food and drinks up on a cardboard box and a blue crate in the small office at the back.

One of the staff members was eight-month's pregnant, another one was stressed as she had forgotten she had a *stokvel* meeting at the same time as the workshop, and another staff member had had six teeth removed from her mouth that week and was unable to speak properly. Afrikaans was the first-language of the participant who had just had her teeth removed. Previously, she had expressed a fear of not being able to write adequately in English. She was fearful mainly of her spelling and what she believed was a limited vocabulary. I encouraged and assured her, that she could write in any language she wanted to and that it would be wonderful if she wrote in Afrikaans. She decided however, before we began, to write in English as she felt it would be a good opportunity for her to improve her written English. The Manager supplied the paper and the pens, and we all pulled up a chair around the snacks crate and began.

I decided to title the workshop: "Using Free Writing as a Tool to Cultivate a Daily Journal-Writing Practice." I wanted to use the workshop as a catalyst for something that the women could extend into their daily lives, if they wished to do so. There has been much research on the benefits of journal-writing and since journal-writing has been integral to managing my own mental health disorders and trauma, of which I knew some of the staff members suffered of their own, I decided on this workshop theme. I was aware that being too preachy or pushy with an idea can be off-putting in any workshop, so although I was encouraging, I tried not to be dogmatic or overly optimistic about the benefits of this practice. I structured the workshop loosely as follows:

Workshop structure (+-60mins)

- Intro to freewriting
- 'Rules' of freewriting
- x4 group free writing exercises & voluntary sharing
- Debrief / reflections / questions / comments
- The benefits of cultivating a daily journal-writing practice
- Free-writing journal exercises to try at home

I based a lot of the workshop on Robert Berold's "Notes on Free Writing," and "Running a Workshop" by Vonani Bila. I tried to tailor the free writing exercises to include a balance between internal and external exploration and together we did the following four free writing exercises:

Free writing prompts

1. What I saw/noticed today since waking up – 2 mins [Daily recall]
2. I remember... – 5 mins [Re-visiting the past]
3. Take a quick walk around the shop space, pick an object/texture/smell/sound/taste in the space, and write about it. – 5 mins [Exploring the senses/cultivating curiosity in the mundane]
4. Imagine a place where you are at peace or recall a place where you were at peace. Write about where you are and how you feel. – 10 mins [Stress Management]

Despite the initial nervousness, what surprised me about the free-writing exercises was how they immediately transformed the energy levels of the group. After the first exercise everyone was laughing, sitting up straighter, more awake. What surprised me was how seriously everyone in the group took the exercises and how forthcoming they were with sharing their writing with the group. Given the initial fears expressed by some of the women, I thought that they would have been more self-conscious than they were. This was my own projection. I made sure I re-iterated that no one had to share their work if they did not wish to. But everyone in the group shared, even extremely personal experiences that emerged through the exercises.

The women shared stories from their childhoods. The participant who was pregnant, her writing all leaned toward parenting and her experience of carrying another human body inside her body. She shared a story about her first menstruation and how the first person she called to help her was her father. She shared another story about how she grew up believing that her grandparents were her parents. She shared stories about the changes in her body and her fears and hopes around raising the child. Another participant shared a story about the truth of who her son's father was, her regrets, and painful relationships she'd had. Another participant wrote about growing up how she was always forced to wear stockings to church and how she hated the stockings so much that she would pretend to be sick so she could stay home. They shared stories about the customers that come into the shop, about their concerns for the country and their town, the things they witness in their communities every day. The stories were incredibly detailed, intimate, moving, and re-iterated the importance of everyone's story. Not only for each of us to be able to tell our stories ourselves, but for others to listen to them without judgement, comment, or competitiveness.

One of the free-writing exercises that truly surprised me was exercise no.3. Here, we all got up and walked around the Van Schaik shop floor in silence, paying attention to our senses in that space. Everyone picked an object or a sensation to write about and we re-entered the office to do so. What the women shared was incredibly imaginative and creative. One of the women picked the object of a backpack and wrote a story about its life as a backpack; where it goes, what it carries inside it, who carries it. Another woman wrote about the garbage bags in the back room, and about how inside them, were all the end-of-day thoughts. It amazed me that these women all had such wild imaginations, and I don't think I would have seen this side of them so easily had we not done this workshop.

The freewriting exercise no.2 “I remember...” and the topic of memory, seemed to spark the most discussion. At this point, one of the participants brought up that she found it interesting how all of the free-writing prompts had triggered initial strong memories for her. Strong memories that the participant had replayed over and over in her mind. But how, through the act of writing them down, she noticed how that initial memory sparked other “inconsequential” memories that had been “forgotten.” One of the other participants strongly felt that the past was the past and that it should remain in the past in order to move forward. This freewriting prompt made her uncomfortable and she initially indicated that she did not wish to participate in this particular prompt. This was a lesson for me in accepting people’s limitations and personal space. However, she did end up participating in this prompt in a later free-writing exercise, no.4, on a place of peace. Here she wrote a humorous and emotional anecdote from her childhood about her grandmother’s kitchen. Through these stories and discussions, I realized just how triggering and sensitive remembering is for many people. I am unsure if I did more damage than good by encouraging people to open up to their past through this prompt. However, I think what was important was that a discussion on the complexity of this topic was opened up and everyone’s perspectives were listened to.

It was really my intention to make this workshop light-hearted and fun. However, what I realized was that people have wounds and pain and it is inevitable that in any vulnerable situation, that pain will surface in some shape or form. Through this workshop, I realized that as much as we need to create safe spaces to express joy, we also need to create safe spaces to express pain. I think that free-writing workshops are one potential safe space in which to do that. When painful experiences arose in the workshop, I tried my best to hold the space by listening with empathy, and acknowledgment. I was concerned that there may have been feelings of shame or embarrassment after the workshop from the participants after revealing such personal accounts. This again, may have been my own projection, but I made sure I reached out to the participants after the workshop to thank them for their contribution and participation and continued to pop-in and visit them at the shop to maintain relationships.

The participants were given exercises to try out at home and were encouraged to work on the pieces produced in the workshop. However, the reality is that these women live very busy lives and perhaps there may not be a product, or even a journal-writing habit that emerges from the workshop. But this does not diminish what was experienced and created together in that moment, in that space and time, whether it was significant or insignificant to their lives.

Below is a response I received from one of the participants. The rest chose not to formally respond in writing, but all verbalized generally positive or indifferent feedback.

Your experience / feedback / comments on this free writing workshop are extremely valuable to me. Thank you for participating.

Dankie Robb, for such a lovely evening (al was dit so kort). The workshop was very nice, one does not always realise how important it is to reflect on ones life. You know, this workshop took me back to some pain and very joyous moments, but in the end, it also helped me to deal with that hurt. You know that was always a door which I prefer not to open. Thanks to your workshop I can get anything down, knowing that it will help me to heal and grow.

Thanks Laetitia. 9/9/19

Overall, I was moved by the womens' openness to and enthusiasm to trying something that they had never done before and surprised by the lengths of their imagination and creativity. I would have loved to have extended the workshop a bit longer and perhaps had it on a weekend when the women were not working. However, this was the arrangement that suited them best and I felt it important to respect their wishes.

Being surrounded by writers and other students and creatives, it is easy to forget just how fearful so many people are of putting pen to paper. How many people are insecure about their spelling, their grammar, their vocabulary. If anything, I hoped that this workshop might have helped these women start to view writing as a friend, rather than an enemy, and how regular writing for the self in the form of a daily journal-writing practice may help to ease the stress of the busy lives they currently lead – as idealistic as that is.

The relationship between poetry and environment

Reading in community report by Robyn Perros

09 August 2019

On 09 August 2019, Women's Day in South Africa, I read some of my work aloud as part of an all-women's mural painting event hosted by Space Case Gallery and The Winston Pub in Umbilo, Durban. The music venue is located in my old neighborhood, on the corner of Clark Road and Umbilo Road, an industrial, low-income area on the cusp of Durban CBD. A few of my friends were on the organizing team, performing their music, and re-painting the murals in the area as part of the event and suggested I join them with a reading.

At this point, I hadn't formally organized a reading. I had been putting the reading off out of fear and not being able to settle on a space in which I felt comfortable sharing my work. For a long time, I have been interested in ways we can extend art and poetry out from their usual settings and share it in public places where the public can engage with it more freely and spontaneously. Although readings and exhibitions in more "traditional" spaces are of course important, getting literature and art more integrated into the fabric of daily life is something that I am extremely passionate about.

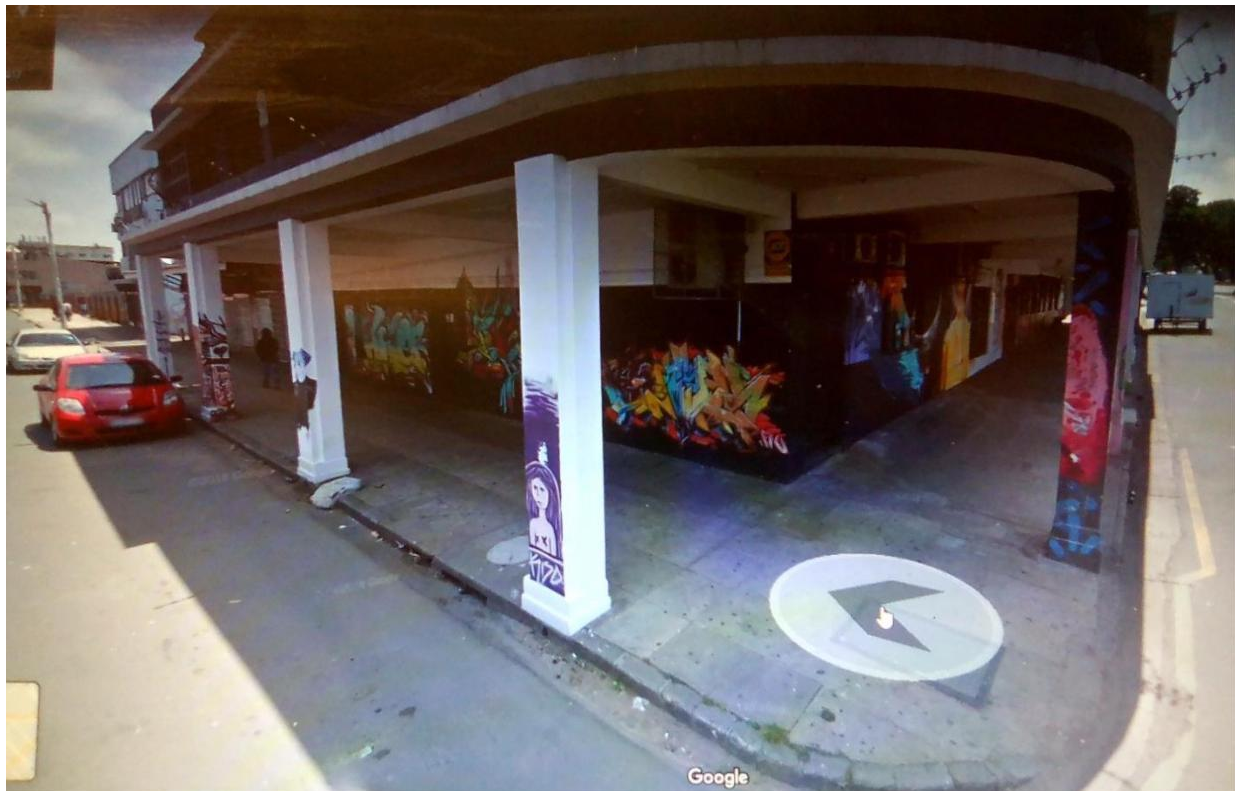


Figure 1: Reading location pictured in daytime. Corner of Umbilo Road and Clark Road. Umbilo, Durban. Google Maps, 2019.

Since the Umbilo neighbourhood in Durban is one I have a personal relationship and history with, I decided to participate in the event with a public reading. The fact that it was Women's Day, a collaborative event, and that women were being overtly celebrated and supported at this time, also made me feel more comfortable in sharing my work here.

The event took place outside on the street, using The Winston Pub, Durban's oldest punk music venue, as a base and support for resources (beer, extension cords, toilet etc). Local graphic artist, Tasmin Naidoo, was the organizer of the event and the mural artist team consisted of local artists: Dhiantha Achary, Nadia Naidoo, Tessa Mae Hadlow, and Kylie Wentzel. The event began in the early afternoon with a small crowd consisting largely of urban youth from various cultural backgrounds. There were slightly more women at the event, men, non-gender-conforming individuals, a few children and families, and a handful of people from older generations.



Figure 2: Event location. The Winston Pub, Durban's historic live punk music venue. Photo by Tasmin Naidoo. 09 August 2019.

What was great about the space was that there were people constantly moving through it – pedestrians walking home from their work at the nearby factories, women in slippers buying bread and airtime from the corner shop, a young man who offered to sweep the pavement for

some coins, a homeless man who came to bum a smoke. Some stopped to look at the mural paintings, try on clothes from the second-hand clothes vendors, listen to the music, observe the space for a minute, or glanced and carried on walking, carried on with their day.

Although some people had suggested I read inside where it would be quieter and more intimate, I decided that I wanted to read outside on the street as this was where people already were and I did not want to break up the small crowd. The organizer set up a mic, a small speaker, and a bar stool in front of an existing mural portrait painted in 2016 by local graffiti artist Mook Lion, of the late Delon Moody (4Givn), also a well-known graffiti writer in the Durban community. It was special for me to be reading against a portrait of my late friend, and a friend of many other's in the audience there that day. New murals were being painted, while simultaneously older ones, were being remembered. Having the "stage" set up in front of Delon's portrait, sparked discussions, memories and comments about him and his contributions to the community over the years, which somehow gave the space a sense of weight, history, and grounding.



Figure 3: Mural art portrait of Delon Moody by Mook Lion. Reading by Robyn Perros. Photo by Jess Bothma. Clark Road, Umbilo, Durban. 09 August 2019.

I selected a few pieces to read that I thought spoke to ideas and observations of the city space in Durban, as well as women-centered experiences, gender-based violence, and inequality – given that it was Women's Day, and given that a lot of my writing tends to fall into those

arenas. A crowd gathered around in a cluster, some people sat down cross-legged on the pavement, others stood out in the street, narrowly escaping the passing cars. Some passers-by stopped for a minute to listen, some stayed, some didn't notice at all. I found the audience to be very supportive and respectful. They listened attentively but also cheered, clapped, jumped in with comments, made requests, and took out their cellphones to make pictures and videos. I enjoyed the informal ease of the interaction with the audience, the gap between us felt small. I think this may have been due to the fact that the space in which we were all in, was undefined, there were no strict codes to adhere to, as there may have been in a book-store, a gallery, or in a seminar room. The space was being made in that moment.



Figure 4: Murals in progress by Diantha Achary (right) and Kylie Wentzel (left). Photo by Tasmin Naidoo. Clark Road, Umbilo, Durban. 09 August 2019.

During the reading, cars and motorbikes roared past, taxis hooted, shouting voices bounced through the street, Durban's green parrots squeaked overhead – sounds of the city moved past and through the busy corner we were located on. At first, I worried that this would distract me and the audience, become a disturbance, but as there was no way to control it, I tried to embrace the noise as it arose. As time passed, the city sounds become just another soundtrack to the spoken-words, or rather, the spoken-words another soundtrack to the city sounds. This made me feel part of the environment I was in, as I was having to respond to it. I enjoyed this lack of control, the spontaneousness of the sounds, how reading aloud in the city heightened the many other stories unfolding around us.

Although I knew a handful of people in the audience, there were many people I did not know, and was extremely nervous about how they would react and respond to some of the difficult and uncomfortable topics I touched on, like white privilege, urban poverty, sexual violence, death, the complexities of sexuality. The audience was very generous in their feedback on the reading and throughout the rest of the evening and the days that followed, I received some of the following mixed responses that I recorded and kept anonymous:

"I liked the picture you painted of the city."

"When you were telling that story of the people who collect things in the street, I always dismiss those people, I never think about them, just ignore them you know, like whatever, but I felt like that story gave me empathy, like that's a real human. I guess I felt guilty and shit."

"So much of it was weirdly very relatable."

"When you were reading, I closed my eyes and a black and white film played through my mind."

"I wanted to hear you read with more anger though."

"Fuck, feel like I just read your diary."

"You went in deep. People aren't used to going in deep like that. It's too scary for them."

"You spoke about so many things that I've experienced, things that I'm too afraid to share. It was really inspiring, and such a relief to hear someone speak about them. To know that someone else experienced the same thing, it just becomes less of this big monster inside, you know."

"Even though you weren't that confident in your delivery, the words were powerful, transfixing, I was like stuck there."

"You're so intense man, whenever people get like that I'm just like 'smoke a spliff, it'll be okay,' you know?"

“You said things that I’ve tried to express about women’s bodies so many times but just couldn’t.”

“I felt my stomach turn into a sick knot.”

“Even though I’m a guy, those stories made me think about my own life, they made me really feel something, like about my dad and stuff. It was really emotional.”

It was a challenge for me to accept the positive feedback and not grow disheartened by the more negative feedback. However, I was grateful to have received such a wide variety of responses from such a wide variety of people, which will help me to improve my writing and delivery in the future.

Oral traditions have always held a strong place in societies, communities and cultures throughout the world. I think about how poetry was used to strengthen communities, teach moral values, relieve people from sufferings, combat oppression, unify. Often it hurts me that traditional poetry is mystified, tucked away in books, diaries, and heads. I want to work towards making poetry and stories more accessible and integrated into our daily lives, into our daily commutes, into the spaces where we sit, wait, walk, and wonder. This reading experience, reiterated the importance of writing and reading poetry in public places; that it is vital if we are to keep it at the forefront of the human consciousness, where it can perhaps help to inspire, transform, acknowledge, remember, and perhaps even forget.

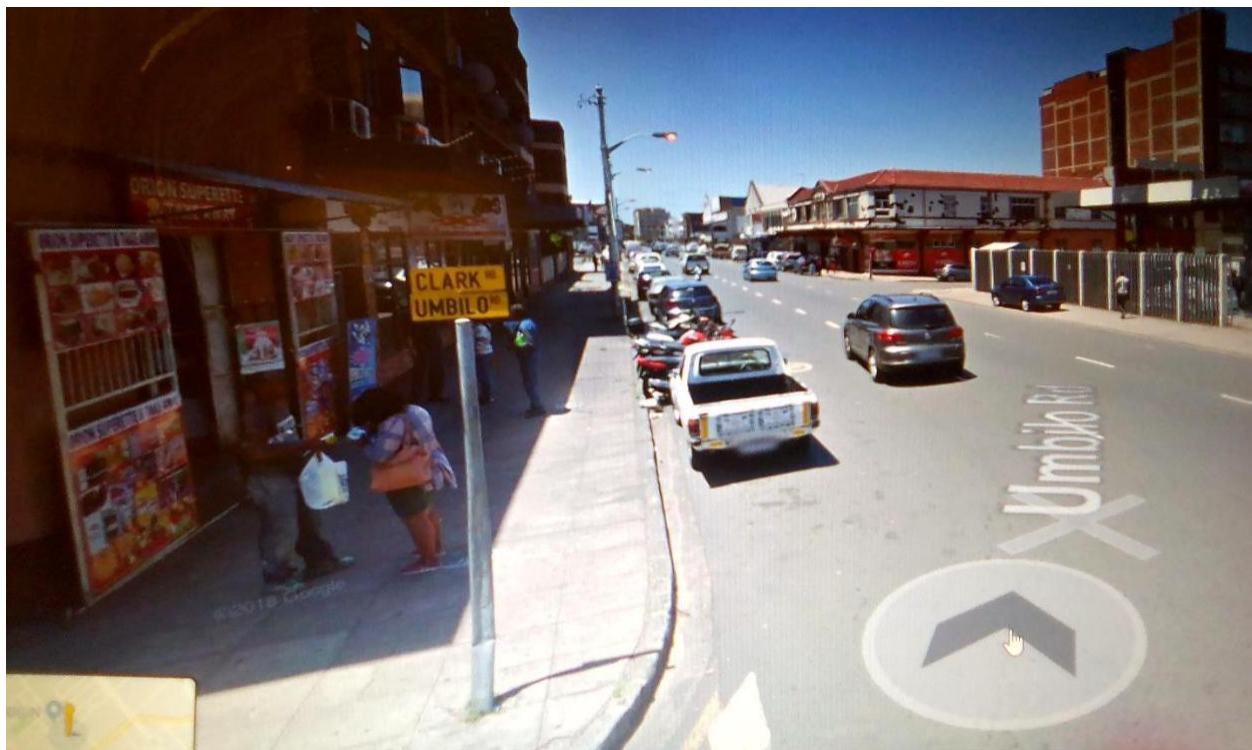


Figure 5: Event location pictured in daylight. Corner of Clark and Umbilo Road, Durban. Google Maps, 2019.

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