

**This document consists of two (2) parts:**

**Part A: Thesis**

**Part B: Portfolio**

Part A: Thesis

**Jungle Drive and Other Stories**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

of

Rhodes University

by

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November 2020

## Thesis Proposal

My thesis comprises prose in a variety of forms with porous borders, including the short story, flash fiction and prose poetry. I am attracted to a processual approach to writing as I like the potential for experimentation with spontaneity and textual improvisation within and across forms that this allows. I am influenced by Joanna Ruocco's novellas, *The Mothering Coven* and *Dan*, whose worlds are built with generously scattered references, interesting words and strange features, delivered in a dead-pan tone that joyfully scrambles my logic. At the same time, I am inspired by the precision and beauty of Tina May Hall's prose, and how she plays in the space between the natural and magical worlds. In addition, I draw on the musicality and rhythm of Noy Holland and JA Tyler's prose, adding a corporeal layer to the words, sounds and movement of the text.

# Contents

These Stars	6
Jungle Drive	7
Charlotte	12
The landscape is sparse	14
Stones	15
Once Upon a Flying Stone	16
Dear Friends	17
My Sister Mary Made a Music Video and I Wasn't In It	20
Glossary #1	24
The First Abscess	26
Carol	27
Malawi Gold	29
An Aftermath	32
Marie	33
Sylvia	34
Glossary #2	35
Scenes	37
The Farmer and the Artist	38
I forgot about a bird	39
The Chicken and the Rabbit	40
Choose Your Own Adventure	41
Mrs Figg	43
Dogology	44
Monkfish Wrapped in Bacon	47
Gina	48
A thread curves and bends	53
Me-Ben-Rose	54
Schedule	55
My nostrils fill with swamp odours	56
Net in a Tree	57
A Walk in the Woods	58
Afternoon Activity: River Walk (beautiful, medium fitness)	59
Theory of Change	60
Ask Hagrid's Mama	61
A List of Common Misconceptions	64
Poems	65
Alice	66
Green Circle	68

My Friend Asked Me to Speak	69
The Door	70
In the Library	71
An Interview	74
Story Sum	78
Everything made sense and nothing was ugly or fat	79
The trees are losing their leaves	80
no title	81
Anthropocene	84
Untitled	85

## These Stars

It's quiet, windless leaf quiet, like a tree or an unwalked lawn. The night layers my skin in clear ice, there's no moon; I'm all gooseflesh and thirsty for air. The sea wakes in the distance, yawning moans along curves, the sky is a song full of stars. I'm hungry for stars, desert stars, boulder stars, those after-storm paths up the harbour hill stars, these stars. I start with the juiciest, thorniest stars, morsels of white light and spines. They fill sockets from uprooted molars with glowing, thread beams through the gaps in my teeth. Stars drop down my throat, brittle crabs scuttling shells, Antares glows red from my larynx. There is more sky to eat, more strips of black holes, but my spoon is tired and bending. My last mouthful spills and pools with my shadow, a crater in a hideaway moon.

## Jungle Drive

We left the club early. The crowd was too young, or had too much hair on their shoulders. We drove to the parking lot up the hill at the edge of town, where it met the Brazilian jungle. A road appeared ahead that we hadn't seen, the caipirinha jugs sent us up the hill, or maybe it was the mint leaves or the guitar strumming and catcalls, but we followed that bumpy track, it wound along, eroded in places, eaten away, untravelled. We reached a flat area higher up and stopped there. We could watch the sunrise later, over this jungle we thought we'd have explored by now.

We ate coxinhas, those golden cones of fried dough, crisp and filled with chicken, and some of those saucisson Brazilian corn dogs we'd discovered at bus stations, churros too, they'd gone cold but the sugar and doce de leite still layered our palates in caramel and happiness. Sister and I laughed with our heads thrown back, cackling delight into darkness through the windows, it was different to how we laughed at home. The night sky was navy blue here, its archways less curved, more angled, the stars patterning them in foreign stripes, exotic clusters.

We must've passed out with sugar on our faces and plans to watch the sun paint the jungle gold. We must've left crumbs all over the seats. Our truck flew into the night sky. We floated into the forest canopy and I stroked the tops of the trees with my feet that dangled from the window. A school of fish passed us, glowing in luminous scales, their eyes lit with dangling lamps.

'Sister!'

My name hissed though the leaves.

'Sister! Wake up!'

The dark night sky grew lighter.

'Sister!'

Sister shook me awake, roughly, madly, desperately agitated.

I opened my eyes. My mouth dropped open. My stomach opened in a gaping hole, then dropped into the floor below my seat.

Our truck was no longer on the road. We were rolling through the forest. Neither of us driving. We could've been rolling for hours, days. Neither of us spoke, though our breath came in tight coils of panic that wound around the seatbelts, our scuffed boots, the jackets and bags of trash.

We watched a lilac snake watch us pass, with glowing yellow eyes, its purple tongue tasting the air and our fear. The windows were still open.

The truck was moving slowly, though not slow enough to jump out and stop it, thankfully not fast enough to lose control, throw us out, crash us, crush us, flatten us and itself against trees. The landscape was thick with trees, angled branches and leaves every green.

Sister grabbed my wrist. I grabbed hers. We stayed like that for a while, squeezing each other's wrists, watching the jungle, counting out heart beats.

The trees bent aside for our path, polite, though their low branches scratched at the paintwork wild and savagely. Low shrubs raised their leafy skirts and we rolled through their twigs and branches. Once, a bush raised its lime green form and we passed underneath it, we waved as we passed, I yelled—

'Thank you! Thank you!' through a crack in my window.

Those words broke the breathy silence.

'Are you afraid?' I asked Sister.

'A little.'

'Well it's a very beautiful thing, this jungle, and so polite and ordered. Not like I thought it would be.'

'But there's so much of it. And just these two small pieces of us.'

'And this big piece of truck.'

'And that, yes.'

'I'm not afraid of the jungle, Sister.'

'I'm afraid of what's in it.'

I scanned the trees and saw many sets of eyes. Marmosets, a jaguar. Bats and bats and bats, though the encroaching daylight had almost sent them all to hidey holes.

A troop of vervet monkeys called hello's to us.

'Hello, hello!' they waved, swinging between branches.

'Hello!' I called back, 'Where are we?'

'Hello, hello, where are we,' they called back in volleying pitches.

'Hello,' called another, throwing a jackfruit at our windscreen. The stringy juice stole our view and a web of cracks spread across the drivers side.

'Fuck you, idiot creature! Fuck you!' shouted Sister, 'We're scared and lost, hungry and covered in crumbs!'

I looked at Sister, shocked and sorry, and confused as to which was stronger.

'Are you that scared, as scared as all that?'

I gave her the bag of churros at my feet, though they'd gone soft.

She forced a whole one into her mouth, and her face went pink as she chewed.

'Maybe we shouldn't have taken that road,' I said.

'Maybe we shouldn't have taken this trip,' she said.

'But at least we're seeing the jungle?'

'The jungle is killing us.'

I looked out of the window. The vervet monkeys were following us from further away. Most of them were carrying jackfruit, some were carrying babies, some were carrying both. Others had empty hands, swinging at their mismatched sides.

'Let's listen to some music,' I said.

Sister didn't answer me, she just kept chewing that same old churro, though it might have become something else.

I slipped a CD into the radio. Sertaneja, country music, some of the classical and some universitario. Siblings singing harmony, guitars, something to make Sister feel cheerful.

'I wish we had more caipirinha's here,' I said.

'I wish we never had them ever,' said Sister.

A flurry of bats flew out from two trees we passed between. The truck was still rolling downhill in a gradual, circling, turning. They darted through the canopy, shouting together in bleats and bursts. Some aimed for monkeys, and jackfruit rain fell from the canopy. More stringy fruits landed on our truck, denting the bonnet, another on the windscreen.

The sertaneja spread into the trees and the shrubs.

It was getting dark. We'd been trundling through the jungle for hours.

Sister switched on the headlights. Eyes appeared in the blackness, some still, some moving, some in the closest bushes, others in the middle and far distance. I turned around to look into the back of the truck. It was filled with vervet monkeys with their babies and jackfruit, marmosets with orange manes. One puma, its eyes amber and staring.

I didn't tell Sister about them.

We must've fallen asleep. I must've fallen asleep. I woke up and we were still there, moving through the forest. Sister was balled up on her knees in front of her seat, squeezed into the gap below the steering wheel, her face hidden in the crook of her arm.

I wondered if this could have been more fun if she hadn't been here. Or if I hadn't.

I looked behind me. The monkeys and marmoset were still there, mostly asleep, mostly lolling against one another in a friendly pile of fur, orange, jackfruit and baby faces. The puma was gone.

That's when I noticed something as we passed it. It was right there. I gasped but couldn't see enough in time. All I got was the back of it. A sign. An actual sign, nailed to wooden poles and sticking out of the bushes.

The truck was going too fast to stop. We were still on a descent. Still squeezing through trunks and traipsing through creepers, still cruising past snakes and tropical flowers.

Sister was awake.

'You won't believe it,' I said, 'you won't believe what I'm going to tell you.'

'Holy shit,' she said, pointing ahead, 'holy shit holy-shit-holy-shit,' she kept saying, her pitch rising, her words streaming.

There was a sign up ahead. A big, bold, bright yellow one, with words in red and black.

We were moving quite fast now, it was hard to read as we passed it.

'I think it was advertising coxinhas,' I said.

'That's what I saw too,' said Sister.

We were both alert now.

'I saw one earlier,' I said, 'but only after we'd passed it, you were sleeping.'

'Why didn't you wake me,' screeched Sister, 'why-didn't-yOU WAKE ME UP, YOU USELESS DRIFTING STON—'

'Look,' I said, pointing ahead, 'another sign.'

Sister stopped her words with her palm.

We both leant forward, I stuck my head out of the window.

'That was definitely advertising coxinhas,' I said.

Tense silence curled and coiled through the gap between me and Sister. She kept her eyes glued ahead.

Another sign came up, closely followed by a cluster of three. Monkeys sat on their frames, holding wrappers and takeout boxes, watching us pass.

'We must be coming closer to a town,' I said.

I looked for another CD for something to do with my hands. Maybe something more western, less nostalgic. I turned on the radio, and a voice came through the speakers—

*'Welcome to the Forest Clearing. If you would like the following message in English, shout English, if you'd like it in French, shout Francais, if you'd like it in Brazilian Portuguese shout Brasilia—'*

'English!' shouted Sister

'I wanted to hear all the options,' I said.

'Shut up and listen.'

*'You are coming closer to The Forest Clearing. If you were coming here to live, welcome! We look forward to adding your skills and colours to our commune of art and living. If you were coming for our state-famous snacks, wind down your windows and shout All The Snacks! when you get to the green and purple sign. This is a place of peace, but you shouldn't stop unless you're planning to stay—'*

'Let's stop!' I shouted.

More and more signs were appearing, lining our way. There were pictures of poets and potters and astronomers, puma researchers, parrot painters, birdcall apologists, prose-makers and chefs.

'Let's stay, this place looks amazing,' I said

'This place looks like a hippie colony,' Sister said, 'we're not stopping.'

'Please!' I said, but I knew Sister would decide on stopping or not stopping.

*'... If you don't want to stop, or if you're lost, the next town is not too much further. You should arrive at Blumenau 15 minutes or 30km from here if you stay in the demarcated area. We've positioned poles all along the route to guide you. The descent ends about halfway, and you'll reach a well-tarred road. Be sure to keep your windows closed as you pass us if you don't want to stay—'*

We had reached the outskirts of the clearing. Children ran along with balloons, throwing streamers and holding buckets of steaming coxinhas. A man stood frying saucissons below a bright and flashing sign. A woman was tending bright creepers of tropical blooms, oranges and purples and glowing ember reds.

'Please, Sister,' I said, soft and low.

She kept her eyes straight ahead.

We passed a meditating child, she was levitating over a pond covered in tree frogs and lily pads. A puma was walking with a young boy, they loped side by side below blooming trees.

The announcements had ended and our sertaneja started blaring through the speakers, Sister had turned up the radio for the announcement. She tried to turn it down but I took her wrist, quite quickly and decisively, not at all like a sloth.

'What are you doing,' said Sister.

'Let's stop and dance.'

'No.'

'Please, just for a little bit.'

She shook me off and looked ahead.

I looked back at the town that was beginning to shrink into the jungle dark, children and signs, pumas and baskets, living, life, cartwheels and monkeys with jackfruit. I wanted to see them all. I wanted to try the jungle coxinhas and stand close to the lily pad pond. Sister didn't want to stay. She didn't want to stop. She didn't want to like coxinhas and saucissons.

'I love you,' I said, 'I also like you, most of the time, I hope you'll find Blumenau. I love you, I hope I'll see you again, good luck to you, take care, I hope you find a husband and a child, two children, I love you, drive safely, I love, like, love you,' I said.

It was more than I planned on saying, but I was struggling to loosen my seatbelt.

It clicked open and I rolled down the window and squeezed myself out, dropping and rolling onto the forest floor.

'Goodbye,' I yelled, 'goodbye, Sister!' I waved and jumped and smiled and clapped her goodbye. She looked back through the truck. I saw her mouth widen as she noticed the monkeys. She threw a wave through her window and wound it closed.

'Goodbye!' I shouted as the sertaneja faded over the bumpy track. I could hear Sister singing along now, I could hear her whoop as the Big Town drew near, I could hear her go.

'Goodbye,' I said softly to her blinking lights—

'Goodbye,' to her turning wheels.

'Goodbye,' I said, as I heard her start the ignition, and then the truck was gone completely. The music faded to loose twangs, soft drums, then silence. My heart dropped then, and so did my shoulders and my eyes. I watched the forest floor and thought about how I'd said too much. Or too little. I looked up at the silence, at the place where the truck disappeared, and thought about the way her goodbye had landed in a heap on the ground, like me.

'I like you,' I said, 'come back sometime, don't forget about me or the monkeys, the shrieking laughter or this.' I let my eyes drop back down to the layers of leaves on the ground.

'Hello,' said a girl, with a small marmoset on her shoulder.

'Hello,' I said.

'Hello,' she went.

And I went hello again.

## Charlotte

Charlotte hated birdcalls. She was sure that people that liked them also folded books over when they read and sprinkled sugar over their porridge and ate it without stirring it in.

‘They probably also talk about the royal family,’ she said aloud.

There were so many old leaves covering the path. Some were damp and blackening, others were dry as kindling. It looked like only she and the bushbuck were promenading this stretch of riverside forest.

‘Well, I also sprinkle sugar over porridge sometimes without stirring it in. Maybe I could like birdcalls one day too.’

A touraco started its low taunting just then, and was quickly joined by another.

‘Urgh,’ said Charlotte, as the low repetitions crossed the air in front of her, her throat vibrating in protest. She tilted her neck and coughed in an uncovered diagonal, aiming for the leaf-patterned sky.

‘It’s wonderful to cough with such freedom,’ she said, stroking her air-scratched throat.

She edged along the path, holding her skirts above her ankles. She fancied herself a Victorian explorer today, though it felt a little like middle-aged humour. Nevertheless, it felt suited to her particular, singular mission for this particular, singular morning. And that was to have a period of direct, punctuated, unwhimsical time. One where her observations and sensations could be ordered into exact packages of well-defined actions. A capsule of diction and syntax enacted. To spend some time fully *present*. To fold her observations and sensations into exact packages of well-defined Zen. A capsule of breath and bliss enacted, somehow.

‘I don’t know what this means, but I will try it for something other than love or money. For branches or roots. For snakes always in retreat.’

A palm-nut vulture landed noisily in the low branches over the river and started its grunting, knocking call.

Charlotte looked the other way. She took a deep breath in, and contracted her core muscle as she exhaled, trapping her frustration in the horizontal fibres of her lower abdomen. She forced a smile when she breathed in again.

‘That was quite effective,’ she said, picking up her walking tempo once more.

‘*Allegro*,’ she said, and began a ginger, hop-skip’ish jog along the path, always alert for snakes or sinister roots.

The forest was awake now, and the ocean roaring its approval at something—probably itself.

The palm-nut vulture had been joined by its mate, and their yellow, red-rimmed eyes were following Charlotte along the path, probably willing a trip and a bruise, perhaps a broken nose or ankle-turning.

‘*Largo*,’ said Charlotte, halting her jog abruptly and trodding up the stairs she had reached.

She needed a place to try her experiment where it would be adequately scientific and direct. The palm-nut vultures floated off over the river, and she descended the mud-slick steps down to a small deck on the water.

‘This spot always makes me think of snakes and crocodiles,’ she said, ‘What a pity.’

It was a pity, since if she weren’t thinking about snakes and crocodiles, maybe she could sit on the seed and bird-shit-specked wood and sketch the water. Or some of the branches. Or the edge of the wooden planks.

‘*Ritardando*,’ she said, slowing her breathing in a Latin diminuendo, and settling in a strip of sunlight to watch the river.

She arched her spine and threw back her head, opening her mouth and sticking out her tongue with a creature-ish fire breath. It turned into a choking splutter of misplaced spit. She shook out her middle and gave her attention back to the surface of the water, alert for ripples and scales.

A sound came from across the river. One she knew.

‘Palm nut fucking vulture.’

Clicks and coiling raps of air against beak called out from the bulrushes across the water.

‘Or maybe something else...’ she said, the vibrations puzzling her sense of balance.

The sound of interrupted starlings joined the clicks and raps in an embarrassed barrage of twittering, though she couldn’t see any birds. The collection of sounds grew. The night-time crow of a cockerel. Three feeding bee-eaters. A lonely hadeda on a roof and thousands of barn swallows roosting. Then a high pitched sound. Bells. Homemade bells that hold the chords between prayers sung next-door all through the night. Charlotte’s eyes were glazed and bright, she edged towards the sound.

‘I don’t know what bird this is,’ she said.

The threads of sound wove themselves into a single chord. It traveled the space between Charlotte and its source, like a monkey-nut’s arc through the air from a boat filled with children.

The chord flew up and down, it dove underwater and jumped over long-ago boats on the backs of flying memory fish. It bounced from branch to eardrum, splitting and rejoining in octaves and crotchets and quavers. The sound filled Charlotte with trapped screams and shudders. She was suspended in resin, trapped in amber curves.

The sound reached the end of a crescendo, in three dimensions, perhaps four—maybe seven. And then it faded, spiralling smaller and smaller until the threads formed a circle that could fit onto the head of a pin. A crowd of starlings rose from the bulrushes and formed a tight knot of dark brown and rust-tipped wings.

## **The landscape is sparse**

It must be the absence of rain that made it like this. It's usually a green-painted hollow, swum through by fish with eyes staring out from their sides. It's strange that you would find fish here. It might be the way that feet tread damp loam, drumming ground into sand brushed off stones. It could be the crabs that scuttle dry leaves, crushing yellows to crackling floors. It could be the painter, his old wooden easel, his palette all brown, green and grey; the low light, the brushstrokes, the glass jars and sponges, the charcoal lines smudged in dull scales.

## **Stones**

There are fourteen stones on my windowsill. At least I think it's my windowsill, it might not be. If I could say for sure whose windowsill it is, then it might be easier to allocate the stones to their authentic, most truthful origins, but I doubt that could ever happen. And if it did, perhaps then I'd need to do the same for the window frame, the window pane, the walls that hold them all. And as for the cement below, the ground, the hands that dug the ground, moved the soil, chose the tree to leave standing... But I need to use the stones. I'm not even sure if they're stones though they look exactly like stones. Perhaps if I hold each one in my mouth, alone, the edges will merge with my edges and I'll know their origin, and my end. But even then—is the origin of the stones not the same origin as my palate, my skull, the seat and the floor and the far-flung stars? I hold a stone in my palm. All it does is assure me I have one true patch of hand. When I close it into my fist I feel an absence of hand in the space where there's a presence of stone. Is the space that holds the absence of the presence empty? Or filled to the edges of me and its edges. I squeeze the stone. Or the space. Until its uncertain whether the space or stone or absence or presence is pushing at my hand or my hand is squeezing it. My hand has no tenacity or resolve, or certainly not enough to squeeze a stone. It must be the stone or space pushing at the hand, that alien hand that might no longer be my hand. The stone is returned to the windowsill. There are thirteen more to choose from. Hesitant fingers take one. They're curling and shifting, averting their grasp. The stone singses their edges with hardened cold. The hand throws the stone through the window into a wall of trees. It's gone. It's gone from the sill. It's gone from my sight. But now I'm not sure it was ever there. The only proof I have is a recording.

## Once Upon a Flying Stone

Once upon a time, not all that long ago, but really—long, long, aeons and epochs and generations ago—there was a boy called Tim and a girl called Rose. They had a cow called Lucy, a dog called Pom Pom and a cat called Fluffy Bum. They also knew a tree goblin named Binklebonk, a worm named Mudwiggle and an eagle called Jim. There was also a boy called George, one called Bruce (surname Bogtrotter) and a trio named Bessie, Jo and Fanny. There was a man called Mr Hoppy who liked Mrs Silver—and four girls with the surname March. There was a clever fox who lost his tail, Katy-who-fell-off-her-swing, a clever girl who read all the books at the library, and a pig who learnt how to herd sheep. That pig was different to another pig who made friends with a spider named Charlotte. There were Charlie and James and Diana and Anne, The Cuthbert's and Berenstein's and Twit's. Also Edmund, Lucy, Susan, Peter, Bertram, Baloo and Mary Lennox. Boggis-Bunce-Bean and Fleshlumpeater, and Sophie and Colin and Dickon and Martha. Pongo, Perdita and the Darling's. And the Dearly's. Also Moonface, Silky, Saucepan Man and Dame Washalot.

They all lived in millions of particles of dust, floating and twirling and settling in light shafts all over the far and near distance, like very fine hairs. They were in boarding houses and glass elevators and peaches and caves. In Narnia, Avonlea, Ingleside, and up a faraway tree in a wood in the country, full of trees that said *wisha-wisha-wisha*. Some of them liked to hide in cupboards, others liked pickled limes, and others chased rabbits from cabbages at the end of an angry rake.

*Nathalie*, they whisper, or it's something else they're saying. It's hard to make out, with the blurring lines, the fades and spots, the shadows, earwax, railways and pavements all over London. *Nathalie*, they call, but it's actually me speaking—they don't know my name, and how on earth would I squeeze between the rails of their neighbour's balcony, without frightening the Esio Trot? *Nathalie*, they insist, a twinge of annoyance in their tones. Perhaps there is a way for me to join them. Maybe a smell I could follow.

I raise my nostrils and sniff for Pop biscuits baking in the hollow of a tree, or hints of damp soil behind a wall covered in ivy. A red-breasted robin might appear to twitter me in the right direction if I stand in the driveway for long enough. I could follow a crescendo of twilight barking above the metallic rattle of pots and pans. One of them might fetch me in a cherry-bounce, or a sleigh filled with furs and Turkish Delight—or perhaps a giant horse will come cantering by and I'll dive for his wind-whipped tail. Maybe it will help if I talk backwards or drink a cocktail of household cleaners, animal pills and brown paint, unless there's a network of tunnels under this house that joins hen houses and fox holes and a secret cider cellar. Perhaps the answer is to find an old spade or a bulldozer, or a thousand sticks of dynamite and blast a hole in the ground. For a start. Unless the start is where I need to go, rather than where I need to begin.

## Dear Friends

Dear Former Members of Escobar's Cartel,

Did I tell you when I think of recording my Dad's stories, the ones he loves telling, a hand pushes down on my chest. It could be one finger. Or maybe my ribs contracting. When I think of going to Colombia, a rope pulls between my ankle and my diaphragm, and my body tilts to the left. It's an unnatural angle, but maybe that's the cost of holding onto a cube of ice with a crab-claw pinch.

\*\*\*

Dear Therapist,

I cry when I watch people kneeling. And when I see people hugging or standing together. I cry watching videos of cats and dogs being bathed, of schools welcoming students, of friends making bread in the kitchen. The happy tears whoop and cheer and sing Irish drinking songs. Some are sad, they play Spanish guitar and sing *Mon Marie*. Others are silent and unsure. When the types all mix at once the noise can be unsettling enough to make me fold the emotions into triangles, plastic packets squashed into a bottomless bag, waiting for air to fill them.

\*\*\*

Dear Britain and America's Got Talent,

My Dad and I cry when we watch people singing on your shows. Neither of us knows the other is crying. We have secret tears under our skin that squeeze through the pouches below our eye sockets. They slide over our cheek bones to the jawline and curve down our necks to pool in the gap where our clavicles almost meet. A small bay of tears above the sternum. Perhaps that's why his heart is leaking.

\*\*\*

Dear Untitled Folder,

Did I tell you I keep holding my breath. I don't realise I'm doing it until I take a deep breath in, and out. I do that every few days. I'm thinking about setting a timer every seven minutes, just to remind myself. There're so many things breath is saying, but I'm struggling to understand its ins and holds and outs. Trying to write about them feels trite, thin.

\*\*\*

Dear Lakes, Geese, Jon Snow and Professor Snape,

I'm naked and goose-pimpled on the lakeside, sliding a toe on a thick slab of ice. High altitude, vertigo, a crowd of birds come in to roost. I'm waiting to start seeing patterns, fish just below the surface, cracks in the ice.

\*\*\*

Dear Britain and America's Got Talent,  
I've buried my anger with those sternum tears.

\*\*\*

Dear Therapist,  
Sorry, my last message wasn't meant for you.

\*\*\*

Dear Horoscope Reader, Life Coach and Diary,  
Did I tell you that my finger has its own mind. The index finger on my left hand. Once it pointed without me pointing it. It stood up in slow motion, like a lumbering monster in a film that realises someone is hiding around a corner. After the finger pointed, it bowed back down to make a fist with its sisters and pummelled my brother. The same finger ripped his shirt in the kitchen during the Christmas holidays. It started as a gentle placing on his shoulder and turned into a vicious, hungry claw. I should have said nothing. I should've thrown away the mango peels and left the kitchen.

\*\*\*

Dear Dr Suess, Richard Scarry, Chris Riddell and Quentin Blake,  
How would you draw an angry index finger?

\*\*\*

Dear Dr Suess,  
Are you a real doctor, one that could help me grow fingerlings?

\*\*\*

Dear Therapist,  
I've thought about it, and I don't know what happens to anger when you bury it.

\*\*\*

Dear Former Members of Escobar's Cartel,  
I think my anger congeals in my left index finger. My finger that has its own mind. If it stays buried long enough it should merge with its mind and birth fingerlings that travel my passageways looking for a place to settle. If I store enough anger the fingerlings might pattern my legs in varicose veins. Or they might point out from my spine and give me a ridged crocodile back. Do you think I could cut them out and sell them? Surely there's a market for rage-infused fleshlings, conceived by an angry finger-mind fuck? I'm sure there are ways to smoke a fingerling. I might need to desiccate them after cutting them out. Perhaps they could be pounded into white powder, bagged and stuffed into ice-cream truck tyres.

\*\*\*

Dear Britain's Got Talent,

I sent you the wrong message. Thanks for your response. Please don't contact me again.

\*\*\*

Dear Horoscope Reader, Aragorn, Anne Frank and Diary,

I've figured out how to bury my anger. I could systematically forget it, the same way I forget to breathe deeply. I could layer the memories under thick gauze soaked in mercurochrome, and send them into a dreamless sleep. I need to learn to stop fidgeting, stop biting my nails and shifting my position; it'll unsettle the gauze at the most inconvenient time. Perhaps when I'm in the middle of folding rage or tapping ice or breathing at the river mouth at Mbolompo. Or in the middle of skipping along the lagoon with a balloon made of shards of porcelain stars—I might lose my grip and release it to a hungry, pale white sky.

\*\*\*

Dear Former Members of Escobar's Cartel,

Did I tell you there're days I'm so lonely I feel like I might be an orphan. And then my finger reminds me, not yet.

# My Sister Mary Made a Music Video and I Wasn't In It

*after Sabrina Orah Mark*

Mary is my sister and she is making a music video. Finally. I arrived today. Nobody from the family has spoken to me in years. Partly because of the distance. Partly because of the spores. Partly because they don't know what languages I speak.

'When are we going to start?' I ask.

'If you're going to be liKE THAT YOU CAN JUST LEAVE!' shouted Mary.

She's mostly like this, my sister. Though she's never like this. She's never really like anything. Even when she lives with our parents. She's always had trouble with verbs. Verbs are her deepest vice—thorns embedded in the hardest part of the skin on her heels. I've tried to pull them out for her but she thinks I'm trying to kill her. She thinks I don't look up to her anymore. I'm only looking down to get a good look at those heels.

Mary is setting up a camera. It's a camcorder, one she bought in London, the one Father dropped in a bus in Italy.

'Is it working?' I ask, almost in a whisper.

Mary doesn't answer.

'She just didn't hear you,' comes a whisper from behind the couch.

I creep towards the gap between the wall and the couch. There's an intercom installed against the wall, a light flashing.

'Mary, could I have a pair of socks?' I ask, 'and maybe a cup of tea?'

I know this will take her at least forty-five minutes.

She doesn't look up from her task.

'Mary?' I ask a little louder, sure to keep glass sheens and stray barbs from my tone.

She looks up at me, her eyes filled with tears. She thinks I've never been able to see them.

'Yes, Sister?'

'Could I have some tea and a pair of socks?'

'You know where they are. Help yourself with pleasure.'

I don't want to upset her. Not now. Not after all these years of eggshells, piling up among the plants in Mother's rockery. To feed the mongeese.

'Mary. I don't want to touch too many things. I've been Outside all this time. You've all been so careful all these years.'

I haven't asked her where the others are.

'Ok I'll do it. You can wait outside, visitors stay on the verandah at the back.'

She disappears down the stairs.

'Sister!' whispers a voice from the intercom.

I rush over and listen.

'Come to the garage. It's unlocked, the doors are open.'

Mary comes up the stairs with the socks.

'You can wait outside while I make the tea. It usually takes me some time.'

She doesn't know she has trouble with verbs. She thinks she just takes extra care with them.

I walk outside and wait until her back is turned to the tea cupboard. I'm reminded of a time that she loved me and I loved her. I have a feeling towards her now. I don't know what it is.

'Sister!' A whisper hisses from the open garage door.

I walk in and they're all there in the dim light, eyes wide, knuckles white, legs dangling from the rafters. Father is there. Mother. Grandma and Aunt and a collection of cousins whose faces I can't count. Brother is there. His daughter is there, though her eyes look faraway.

'What are you all doing here?' I ask.

'It's wonderful to see you,' says Father.

'Where is Mary?' Says Grandma.

'If I have to hang on to this fucking beam for another 6 months,' says Aunt, 'I will bash my head in.'

'Have you seen my wife?' asks Brother.

'Have you seen my mother?' asks his daughter.

'How long have you all been here?' I ask.

Mother ignores me. A barrage of words answers my question. There are more of them. Mother and Father's sides of the family are holed up in the roof of the garage. They're balanced on beams next to tables and spare planks and a dolls house far too old. Cousins are hanging from hooks on the walls and uncles are rolled into carpets. Their eyes are tired and excited, a little sunken and mostly blue.

'We're here for the music video,' says Oldest Cousin, 'she said she needed actors, so we came.'

'But you know her trouble with verbs,' said Father.

He knows her trouble with verbs very well. He too has trouble with verbs.

'Get us out of here, Sister! Get us out!' screeches Mother, her voice hardened and serrated with devotion.

'I need my hair done, my nails done, my husband out of my sight' says Aunt.

Uncle averts his eyes.

'Sister?' comes her voice from below.

'Get out, get out!' shouts Brother, his eyes grey with sleep and fear.

I step into the sun and Mary is at the bottom of the stairs, holding my tea in a cup. There are tears in her eyes. There are probably tears in the cup.

'Thank you, Mary.'

We sit and I drink.

She is holding the camera. She has her mask secured over her mouth and nose.

'When will we start filming?'

'Now.'

'I don't know the words to Woodcutter.'

'The others know them. The family. I know you've spoken to them. I could hear you from the kitchen.'

I look up at the ceiling. She looks away. We let the unsaid words float into the loft. They flatten themselves against the blue wall, covering the patches that Father left white.

Mary has always had this trouble with verbs. She'll plan to pay taxes and end swimming laps at the pool. She'll mean to buy bread, and sell it instead. She'll leave the house for a change of scene, and mistakenly lease it to tenants who arrive to a home filled with parents. She'll plan to drink eight glasses of water a day, and forget them lined up on a windowsill, the water evaporating. The house next door has been empty for two years, and the walls are lined in glasses, filled, half-filled, third-filled with water. Father sent me pictures. He did that instead of weeding the garden.

I finish my tea. My last sip is still warm.

'Well done, Mary,' I say.

'Will you stay?' she asks.

'Where are you filming this music video?' I ask.

Her attention and the sky change to blue. A bird sings sweetly.

'Let me fetch my guitar,' says Mary.

A collective sigh rushes down the stairs from the garage. A stone in my stomach drops, landing in the gap where I once had some heel.

'We'll be here another 6 months!' screeches Aunt, 'Why did we come, why, why, why, why, why, why...'

The rest of the family joins Aunt with whys and whys and whys. The whys turn to wise in mid-air and that calms them all down.

We wait.

I call Mary.

Mary boomerangs against the wall, against the lawn, against the rocks and the eggshells and the sky.

I walk down the stairs.

'Mary?' I call again.

'Yes?'

She answers with a light tone. Like a bird flying, a stone skimming, a coral tree in June. There's something about Mary when she's cheerful. If only the world had no verbs. If only the verbs didn't have Mary.

She comes up the stairs with her guitar. She takes a deep breath and removes her mask. She turns on the light. A flurry of bats shoot out of the garage. Moths leave the walls in a beige, dusty cloud. Hundreds of eyes open, fearful, questioning, blue, brown and wide.

Aunt jumps from the beam to the floor.

'Mary! How wonderful to see you!' she beams, truthfully, hopefully, in mad and deep tones, 'Is it time?'

Aunt is excited, bedazzled, filled with brilliance and zest.

This is what Mary does when she actualises her verbs.

'Where's the script?' I ask.

'Action,' says Mary.

The garage is set in motion. Arms and legs flail and tread and spring and fold and dress. Axes and denim and big bushy beards emerge from cupboards and boxes and ripped open tyres. Un-

cles and cousins are trimming their growth with mirrors and clippers and shiny sharp blades. Aunts and cousins are combing out hair, thickening brows, clicking their heels. They paint lips and lashes, pinch cheeks and set eyes in stars. A collection of woodcutters form a straight line, buckling and lacing big boots. Aunts and cousins and starlings swoon. The air hums with bristles and dreams.

Mary sets the camera to roll.

I don't know what to do. I hide in the corner, facing the wall. I don't see what happens. I fold and I unfold my arms. The family razzles and dazzles and drums. They belt out the song in harmony. There are guitars and harmonicas, ukuleles and shakers. The crowd follows steps and beats, Mary shines. She's a star.

The song ends. Backs are thumped. Everyone laughs. I ask a question. Everyone turns and looks at me.

'Don't make this about you, Sister,' says Mary, 'This is about me and my bag full of verbs.'

She locks her eyes with mine and I see a tiny Mary pulling up verbs from inside the hollow of a tree. They're tangled in a net made of strands of hair and twine and unused floss. She knows about the verbs. She keeps them in a bag made of threadbare wings.

Me and Mary are alone in the garage. Our eyes unlock.

'I take extra care with them,' she says.

I disagree, but I push feigned agreement from my belly to the ends of my fingers and pray that she doesn't see.

The family lies on the grass and walks down the road and naps in the lounge. It's like they're on holiday. It's like they all know each other. It's like they're fulfilled. It's like they're prisoners. They're wearing their masks again. Maybe because I've come from Outside.

'What will you do now you're finished filming?' I ask Mary.

'How could you be so cruel,' she answers.

Her eyes fill with tears. Now I know that she knows that I see them. I look away, up at the violet sky, and wonder if anyone else sees them.

'Don't make this about you, Sister,' she says.

'I know,' I say, lacing the words with love, acceptance, patience and fear.

'I know you know,' she says, trying to lace the words with peace and love and regret. Instead she punctuates them with question and exclamation marks, the meaning floats up to the loft, and flattens itself against Father's blue wall.

# Glossary #1

## Socket

What's left when wisdom is extracted, both in the form of teeth, and in the forms taken by intricate spore systems birthed by mushrooms after electric storms in the sugar fields outside KwaDukuza, Northern KwaZulu Natal. The first form of socket can fill with blood when left unclogged by cotton swabs. The other kind can never be filled. When attempts are made to fill them, these sockets simply multiply.

## Sugar fields

1. Undulating ripples of sugar cane, lined in silver stripes, or buried in telos-filled furrows of compost-black soil.
2. Troops of anonymous men and women waiting for orders in an undisclosed location.
3. Piles of fine crystals in all known shades of white, red and yellow. They are sweet to the tongue, and when ingested by adult humans, are stored in clusters around the hipbones, abdomen and just below the jawline.
4. Mythical gathering place of barn swallows and southern right whales who lost their way along a migratory path, mostly due to surge-related electrocution.

## Beak-ish

A catch-all term for the unknown shades of white and red.

## Wing-ish

An unknown shade of yellow, often associated with gum disease or lack of tenacity with regards to dental floss or earth-ing rituals.

## Flight path

Curved loops of uneven cobblestones between a house and a street, to deter stiletto heels, blackening toenails and the swooping arcs of metal detectors. The gaps between stones are sometimes reinforced with large molars with silver fillings.

## Wingspan

The extent to which jaws can be forced open for wisdom extraction or the enhancement of established sockets.

## Intricate

*This word has distinctive meanings, which can never all be true.*

1. Another word for multi-coloured.
2. A collaboration of such multitudes of fine-feathered detail that none can be correctly ascribed.
3. Held together by red, green and yellow wires.
4. Infectious, deadly or unimaginably catching.

## Multiplication

A mathematical term often confused with times, both the worst of and best of, as well as those described as good, so many, how many, too many, enough, not enough, seven, forty-nine, Sunday, New York and ancient.

## The First Abscess

The first one came from a needle-shark in the Nile River, hungry for foreign flesh. It was born as an innocent dot, then coloured red in an angry circle on my calf, the layers of skin thickening with camel hair and Nubian eyeliner. A wetsuit opened the wound to dust, ocean and colonies of Marsa Alameese bacteria that were interested in languages and quirky blood cells. In the plane it began to seep, a tickle of plasma-ants crawling, sticky and warm, down my ankle. I limped into London wearing jeans hemmed in a yellowing, crystalline crust.

‘That’s not a bite,’ he said, ‘that’s a continent. Look, there’s Italy.’

It must have dropped down my throat from the sky as I took in the size of a pyramid in Giza, my gaping mouth squinting at the sun. It broke up and dissolved in my bloodstream, Florence merging with leukocytes, proteins, Barcelona, Porto, platelets, Lecce and all kinds of corridors. It travelled my veins by train and ferry, photographing blood vessels and arteries, lungs and secret cavities, until it found a place that felt like home. All its parts converged there, halfway down my left calf. It seemed like an arbitrary choice, but there must have been some kind of untold logic to it, maybe the kind you can only smell after swirling it in a glass, holding the stem in a three-finger grip. The particles pushed out against muscle and skin, until a follicle bent aside for an earring hook and let the infectious horde begin its outward seep. It started slowly, and then erupted in mid-air, spreading across the skin in a pus-filled, pulsing mess of flesh and fluid.

‘Just cover it with this,’ doctor said, ‘and change it in three days.’

In two days, in the gardens at Versailles, France, the dressing was green.

‘La vache!’ said the nurse, calling friends round to gasp at the leg with barraging words. The second doctor lifted gunge, loosened rot, scraped it raw, muttering insults across the Channel and prescribing a month of antibiotics. A scab formed in the Loire region, and activated its itch during Mary Poppins on the West End, obstructed view.

The scab came off in Stanger, and I left its dried out curl on my desk.

## Carol

When Carol was a small girl, big enough to go for walks, but not big enough to go for walks alone, she would ask someone bigger to watch her walk. She learnt how to read which person to ask by the air-colour threads that joined them. She could tell from how Aunt sighed, or how Uncle was opening cupboards. She could feel a thread pull taut when Mother stood at the kitchen counter. They pulled when Father sat in his chair with a book, but not really reading. She wasn't sure if the threads pulled at her or at them, or at a place where they joined, but when she wanted to go for a walk she watched the threads and read them, and the threads she watched would show her where to ask. When she asked she would ask kindly, threading her words and tone in time with air. She would ask Aunt if they could go to the boardwalk to see if the sun had arrived. Uncle, she would ask to walk to the pool to count the empty loungers. Mother was more difficult to read. Father was the easiest of all. But when she had asked someone bigger, and when someone bigger had said yes, she would guide them to the closest thread-bare door. Under over through the crossing loosing tightening threads, she would guide them not to change their minds or fall.

When Carol was a small girl, big enough to go for walks and almost big enough to go alone, but not yet, she asked Aunt to watch her walk. She guided Aunt along the wall up the stairs, and out through the laundry door. The threads joined the shirts, the towels and sheets that were pegged to the taut washline. They walked up the bank past the dark green shrubs, past the leaves, the fronds and the bare-sand lawn. They walked down the road, past trees and cars, past the house with the cage for a cat, not-caught. At the boardwalk Carol walked and Aunt stopped. Aunt watched the trees and got lost in the sun that lit their trunks. Her threads were looped in a trail down the path, past the cage and the lawn fronds leaves. Carol walked, and she walked on alone, she walked and no-one watched. She walked to the edge of the boardwalk ledge and peered at the stream below. Aunt didn't watch as she knelt on the boards, though a thread pulled taut and long. The tautening thread pulled up the bank, through the trees sun dust and leaves. It pulled at Mother, Uncle too, at the sheets and the towels and Father. Aunt watched the tree and the sun-lit trunks and felt no pulling threads. Carol went head over heels to the stream, and the threads pulled hard and high. Her landing was soft, it began with her face in the mud, and the threads went dark.

A vulture watched Carol, face-down in the stream, and her ghost as it sailed up the palms. Her ghost was small, too small to float alone, but Ghost was the Carol that could see. Ghost could see Carol from the top of the palms while the vulture clicked its beak. Ghost could see what Carol should do, that she needed breath and turning. She needed the pull of a tautening thread from a knot now tight as air. The vulture flew to a different branch to watch inside the house. Mother and Uncle were locking their eyes. Father had stood from his chair. They felt the threads though they didn't know, they were old and thin and tangled. Ghost slipped in behind Carol's eyes and showed her from under her lids. Carol saw Ghost's view from the branch, and the threads pulling taut and long. Ghost showed Carol the way she should turn and the threads all woke her at last. Carol turned her face to the air and breathed. The threads fell slack and low. The vulture flew back to his

topmost branch as Father sat back down. Mother leaned back to her counter top and Uncle looked away. Carol walked, she walked on alone, she walked to the tree Aunt watched.

# Malawi Gold

## The Ingredients:

- 1 bench
- 3 flat cushions
- Beer
- Bar counters
- 4 flat screen TVs
- Avatar* (full-length film)
- Malawi Gold
- 1 large lake
- 1 lovesick bartender
- 3 large speakers
- 1 week's worth of mornings
- 1 pinch of tenacity
- 2 pinches of crumbled resolve (exact pinches)
- 1 DJ
- 1 crowd (young, drunk and vibrant)

## Disclaimer

This method is not foolproof—in fact, it's more partial to fools than non-fools. It has a different word for fools, but not a different word for foolproof. It will confuse you. That's if you treat this method like a series of steps to follow towards a final product, it's not that kind of method. This method is closer to a series of prompts, extracts from books, recordings of friends, family members, strangers in supermarkets. You shouldn't trust it too tightly. Rather let the process hurtle down a hillside or a grassy bank; let it curl in on itself, and unfurl when the moon is between half and full, whether waxing or waning. You can choose the order to follow the steps, or follow just one (or none), or those that you most like the sound of.

## The Method

*(or the steps, the pole, the bannister, or the slide)*

1. Get to know the bench. It's wooden, right at the edge of a deck on the edge of a lake in the Northern part of Malawi. Not all the way north, somewhere around Nkatha Bay. It's best to get to know the bench by sitting on it in the mornings after a swim, once you've ordered a pot of coffee. The three flat cushions belong to this bench. Move them off when you're wet, replace when you're dry. You can also sit on the bench after everyone's left the bar at the end of a night. Alone, with a guitar. Lie down when you're done strumming, watch the stars, listen to curls of water round pebbles and algae-lined gullies.

2. The beer is expensive at the bar where the bench is. There are other options. Best to walk down the hill after happy hour for a supper of beans and rice, and cheaper beer at the club next door. It's loud, with walls lined in mirrors, drunks, the guy from the tourism office, flat screen TVs in four corners, and a bathroom way too grungy to pee in. Pee outside, round the back, that's where everyone pees.
3. The number of bar counters is unimportant, but choose which bar counter wisely. Choose where you stand, how you stand, who you stand between. Try finding a spot between unoccupied stools if you can. Remind yourself of the bar counter at StepRight in Livingstone—that old man and his old fingers, his old throat spitting words into your waistband. Sometimes the only reason for approaching a bar counter is to bring your eyes closer to particular sets of eyes that are narrowed, that are almost shadowed, that you know.
4. Watch *Avatar* on one of the four screens; it will create a particular juxtaposition with the wildlife channel on the opposite screen. Lean there, against a pillar, against a person, and watch giant blue people with almond eyes fly terradactyls through jurassic-dream skies.
5. Malawi Gold. Smoke it. Eat it. Giggle it from counter to counter. Set a timer to remind yourself of things you shouldn't forget. Don't use a flashlight while it's digesting.
6. A large lake is not essential. It depends on how long you bake this for. Perhaps you'll end up drying it, or maybe you'll eat it all raw—fingering the batter off a spatula, or using one small enough to fit into your mouth. A large lake will be helpful though. It has dissolving properties, perspective properties, sound distortion capabilities, crocodiles, cichlids, depth and distance. Sometimes it has a large bulmastif right behind you, with a head the size of an otter's.
7. If you opted for a large lake, and for the bench—and the particular bench described at (1)—the lovesick bartender is a non-negotiable. You have no control over this part. His name is Johan. He is a local from Nkhatha Bay. He fell in love in South Africa. He isn't from South Africa. He has a song that is the exact soundtrack to his heart's dissolution. I will not attempt to fish for that song, the name of it, the artist—it will enter my brain and stay there until I forget it again. It will do the same to you. The large speakers will play this song, all three of them. It will move in clouds of sonic spores and enter your gin-secreting pores in the morning. The combination is gross. The large lake is helpful for drowning it out, the song. Stay under as long as possible, as long as you need to. Line your pockets and elastics with pebbles if you like.
8. A week's worth of mornings is usually enough time to allow things to settle. Like sediment. If haze, smoke and toxic fumes are travelling your thickening bloodstream—lifting the hairs on your arms while you lie in full sun—then you need a few mornings. In time this vapourish smog will crystallise, settling in dust and flakes, gold-coated, sinking to deep-bass shadows and rosy whispers.
9. A pinch of tenacity will get you away from the bench after last rounds, and after walks back up the hill from the club at 2am. It will send you to bed, to the shower, to the balcony outside your room. You'll keep your word, your dress-hem intact, your space and your sense of balance. You have more than a pinch of it, but a pinch might be all you need for a week's-worth of mornings.

10. Two pinches of crumbling resolve is all it will take to offset the pinch of tenacity. You'll need to decide whether you'll stir or sprinkle or spoon it in. You might not be able to make the choice; the crumbling might be done by someone else. Some people are known to pound the resolve, adding all kinds of impolite ingredients, in secret, in dark corners and shadows.
11. A DJ chooses the tempo, the mood, the colour of the afternoons. A variety of songs is best, a diversity of beats, speeds and repetitions. The DJ is in multiple locations, but like a lot of other jockeys, he is speedy, wears a helmet, holds a crop, and rides in circles the world over—that includes the contours and fleshy mounds of your brain.
12. A young, drunk and vibrant crowd is the last of it. 'Young' is not only related to age here, it's open to interpretation. As is drunk. Vibrant is generally a given. This ingredient is unavoidable and will be both blessing and curse. You will choose various roles in this crowd. Sometimes you'll melt into it, a glob of butter; other times you'll be a wooden spoon, stirring and folding and lifting soft pats of batter. The crowd is quite similar to the large lake, though slightly less predictable, and at times, more.

### The Secrets

*(or the silent, minuscule gaps between ingredients and steps, that white noise in which they're separate, and then joined)*

*Stirring:* Stirring is the most dangerous part of this. It will upset your feet, press into your spine and knead your shoulder-blades apart. It might extend your neck backwards, at an angle you didn't expect, perhaps even while you're on the bench. The cushions are walking, floating ghosts along a path along the lakeshore, past banana circles and snakes, darting arrows down the bank. Leaves are crushed underfoot, pounded, crumbled to pinches. Wood, shards, beats echo round hills and arching stairs, a deck dressed in shadow. Terradactyls fly. They're blue and giant in the flat expanse of eddies and coils, uncurled, spiralling tendrils through sand and algae, lake water, coffee melting dust-lit stones. The lake is deep. Sinking lower dissolves sound, the sonic motes and clouds. A half-moon hums in the pool at the base of your neck, at the tips of your almond fingers. Narrowed eyes and barstools, long hills and otters, heads lined in buttery folds of batter.

*Folding:* Folding might be wiser. Slower. Perhaps it's best to let everything sit and breathe for a while... In, hold, hold a little longer—hold until you see stars—and out.

## An Aftermath

### *Statement from the Sponge Cake Icing:*

Marzipan is a strange name, though not half as strange as shuttlecock or duck-billed platypus, and it's mine—all mine. I hold it in my mouth like a robin's egg parboiled in rice. Marzipan is sweet, it is rubbery, I am Marzipan. I am not Australian. I am not a woman, or a man. I'm not a beast or bird or dried out slice of pie. I don't draw tracks along workshop floors. I have no treads. I used to be layered over sponge cake. It was blue, green and yellow, criss-crossed in grilled sponge layers. The layers were cut, joined with clear jellies, glued with fresh berry-squashed jams. But my self split in two. Stamped foot split in two. Not down the middle, but through strips and diagonals. My pancake form parachuted to the floor in a clumsy pirouette of sweet drapery. Ice bird heads rolled across tiles and stopped—beaks bared, eyes staring, curves flat. I am icing now. Too sweet, too soiled, caked in dust.

### *Statement from the Sponge Cake Sponge:*

I am the layers of sponge. I'm not verbose. I'm not wallowing or pancake flat. My lips are pursed. I am passive aggressive. I'm blue, green and yellow, cut into lines, squares and triangles. My Marzipan is gone, but I am still cake.

## Marie

Marie chose the leaves slowly. She ran her hand along bark, her fingertips brushed along edges. She reached in line with bare branches and evergreen stems. One leaf fell at her feet, another caught the sun as she passed it. The first leaf was green and fresh off its stalk. The second leaf was old, fading in browns and yellow. Marie held the leaves against her eyelids, one rough and papery, the other smooth wax. She lowered them gently and passed them from palm to palm. She began to see things. She saw a supermarket, she saw herself in it, standing in line with her grandmother. She saw dragonflies and powder blue, her cousin's eyes buttoning. She saw dreams and walks and stone walls all stirred in fits and streaming. She saw a man, leaning against a trolley, and a suitcase with books and a box of milk teeth in it. She saw berries, bushes and baskets of them, a red basket with white flowers, its handles neatly folded inside, they were braided in plastic, preserved in oil touches. She saw her mother, she was speaking, the words curling in smoke and green. She saw cane fires and gravel roads, bicycles and tailgates, blisters creased in sweat and holding. She saw a letter, she saw seedpods and snarling, mouseholes flooded in storms. She saw a room, a blue dressing gown and an ankle raised and swollen. She saw a woman singing highways and dark desert hair, the words and the strums of guitar, she saw buckets overturned and drummed, flutes hollowed out with breath, shoulders hunched and chests swaying. She saw smiling and she saw a carpet, persian, covered in hair and salt. She heard a man ask a question that a girl couldn't hear. She saw the girl fold away a blue dress. She saw a man on a hill, his eyes framed in wool. She saw sharp breaths and fast hearts, crossing through rivers, leaning through currents and stones. She saw a man speaking. She saw him speaking on a road below a starry sky. She saw a cup filled with wine, another with steam. She saw a man across a counter. She saw her grandmother, one knee folded over the other. She saw her in a chair. She saw another room filled with chairs and quiet. She saw a harbour circled with green hills, and her mother, joining blocks of crocheted squares, blue and yellow and grey. She saw them in lines on a table, and on the white-washed curve of a piano. She saw them stirred up and mixed, grey with wisps of green curling.

## Sylvia

Sylvia got tired of moving her things, in boxes and buckets and stackable drawers. It seemed like she'd settle, acquire a rock, a new name, set paths between dams and deposits of cowries—and then she'd begin moving her things again.

She decided, one day in June, that she'd build a house, one beautiful to own.

She had to find some spare land, large enough for a very deep hole, but small enough to fold away when the next time came. Her neighbours met and chose a plot close to the river, but far enough away that the children wouldn't bother her with questions, and adorable smiling.

She started digging.

She needed space underground for all the fluids and soft things to seep. The house would be made of sand and wooden blocks, held together by roots and stalks of creeping green things. The wind was strong on this hill, the roots would be best at holding her home to the ground. The tides had longer fingers now too, and the roots could withstand water better than concrete and cement. She didn't have the strength to mix it in any case, and burly men were few and further between than you would think.

Sylvia liked digging. Her neighbours found this strange, quite comical. The children wanted to help but she was determined to drop only her own beads of sweat into this ground—her own milky pearls filled with her very own salt and particular stink.

She collected building materials in the early morning, and in the last half hour of light at the end of the day, when she was too sleepy to think about it. She collected driftwood. Only the curviest, driest pieces—their loops could be turned into bottomless holes. She got most excited when they curled into antlers, sometimes that's what they were. She pounded some driftwood to powder with stones, crushing the wood with brute force. The secret to this beautiful house was surely sweat.

She got tired though.

She had finished digging the hole.

She'd collected enough driftwood, enough antlers, enough hours and powdered bones.

She decided she didn't need a home. The home was really just a box for her things.

Sylvia filled the hole with her things: the hatstand, books and collapsible drawers; concertina, guitars, hooks, candles, yellow shelves and a bucket of coat-hangers. She poured in litres of milk, though she stopped halfway and decided not to bury things that were edible. She left them beside her pile of rocks. Rocks were useful. Rocks would be noticed. The food would be useful and noticed and gone. She folded in jerseys and socks, a harmonica, her favourite mug and dinner plate, ten enamel bowls. She broke her clothes rack apart and reinforced her hole with wire, the rust would make the soil rich and red. She moved all her things into the hole, except for the clothes she was wearing, a blanket made by her grandmother, and a bucket—it was useful for carrying.

When she'd finished she sat beside her driftwood pile and drifted away, and she knew, that was beautiful to own.

## Glossary #2

### Jacket Potato

An outer garment that protects against strong winds and ultraviolet rays. It is worn in a variety of colours and fabrics, though potato mash is the most commonly used textile, from which it derives its name. The earliest Jacket Potatos were worn in retaliation to bad weather, alternative histories and word ambiguity.

### Potato Mash

A popular textile used by weaving strands together in lock-stitched rows. After harvesting, potatoes are boiled until soft and falling apart, then mashed to a smooth consistency. This pulp is left to dry in natural sun for three days, resulting in a flaking powder, loosening in lumps and piles of grainy smash. This substance is rolled with wooden rolling pins, and pulled through hollow tubes to form looping strands. These are joined in long threads between joiners, coated in adhesives and rolled into balls of mash.

### Seaquinns

Decorative discs in a variety of thicknesses and colours, though mostly low-sheen grey or dull silver. These are harvested from dry seabeds and discarded buckets at trawling sites. They taste like the smell of fish, and will either dissolve on your tongue or stick to your throat in choking layers.

### Crab Weight

A white meat used to fill the toes of large shoes, and the pockets of light blouses or trousers. It can lead to bouts of nostalgia, terrified yelps and acute illness if ingested after use on a windy day.

### Clotted Cream

This is purely a thickening agent, used to fill out threadbare sections of trousers between the thighs, or the ends of over-worn sleeves. It can be kneaded into snags and tears to work as a temporary sealant or concealer. Uncomfortable memories will be activated on rinsing or unintended dilution. This can be avoided by wearing ear covers while rinsing, and doing so alone.

### Beans

Beans are kidney shaped masses that appear in all food types and their corresponding processes. Their effects are either creative or destructive. This depends entirely on the time, location and temperature of the bean's appearance, as well as the number of beans appearing together. When creative, these can be parboiled and enjoyed with rice or a light vinaigrette. If destructive, these dark masses will end everything.

## Everything

*This set of definitions was found on a slip of paper in a stranger's pocket and is unlikely to be reliable.*

1. The entire universe and those far-flung stars that are humming.
2. A vague term used to mean anything, where 'anything' includes 'nothing at all.'
3. A filler term used until a more favoured term is identified. This process often ends in forgotten trails and unmarked graves.

## Unmarked graves

*This definition is completely reliable, and can be worn as a badge on a Blazer pocket.*

Holes that will eventually become marked, by natural causes, improved research or floated motes of dust illuminated by torchlight.

## Blazer

An improvement on Jacket Potatos, though worn with decreasing levels of panache and sound philosophy. This garment is more decorative than protective, and prone to being outlined in woven cords that cannot always be re-used. Unlike Jacket Potatos, Blazers cannot be used as fertiliser on disposal, despite their evocative name.

## Scenes

Lake Malawi is a pane of grey glass. The cloudy kind like the shower door in my parent's old bathroom. The shower is at the end of the passage I sprint down while everyone else is in the TV Room at the other end of the house. Doves dart across the sky in twos and threes. Swallows dip and curve. Three fishermen paddle dugouts through the water in smoothly cut lines. Mambo Island darkens to a silhouette. The sun is low over the sea, the icy wind carries the sounds of seals across Tietiesbaai. I pour the gins while Fran spreads a woollen blanket over the rocks and unpacks our chip-and-dip dinner. Our chatter quietens, stretching the moment of day's end. The last of the sun sits on the horizon then flattens to an oblong glow, shrinks, and disappears.

## The Farmer and the Artist

She grew things that fell into furrows and lines, silver green tips, fields swaying. He folded old watches, opened whales' mouths, joined sting rays with sand sharks in caves. She rotated crops, sugar beet, sweet potatoes; there were years of invasions by orchids. Donkeys ate fences, their aloe and spines, the sea spread coarse salt over land. He swirled forks into rivers, mostly acrylics, strange meetings in salty-fresh mouths. She read weather charts, AgriNews, oracle cards, and wrote answers in patted down ground. He looked and kept looking.

He spent years polishing a grey-green pearl that he found on a beach in Autumn. He built an archway of sticks, forgotten blue plastic, bottle caps, strips, rips of packets. He hung the pearl from the apex, a Bethlehem Star, below it, nothing, bare sand, cowries, the breath from a donkey's bray. He walked dunes, years of beaches, and found another pearl; it was scuffed, rough with sand and sharp seams. He left it unpolished, he didn't have time, he used it all building a tree, a tree lit with gleaming. He made the tree silver from thrown away foil, dried shimmers discarded in fields. It reached for high places, the sky and the birds, the clouds, strips of grey, white and blue. He placed that pearl at the peak of its crown. It dropped in a breath of pale air. He never found it.

She liked to spend time with her friend when he passed. His stories filled songs with new chords, the kinds you sing broken. She invited him to dinners, to tea-times and milking, to breakfasts, fence-mending, grinding corn. She made sure he had flesh on his silver-shone bones; she gave him a place in her fields, for his poems. She did the same things every day, he didn't stay long.

He grew tired of walking, of dunes, sand, worn shells. He moved his old searching off land. He began deep sea diving, through currents, curved waves; he found another pearl in less years. This one he split and filed and ground and threw to the breeze at her farm. She breathed it in. Her plants breathed it in. Her pigs and goats and corn breathed it in. And they breathed out fresh pearls made of air.

## I forgot about a bird

I forgot about a bird once. A sunbird flew in a straight, fast line into the room where I was sitting. It flew straight into the window and dropped, stunned, to the floor. It crouched in the corner next to an old trolley, its beak slightly open, its tiny eye catching light, its little black legs curled below its form. I forgot about that bird.

But it doesn't matter. There were so many other things to think about, really—the way my collar wouldn't lie down and I wouldn't iron it; the way time was there, so much, in golden, sugar-strewn piles, but I didn't have any. Well I didn't have any for that. I didn't want to iron anything, not even my hands or the strip of skin below my navel, the midriff that fell in line with an ironing board when I was six.

A scar lies across the horizontal stripes of me, a stripe like those on the sides of a bunting's head. I don't have any more time for anything anymore, so I've had to be reckless, though that's a lie—I can't be, I type too hard for that, pecking at the keyboard like an ostrich. Keep your palms flat, convex, almost unnaturally curved, or else it will get a pinch of your palm in its dinosaur beak and change you. It might get that bit that tells you how long you have to live, or the one that marks out your number of children, marriages, years in the southern hemisphere.

But there's no time to worry about that, no time to remember all the things you wanted to concretise, immortalise, like a god. Perhaps being a god is for the birds. Perhaps it would be better to aspire to being a tree spirit, floating and rooting and spreading green stems in tai chi bends and flows. Perhaps it's best to do those on the dunes, about half an hour after sunrise, that time when the sun is still glowing rather than glaring, colour still spread across the sky, sea calm, wind soft and slow.

Remember the time is always coming, it's always there, though some things are best forgotten. Like a bird. Or something else whose name I've lost. I could pour it through an hourglass, or into a short glass—and drink it in one gulping swallow, open my gullet and drop it straight down, gravity pulling its liquid into my toothless belly-hole, where it can join with the other things I've swallowed. Like the lady who swallowed a fly and a bird and a horse (last of all)—there was also a spider somewhere in the middle. Maybe then I wouldn't forget about a bird. Perhaps, if there's time, I'll swallow a swallow, just to keep myself from forgetting again, like a gulp of wing-whipped air.

## The Chicken and the Rabbit

Right in the middle of Mrs Dwyer's polynomials, they appeared in a sentence in my head. A chicken and a rabbit in a cage together. I wasn't even looking out of the window at the time. No image, just a passing thought. I arrived home that Friday and went straight to the first place I always went to when I arrived home—the fridge. And there they were, in a cage, waiting. The chicken and the rabbit on the kitchen floor, with its raised pink tiles and the Tupperware cupboard framing the wire-mesh scene.

Years later, I was paging through magazines with a group of women in Kenilworth. I'd come to Kenilworth by mistake that Monday, the group of women were strangers. But as I flipped through images for a collage, there they were again. The chicken and the rabbit. This time they weren't in a cage. The rabbit was the same dark-brown dwarf rabbit, but it was being held in a pair of big hands. Maybe it was still in a cage. The chicken had grown, and stood in the shadow of a man in a red shirt. I cut out the picture and pasted it into my collage. I still have the collage in a purple file on Stone's Hill, sandwiched between tax documents and old recipes I'll never use. How did they know that they should appear on some lawn that day, and let the photographer take their picture? For it to appear in a magazine that I would read in a place I only found by misunderstanding? And who held the rabbit, who was the man in the red shirt? They knew, know, will know these answers—perhaps they came up with the questions.

Even more years later, I told a friend about the chicken and the rabbit. We were on a road trip from Joburg to Sabie, and we stopped at a dilapidated bar in a pine forest. We edged along the pine-needed path, giggling about axe murderers and white walkers. The bar was open. We sat on the floor at the fireplace drinking Savannahs, and a boy walked into the room. He was holding a rabbit in his freckled hands, a dark-brown dwarf rabbit. My friend pointed and gasped. I looked at him, and was reminded of a scene where the body of the butcher's boy was draped over a horse, his white t-shirt stained with blood. The boy told us we were lucky to see that rabbit. It usually wouldn't come to him, as it preferred to stay in the coop with the chickens. Fuck. Who knows.

I don't know what the chicken and the rabbit are trying to tell me. I don't know why they've been tailing me since I was three: on birthday cakes, in the back garden, in the headlights ahead of the van when we drove through the cane fields at night, darting in zigzags. Maybe they're trying to tell me nothing at all though. But now I really want a t-shirt with a chicken and a rabbit on the front, and *Who the Fuck Knows* on the back. Though maybe I'd prefer something along the lines of: *I'm following the chicken and the rabbit. They met me in my mind in algebra, and then in a magazine in Kenilworth, and then at a creepy bar in a pine forest outside Sabie. I haven't seen them since.*

## Choose Your Own Adventure

It started with a strange hybrid squawk issued from the dangling end of a branch. It could've been a drongo, perhaps a cardinal woodpecker. Maybe one of those finchy-weaverish striped-head numbers that flit and dart and rustle in the leaves. Choices will be made between bird names. Consequences will be issued thereafter, red segments of millipede curving and wriggling across carpets and smooth floors, blasting skrewt-sparks of white flames, embers and glows shooting across snow, sand, glass-tabletops.

The drongo might have been the most likely choice. Its forked tail is reassuring, its size considerable. There are rumours that it imitates other birdcalls, like a mynah or a parrot, or a recorder installed in the angled beginnings of branches. If it began with a drongo, it's likely the course of events would be pressed quite neatly into moistened clay, lined indents in a concave and glass-less mosaic. There would have been breakfast in the mornings, lunch at midday, tea around 3:30pm, and a light supper between 7 and 8. There would have been games nights and quiet times, book discussions and civilised Happy Hours 4 evenings out of 7. That's if you'd chosen drongo, that is.

The cardinal woodpecker on the other hand, an interesting choice. Probably taken for the bright red cap rested on top of the head, Holy, Red, Juxtaposing, Uncommon. Pecking at wood in a recurring staccato, anxious, busy, productive, taperingly efficient. Though relentless, lining up activities in ascending and descending order, alphabetical and complementary, with rough and smooth lines, a rolling zigzag, holding even coloured dots at regular intervals. A patterned monstrosity lining the edges of pages like a creeping, unsolvable rash. An extended lakeshore line, swum through by crocodiles and guarded by hippos, impenetrable, unworkable, but marching forwards in a productive and soothing line. It's only soothing for its line-ness, its crawling ants carrying leaves and tree trunks, gearboxes, bonnets, eyeballs, severed thumbs and teaspoons tossed into the garden.

Finchy Weaverish stripe-types might have felt like a safe choice, one where *y*'s and *ish*'es allow a degree of flexibility, a comfortable leaning against balustrades, running of a finger around the rounded rim of a thick-rimmed glass. It might have had a snowball effect, however, unwarmed and dry, crumbly, covered in pink coconut and layered in a creamy sugar. These kinds of birds are undefinable, non-existent, they're everywhere. Stripes cover the ground, middle and sky, though the middle is the part most filled with them. They've spread themselves on large cats and jumpers, woollen hats and gloves, down legs, above lips, along jawlines and forearms and segmented in the middle of long trails of asphalt. It's a mess. But it's a choice made. As are the consequences.

Consequences. They are the crux. They are where all the birds and squawks cross over and conjoin like an orchestra. Like a dinner service. Like fruit trees in an orchard in Sardinia or seagulls in Trafalgar Square. The start is relatively inconsequential—the options chosen, potentially unlisted—but the trail is winding, round and round a mountain pass in a lurching bus. Or on a high-gear bicycle. Or on two pairs of metal-shoed hooves. The bus is dangerous, driven by an ageing vampire, immortal and moody. The bicycle is tired, and the hoofed creature, nothing is known about

him, except that he is stubborn. All are moving towards the same destination. There's an idea that the different choices would result in different consequences. This is a calming idea.

The birdwatchers, the cyclists and travellers and hoof-riders, they're all bound from the same quiver of arrows, arching, wriggling, sailing and struggling through the same blue belt of air. The same sun lights their course, the same array of targets pulls them towards their centres. Even though they may land in different eyes—bull, tiger or bus conductor's—they'll all find one in roughly the same location, though each obscured from the other. They'll all think they've chosen a better (or worse) option. The choice was really the bird's. And whether the bird was a woodpecker, drongo, weaver or finch is not an accurate question since the squawk came from none of these. It was being made by a child in the next garden, swinging, bored, on a tyre swing, hiding from parents or homework or a vicious cat.

## Mrs Figg

Mrs Figg is on the verandah, reading in a cane chair. It's a particular kind of reading. She's grouping the words in categories, listing them in the ether of her brain, horizontally, diagonally, vertically. She's making a crossword. Or perhaps it's a word cross, one she's determined to bear. She stands up.

'It's a ceremony! And I'm standing upon tiles.'

She lifts each foot to check the soles of her shoes for evidence, or dried grass. A bird twitters at the end of a branch across from her. A Paradise Flycatcher.

'Hello, Jeremy. You'll never believe the words in this book. Every kind.'

She sits down and goes on scanning the pages.

'She just greeted that bird by my name,' says Jeremy. He is watching from the doorway.

'That bird is a Paradise Flycatcher,' Margie replies, and returns to curling her ribbons beside the fire.

Mrs Figg keeps scanning, mumbling the words in a whispering stream that trickles all the way down the stairs, across the lawn and up the lichen-specked bark of the Flamboyant tree. It's almost in flower, and ants crawl up the trunk and along all the highways and byways of its crown.

'For better views of the sky,' she says, lifting her gaze to the topmost branches. They are catching the last of the afternoon sun at the ends of their gnarly reach. Mrs Figg is catching words again. She is catching them like motes of dust and Autumn colds and silver spoons flying out of top drawers in the dining room dresser.

'I feel... like a lioness on the back of a stumbling giraffe. With my claws properly gripping her bloody flesh, and my sisters all ready to kill,' she says.

'This is a good indicator that she'll be back with us soon,' Jeremy says from the doorway, to nobody in particular.

A cat scampers across the grass, holding a mouse in its teeth. It's not a whole mouse, just a piece of one. Mrs Figg doesn't see the mouse, or the cat. It creeps closer, and drops the mouse-piece on the concrete steps. Mrs Figg hears the thud and looks up just in time to see the cat projectile vomit onto the grass.

'Well that's it. A projectile-vomiting cat.'

She closes the book and turns towards the doorway.

'Oh hello, Jeremy, have you been away again? Australia, is it?'

'Not Australia this time, Mrs Figg.'

## Dogology

1.

Tramp was in a box on Christmas morning. A yellow ribbon trailed from his black-scruff neck. A 6-year old ran him around the table. Round and round she went with high-pitched shrieking. You're going to get hurt, they said. Someone's going to get *h-u-u-u-rt*, they said, the hurt getting longer and louder. She stopped and gagged. She vomited on the carpet. She named the puppy Lady after she'd rinsed her mouth. She named Lady Tramp after they told her he was a boy.

2.

A girl sits in a dark hokkie, her chin tucked into her neck, her head brushing against zinc. Six puppies squeak and bark and pad soft paws across newspaper. She yanks a puppy from its legs, rough and frowning. She smacks it. She glares into its frightened snout. It squirms and kicks in her grasp. She croons in soothing chords. She pulls it to her caving chest, burying her face in its back. She rocks it slowly, stroking its smooth brown coat. She places it down, her touch a gentle curling. Five puppies cower in the corner. She calls them over in sweet and coaxing tones. Two begin edging forward, tails on the edges of wagging. She strokes their faces, speaks in coos and whispers. Three more edge towards her. They begin to crowd her and wag their tails. The sixth puppy rushes into the joyful tumbling. She pats and pets and hums in mellow tones. They squeak and bark and wag and roll, tongues licking. She yanks a puppy from its legs. Her eyes are narrowed in violent furrows. She smacks it. She begins her ritual again.

3.

I once wrote a story about a dog called Sardine. He fell in love with a poodle whose tail wagged in time to his heartbeat. She was killed in a hit and run. His heart stopped beating. The story went with a sketch. In the sketch the dog was alive. He was alive and his tail was wagging. There was no poodle, only a bear in a jacket and a buckle-shoed doll.

4.

Tramp and Steffi and Jess were three dogs. Jess and Steffi were staffis. They were also princesses, royal and vicious with food. Tramp was a French poodle from the SPCA. They went to the kennels to wait when we went on holiday. Tramp got hurt at the kennels. Tramp ate too slowly. Jess and Steffi finished their food and wanted to eat his too. He stood his ground. He raised his chest and a breeze fluffed his fringe from his eyes. He snarled and pawed the tiles. He circled his food in a menacing strut. He marched like a French soldier. Steffi and Jess cowered in the corner. They snarled their hungry strings of spittle. He let them fight him. He let them win. He let them

break him almost in two. He made them stop enough for us to see him a few more days. He lay in his basket in the laundry. He lay there in a regal curl. He lay there dreaming of climbing the bottle-brush tree. He lay there with scabs and oozing. He barked at the moon and whimpered when the house went quiet.

5.

Jess went missing for three days. She came back with a wire looped around her paw. Jess died of biliary, her blood sick and sated. Steffi was clamped in a snare. Her leg got all mangled, and she got all dead.

6.

Gemma and Bertie like running. We run to the end of the garden. I mock charge until their legs are calm. I mock charge once more and then sprint to the stoep, I spring to the table and crouch there. They wag their tails. We shout and bark in glee. We start again.

7.

Bertie went missing for ten days. Gemma and Jimmy went looking for Bertie in the fields. Gemma ran into a ditch and got caught in a wire-thick snare. It snagged and squeezed at her throat, she struggled and wheezed. Jimmy cut her out. She lay on cool tiles in shock. Bertie stayed lost. Gemma stayed lonely and sad. Bertie came back. He came back in the night. The house was asleep but Dad heard him bark and sat up like an arrow. That's Bertie, he said. That's Bertie's bark in the driveway. The vet said he'd run miles and miles. Gemma went missing for a morning. She was found on the train tracks, no head. Bertie was lonely. He ran to meet Dad when he parked in the driveway. He ran with his tongue out, gold eyebrows and button-black eyes. His tail was too long for his body. His fur was too long for his tail. One day he ran to the gate with Dad and yelped, keeled over and died. That night Dad dreamed of him speaking, his voice like a helium balloon. Don't worry, he said, there's no poison. My heart stopped, it was my time to go. Gemma's here, with her head, just like old days. She's circling the house with her bowl.

8.

TK belongs to my neighbour. He is my friend though I keep it quite casual, quite cold. He eats milk and scraps and runs down the path to meet me. He's white and ginger and covered in fleas. I douse him in powder. I squeeze tubes of repellent onto his back. I scrape yellow gunge from the crooks of his eyes until the red lids go. His ribs still show. He still yelps with kicks and stones. He starts sleeping on the mat at our front door. He squeezes through fences. He grows. One night I hear his yelping, sustained and rising in pitch. I get out of bed and open the kitchen door. He's yelping and whining, pulled down the path by two men with a long length of rope. I don't see him

for two days. I ask where he is. We killed him, she says. Just joking, she says, he's gone to Mpame with my brother. He's gone to Mpame. I can't ask if Mpame is another word for The Farm. I'm not sure if there is that kind of Farm in these hills. I make a new friend. My neighbour has a white kitten called Whitey. Whitey smells of paraffin and sits on my lap in the kitchen. Whitey disappears. Last seen walking across the soccer field. Last seen in the forest. Last seen in a flash of yellow.

9.

DJ and Blade are the neighbour's new dogs. They're thin and will probably die. Especially Blade.

10.

I'm not really a dog person. I prefer cats. My first cat was Moppet. My second was Jacques. Moppet was evil, possessed by spirits that spun her, and set her sharp claws in young skin. Jacques was French, friendly and Catholic and sleeping everywhere. He's asleep now. He's asleep underground with an African Grey Parrot and a man called Francis. His grave is in a real cemetery, with jawbones and tombstones and everything.

## Monkfish Wrapped in Bacon

The door opens. A fish walks in. It leaves the door ajar and approaches the opposite wall, walking on its tail-fins. Its scales are dull, they're grey and curling. The fish leans against the wall, one eye staring out from its side. I have seen this fish before. It was lying on a plate, wrapped in bacon, headless and smelling like hunger.

'You're a monkfish,' I say, 'the last time I saw you you were wrapped in bacon.'

The monkfish holds its stare.

The door opens wider and a chef walks in, his knife sharp and gleaming.

'The monkfish looks dry,' I say to the chef.

'Yes, it does look dry,' he replies.

'Perhaps you could wrap it in bacon.'

'Perhaps,' says the chef.

I have seen this chef before. He worked in a kitchen alongside the village port. He wore trousers too small and his butt crack was always showing. The chefs from the port make their clothes out of hand-me-down curtains. Upholsterers and chefs have age-old mutualistic agreements. It was the connections of hotels and restaurants, of crayfish and gloves, windows and glaring. This chef wrapped many things in bacon. He must've had some bad business with pigs. Though it could have been good business with farmers. Either way, I didn't like the way his glasses fogged up over the fryers, how he swore at the waiters and wiped his damp nose with his sleeve.

'Perhaps,' repeats the chef.

'Wrap it in bacon, Richard.'

'You remember me,' he says.

'I remember a lot of things.'

'Well, you mixed me up with another fish,' says the monkfish.

'I'm sorry.'

'You mixed me up with another monk as well,' says the monkfish.

I have. I've mixed the monkfish up with a monk. A monk that brews beer in an English monastery. The monastery's not far from the port where the chefs re-used hand-me-down curtains—where Richard wrapped monkfish in bacon.

## Gina

Gina arrived early. It wasn't like her, but she wasn't sure what she was like anymore, so that's how she planned it. Planning wasn't like her either—which is why she'd done that. But now she had to stand there, hidden in averted glances and regularly changing her foot positions. She waited while early moved to on time, and then to a little late.

Students were gathering. Lanyards were being handed out, their luminous greens and oranges glowed along the walls. Gina waited a little longer to be approached. The foyer gradually filled with voices, boxes opening, chairs being dragged across the floor.

She walked over to the registration table and asked where the bathroom was.

The bathroom was darker than the foyer, quieter and more ordered. Basins, soap dispensers and mirrors lined up in neat rows. Gina entered a stall, the door swung open surprisingly smoothly. She listened for movement, for the sounds of other people, but heard only edgy quiet. She gently lowered the toilet lid and sat down with a sigh. She sighed more loudly than she would usually dare to while sitting in the open-ceilinged stall of a public toilet. She decided to stay there, just for a little while. She let her feet choose whichever position felt comfortable. She sat and wondered why she had come for this campus tour, with all its lanyards and luminous planning.

With a violent *whoosh*, the bathroom door opened. Gina almost shot up but stopped herself—that would be stranger for the newcomer to overhear than a more measured movement. She waited. The steps across the bathroom were slow and heavy, almost unbelievably loud and illogical. Gina wondered if the change from the booming foyer to the silent bathroom had augmented her hearing, made her ears extra-sensitive. She waited a minute longer, pulling some toilet paper off the roll.

The occupied stall was being rattled and shaken; grunts and sharp snorts came from what must have been very large nostrils. Gina flushed and left her stall. She approached the line of basins and mirrors. She looked herself in the eyes while she washed her hands, trying to ignore the loud bumps and shuffling. She decided to hold her gaze while she moved from basin to dryer, though she was desperate to look away, her neck tense and blushing.

The toilet flushed.

The stall door opened, and a medium-sized hippo emerged, wearing a large pair of hipster-framed spectacles.

'Hello,' said the hippo.

Gina didn't answer.

The hippo waddled heavily from the stall to the basins and looked into the mirror.

Her eyes met Gina's reflection.

'Hello,' the hippo said again.

She couldn't keep quiet any longer, it would seem rude.

'Hi,' said Gina.

'Are you here for a campus tour?'

'I don't know.'

The hippo lowered herself to the tiled floor, and began to leave the bathroom.

'Wait,' Gina said, in a tone she hadn't heard before.

The hippo slowly turned to face her, ears twitching and twirling.

'I am here for a campus tour.'

'The human campus, I assume?'

'I don't know.'

'Would you like to see the hippo campus?'

Gina hesitated. She shifted her weight from left to right. She felt the edges of panic curling at her peripheral ends.

'Hippo campus?' repeated the hippo.

Gina's hesitation dragged on, cooled, threatened to freeze.

'Come,' said the hippo, 'It's worth seeing. Grab a lanyard.'

She flicked her head to the left, where a pouch was strapped over her middle.

Gina shifted her weight from right to left, edged forwards, and began walking towards the hippo. She moved towards her lanyard-filled pouch.

'I'm Huberta,' said the hippo, 'not *the* Huberta, just this Huberta—you haven't entered the after-life,' she snorted, giggling in a series of grunts and clicks and grey-leather jiggles.

Gina took a lanyard. The card it was attached to said *Guest*. She looped it over her head, and followed her feet. They'd started jerking forward in shaky treads.

'I'm Gina, nice to meet you.'

'Nice to meet you, Gina. You're the first student I'll be taking around today.'

They left the bathroom and continued down the corridor, leaving the hum of registration and touring that was now in full swing in the foyer.

The corridor looped and curved, the light dimming. They were descending. Huberta moved in heavy thuds, her large grey-brown butt glistening with reds and oranges that quickly turned brown as her rusty sweat dried.

'It's not really sweat,' Huberta said.

'Oh...' said Gina, *did I say something out loud?*

She wanted to explain herself, or ask a question—but Gina's mind had gone almost blank. It might have been because of the way Huberta was moving, or the curves of the corridor, perhaps the dim light. Gina didn't often have her mind feel blank, but she liked it like this: empty. Well, empty except for a large, bold question mark, followed by another, and two exclamation marks—all leaning over in italics.

Huberta was humming. She threw questions over her shoulder now and then. Gina answered some of them. Gina's hands were adequately content with alternating between swinging at her sides and fingering the edges of the lanyard and its hard plastic tag. Her mind floated between things. Transits. Long bus journeys and delays in foreign airports. Illuminated scenes flashing through windows overnight. Gina's feet were unusually decisive, meeting the ground with such

easy resolve and balance even though she was walking in slow, measured steps. She wondered if her clunk-foot had acquired some mobility. She'd been doing the exercises.

'Huberta,' she asked, 'Can you hang on a second?'

'Sure,' answered Huberta, 'Do you mind if I smoke?'

'Go ahead.'

Gina sat down in the middle of the corridor. She unlaced her trainers and took them off, removed her socks, one purple, one blue, and rolled them into her shoes. Wisps of smoke curled up to the ceiling as she stuffed her shoes into her bag.

'Vanilla?' asked Gina.

'Yes—Colts.'

'I used to smoke that. Do you mind if I lie down while you smoke?'

'Not at all.'

It wasn't like her—it really wasn't—but Gina lay down on that smooth floor and closed her eyes. Behind her eyelids there was just darkness, and a few of those red, blue and yellow dots that formed spiralling clouds in her darkneses. She let the vanilla smell coat her air in staircases and donkey fields, spattered rain and thick grass patterning her calves, piglets, starlings on electric poles.

'You ready?' asked Huberta.

'Yep,' said Gina, the word bouncing from her lips with its foreign, excessively eager *p*.

'How much longer until we get there?'

'Not too long.'

'And is it a campus just for hippos?'

Huberta laughed.

'Is it safe?' asked Gina.

'Just keep your lanyard on,' said Huberta, 'Hippos can break boats and cars in two, these tusks don't joke. Have you seen us on Youtube?'

Gina had. She had also seen them on school trips. The first time was in St Lucia. Oom Louis told them how dangerous hippos were, the most dangerous of all the wild animals. She got caterpillar spines stuck in her arm, and he shaved them off with a bush knife. She and her friends got lost on the navigation activity, they fed a stray cat green milk.

'I'll keep the lanyard on,' said Gina.

She held it up to her face. *Guest*.

They kept walking. The corridor seemed endless—but Gina liked it. It was like long-haul flights via Ethiopia; or like lying on loungers in the airport in Seychelles, on the way to Mumbai; it was like sitting outside train stations in Italy, boiling water and stirring pasta for thirteen hours.

They arrived at a door.

Huberta breathed onto a scanner and it swung open. The light on the other side was a blinding glare. Huberta turned into a black mound in the doorway, menacing and beckoning. Gina focused on her feet again. The way they connected with the cool floor.

'Gina?' said Huberta, 'Are you ready for the tour?'

'Yep,' she said. *Who the hell is this yep person?*

Gina's feet paced through the door. Left and then right and then left again. She felt like a flamingo in a giraffe's body, a loping stride hiding pink feathers on stilts.

They were in a sunlit foyer. It was a shock to her eyes after that long, dark trek through the underbelly of some other building she was meant to visit. A crocodile stood at the counter, pecking at the keyboard, ostrich-like. It reminded Gina of a musical she'd seen, though she thought it might be rude to say.

'This is Gina,' said Huberta, 'signing in for a Campus Tour.'

'Huberta, she doesn't look like a candidate for the Hippo Campus. Are you sure she wasn't planning on touring the Human Campus?' said the crocodile, her tone sharp with scales and teeth.

'She wasn't sure, so I invited her.'

The crocodile looked Gina up and down. Her eyes travelled her arms and legs, her snout directing the angles of her staring.

Gina pointed at the lanyard.

'Meat?' said the crocodile.

'No,' Gina said, taking the card in her hands, 'Gues-'

She sucked in air.

'Meat?' she read.

*Meat* said the card, in the same place it had said *Guest* in such bold letters before. Two ice eggs cracked on Gina's shoulders, their yolks dripping strings down her back.

'But it said—'

She looked at Huberta, hoping her eyes looked saddened and pitiful.

'Turn it over,' said Huberta, 'that's the wrong side!'

Gina flipped over the card. *Guest* it said on the back.

'Guest,' read Gina. She flipped it again.

'Meat.' Flipped—

'Guest. Meat. Guest-Meat,' she said, turning the card in her hands.

'An honest mistake,' said the crocodile, 'don't worry my dear, you're clearly a guest—not meat.'

Huberta's cheeks were pink, her back covered in patches of orange, red and brown. Her aroma filled the room.

'Just make sure it shows the right side?' said the crocodile, 'you wouldn't want anyone thinking you're meat. Not here, it means something different here.'

Gina felt like she wanted to leave.

'I'm sorry, Gina, I should've warned you about the other side,' said Huberta. 'I really just forgot, it's been a strange day, with too many trips to the bathroom. Those cramped stalls always mess me up.'

Gina still felt like she wanted to leave, but a little bit less.

'Gina?' said the crocodile, 'You can still leave, it's not too late. And you'll still be able to leave after the tour. The meat thing—just forget about that. They're all hippos here. Herbivores. Gregari-

ous. Descended from whales. Brave, comical, and ever-so aggressive.'

'Huberta, you can go to class,' said the crocodile.

'Sorry, Gina,' she said sadly, 'it was nice to meet you.'

Huberta turned and loped out of the foyer. Gina watched her disappear through the door, noisily and looking quite low and dejected.

'Have you decided, Gina?' asked the crocodile.

'Yes, I'll take the tour.'

Gina was surprised at herself wanting to take the tour. Especially after the guest-meat card, the reminder of hippo aggression—and the way Huberta just said *meet* like it was completely unrelated to *meat* and all that awkward misunderstanding. Her feet hadn't faltered through everything though, and they were still bare, still calm and collected, cool on the cool foyer floor.

'It's a self-led tour,' said the crocodile, handing Gina a pair of headphones and an audio device.

'Just follow the instructions, and, sweetheart, keep your lanyard facing the right way. We don't want any mishaps or meat-guest confusion.'

'Thank you,' said Gina.

She placed the headphones over her ears, and switched on the device.

## **A thread curves and bends**

It's fine, pale yellow, a loop weaving strands into seams. Its liquid movement is a petal un-curved, an Autumn tree wind-swept clean; a crab skull cushioned in sand, filled with air, un-cracked, perfectly dead. That hovering thread is echoing ground, half sung in a thin tube of glass. It loops through an eye, through a loop, weaves a line, circling thermals kestrels ride. That floating looping thread-shone gold coils air into scale-shone lines, that loop just fine.

## Me-Ben-Rose

There's a forest of trees at the border. Tall gums, *wisha* pines, bamboo poles. We walk, hands in hands, to the forest. Two small hands, pudgy wet in my palms. Six legs walk, left-right-left, Me-Ben-Rose.

There are trees on the way to the forest, long line of casuarinas, spiny cones. Coral trees are fading orange at their edges. I dismiss their low branches, play things coy. Ben kicks a stone. Rose shuts her eyes. I am hungry for gums and pine needles. Ben is too, so is Rose, three gum-pine hungry's.

We join the shadow edges of the forest, the bamboo poles creak along the river. Our stomachs grumble. Ben's teeth grind sparks and yellow. Rose breathes in trees and pools drool. The pines whispers are in our ears. They say *wisha-wisha* with the air, *wisha-wisha*.

The branches of the gums reach for birds. Their white and grey-brown trunks line up in rows. I run a hand along smooth and splintered bodies. Ben hugs a trunk. Rose plants her face against its roughness. I hold my hair back and sink my face in. The bark is hard. We bite in sideways rips and tears. Strings of bark and strips of trunk uncoil in pieces. It takes resolve to bite into a tree, a raging hunger, sometimes blood.

Rose moves one tree along and starts her licking. Ben's mouth is full of twists of brown and sap. I chew on leaves curled on the ground to add thin gravy, a eucalyptus moisture coats my mouth.

Rose makes dimpled fists. Her wrist creases. She pounds on raw-licked trunk.

Ben's mouth is filled with leaves. Green yellow brown with sand.

I use a twig to push stems from empty sockets.

## Schedule

- Wake up and breathe for five minutes.
- Don't think about it, you were breathing already.
- Activate your core.
- Forget about the core.
- Write three pages of long-hand in a journal.
- Don't worry about punctuation.
- Don't worry about content. It's better to worry about punctuation than content.
- Go for a walk in a circle for ten minutes.
- Take off your shoes and connect with the ground.
- Don't do it on the grass outside, it's too wet.
- Focus on your breathing.
- Don't think about it, notice it.
- Don't over-think the breathing, focus on the movement of your ribcage.
- Don't worry about that stabbing below your ribs. Focus on your breathing.
- Breathing is the wrong word.
- Don't worry about what the right word might be.
- Don't worry about the stabbing. It's probably trapped air.
- Just open the fucking window so that fucking fly gets out.
- What date is it.
- Don't worry about being hungry.
- Stay hungry as long as possible.
- Embrace hungry.
- Allow hungry to give you a sense of urgency.
- Don't tense your shoulders.
- Relax your forehead.
- Don't let the sense of urgency make you panic.
- Don't say the word panic.
- Don't think about panic.
- Don't write it.
- Fold it into an origami duck.
- Drop it in the bathwater.
- Throw it out with the bathwater.
- Stretch your extremities.

## **My nostrils fill with swamp odours**

My eyes cloud with the vapours of ancient skins, saturated bark, carcasses of terrapins and egrets. I press my palm against the smooth trunk of a tree. Buzzing fills my mouth. A bee is trapped in a spiderweb. The strands are thick and grey, parts of its centre are thinning. It hangs across the path I have to follow from this pathless mound of dim light. It clings to wisps of mould and flakes of skin, a dried out lizard, a sunbird's green-shone wings. I break a branch off the tree to clear a way through the web's buzzing snare, its glaring, death-flecked grey. I prod at the web, then swing in a clumsy arc. It won't break apart. I take a second branch and swing a figure eight at the centre. It breaks through. I walk ahead through the opening. The web's strands clutch at my edges, trailing a wispy shawl that catches scatterings of tiny rot, silkworms, centipedes, severed head of a woodland kingfisher. I watch the tiny, fragment deaths fold into the path behind me. At the edge of my eye, my ears, my throat, one lone bee's scream lined in fine black fuzz. My lips vibrate. They form a rippling O. The bee and I drop the bones of our screams; tiny, empty circles float in the rancid air like mutant nails of a mangrove crone.

## Net in a Tree

First she runs her finger round the curved edge of the hollow, smoothing down splinters, pulling at wisps and grey threads. She uses her index finger, the one that stores her rage. It's on her left hand, that alien hand whose mind she cannot read. A spider has curled up and dried; its legs mouth *crunch* with old leaves.

She explores the hollow with her middle finger the second time. She pokes a little deeper, feeling for the ends of nails, sharp points, loose claws. She waits for the grip of another finger from another world on the other side of the hole. Two sides of the same coin. Two sides of the same brain. Two sides of the same side, winding down desert hills in a curvy zigzag spelling *I was here*.

The third time her finger catches a tiny snag she wants to lift—it might be a switch. It might tilt the ground to a new angle, one that would tighten her knees, one where she'd see a thin *between* that exposes the other world. She knows it's there. She can tell by the light that turns green in the morning.

She buries her hand in the hollow. The fingers have wound her attention into a spiral. It travels the depths and the heights of the tree, winding through bark, curling green veins and hard places. The hollow is joined to another, larger hollow. It extends down the trunk, through the ground, to deep hairy reaches of roots. She catches the end of the spiral and pulls. It has criss-crossed and hatched into a net, hanging heavy and grey.

This is the tree. The one she had known as a girl. The net is swaying. Heaving it up is like holding a mirror in the late afternoon, watching tears. It reaches the opening. She leans back and the bundle pours from the tree in a defeated shrug, landing in drapes over roots, old dust and sharp breath tangled with belts of net.

## **A Walk in the Woods**

I was walking in the woods in France, Senonche Forest, and I didn't really know where I was going. There were two other guys with me. One was psychic, American, the other was too young to read signs. I needed some space so I'd walked off on my own, up through a clear fir-lined path. I wished there were fish there. I wished it so hard that I saw them in schools in the canopy. Their scales caught the light. They shone as they moved and that made me think about pianos and hours of practicing. My mind made a list of scales: chromatics, major, minor, octaves, arpeggios. I couldn't remember the name of the one you play outwards and inwards. You begin with both hands in the middle, xylophoning out and then back, thumbs meeting on the key where you started. It's quite tricky. I pressed my fingertips together as I walked. I was craving the smooth touch of keys or the rough furry cloth that covered them when the piano was closed.

## **Afternoon Activity: River Walk (beautiful, medium fitness)**

You walk up the river with Dibo. You leave behind familiar trees, the boulders and sounds of the Lodge. You start straining for baboons' whooping barks, searching the trees for blue faces—the other kind of monkey. You can't remember which kind is the one to stay away from, you'll stay away from both. Dibo is running ahead, he likes to chase monkeys. You call him back. You miss Gondras. You notice Chicken is following, even though he's half blind and has fits that set his grey form in a statue. You look ahead for Dibo. You stop and listen. You are at the edge of nervousness. You lower yourself onto your haunches and run a finger over its surface to test its temperature. You decide it's cool enough to pass for excited anticipation for this walk. You're reminded of another walk in the Atlantic Forest in Brazil's Santa Catarina state. You had spent 15 hours on a bus to Blumenau, watching trees. You watched the forest surround you, move aside for small towns and circle in again. Poles protruded from the green sea, washing lines, a roof. You wanted to walk in the forest but everyone you asked said you couldn't walk there. You needed to go to the nature reserve, they said, hire a guide. You walked to an isolated parking lot at the edge of town. It joined what looked like the edge of the forest, and you walked in. The trees were tall. Vines and creepers covered their trunks in leaves, eye-poker twigs. You imagined snakes, scorpions, a jaguar; a second jaguar in a tree, watching. Your legs were being scratched by the thickening shrubs that covered the ground. You told yourself you were enjoying this. The sunlight was getting less penetrative. Your view no longer reached very far, and you began looking back more than forwards. You imagined a panther waiting up ahead, eyes darting behind a tree trunk. You stopped. You turned around. You walked back down the path, back to the parking lot, back to the house down the road. When you see bushy areas at parking lots now, filled with litter and desperate lovers, you remember that forest walk—you remember it like it was a fun adventure. You remember it now as you scan the river ahead of you. You begin crossing it, stepping gingerly between loose stones, expecting a snake to appear in a ripple of scales. Dibo splashes towards you. You almost fall over. You miss the way Gondras would stand in the water beside you letting you lean on her form. Chicken is no longer behind you. You beat your feet with your socks on the other side of the river, removing the sand. You tie on your shoes. You call Dibo out of the water. You think about the shelter around the corner, under the big mango tree. There are dogs there, dogs that bark, dogs that Dibo likes to chase and snarl at. You try to distract him. You jog and briskly march, keeping him close, hoping those dogs won't appear until you're past them. They don't notice you this time. You decide to walk up the mountain rather than another river crossing. You turn to the right, scanning the field for snakes. Dibo is staying close. He runs ahead and behind, always circling back. The ground is hot on his paws, he keeps to the shade where he can. You stop to take photos. You want to remember this beautiful place, these beautiful walks, this beautiful beautiful.

## Theory of Change

It's easy to confuse the outcomes and the objectives and the outputs. They're the trunk of the tree, the systems, routines and processes. The low-level details are clear, easy to spot, bee-eaters on a Coral tree's bare-branched apex. The overall, overarching change—similar: easy to view as a palm-nut vulture swooping overhead from the coast to the raffia palms. The outcome is happiness, the output is laughter; the outcome is a flattened dune, the output is thunderclaps of shore-break dissipating in a cloud of mediocre applause, from a person that's breathing deeply—in the early sleep cycle—eyelids flickering, slack jaw, saliva pooling.

A theory of change is a supporting document. You'll know it's attached by the paperclip, curved in the direction of its current, coiled by the speed of its winds. It requires a significant commitment of time to brainstorming, some more to feedback and synergy, a little to formatting and transition sentences, each part adding sense to a trajectory from access to attitude. Access, knowledge, skills, behaviour, attitude, system. Leave system out—it's out of scope. There are so many things to change. The theory of change will chart the course, map the way, allocate power to the right sets of hands, appropriate mouths, pleasing and well-worded outcomes. It should work if the words fit into the templates, the photographs match the file types, the budgets are cross-checked, colleagues consulted, points of view injected, bullshit terms inserted, risks mitigated, teeth extracted, arms folded, jaws set, eyebrows stitched, document named and saved and copied and emailed and signed and dated.

A theory of change is most likely to work if it's illustrated, with arrows to show the movement of the change, doorways marked by tape crossing over, and the sound of drilling.

## Ask Hagrid's Mama

Dear Hagrid's Mama,

I have this problem. I don't know if it's actually a problem, but it makes me feel like there's something different about me. Something freakish. And not in the freaky-cool way. More the freakish-shame way. It's hard for me to write it down here, even though I know you don't know me.

I guess I should just say it. I get turned on by people falling down stairs. Hell, it's not just people. And it doesn't need to be stairs they're falling down. Ask anyone who's watched *Roadrunner* with me. Well not anyone—maybe just those people that caught me. I don't know what it is about the falling, the tumbling, the heights, the tall buildings, looming cliffs. Just seeing a steep hill sets me off.

Have you ever heard from other people with the same problem? I'm tired of feeling the shame creeping up my arms, my neck. Is there something wrong with me. Like sexually. Or maybe even... mentally, or spiritually?

*In shadows of mountains, this shame that the small ones get lost in, fades in the darkness. And this darkness is good. Strong. True. The problem is not your heights and falls. The problem is the shame. I can't say Don't Feel Shame. Instead I whisper to the stones and the sky that they are as they are as they are. So are you. Beautiful. Unique. Perfectly made.*

*Hagrid's Mama*

Dear Hagrid's Mama

The heights and falling are not the only problem. I get turned on by a lot of different things. One thing they have in common is their bigness. Enlarged body parts. Monsters and their looming shadows. Cave-sized armpits full of stinking, dark and twisted hair. Everywhere I look I see fragments of raunchy heat. And I don't see it in glossy magazines or shades of grey. It's always in the ugly parts of the picture. The rot. The stink. The pain.

I can't go anywhere. I can't do anything. Do you think it's because I see myself as ugly rot and pain?

*Small one, I can't send you answers in the wind and fragments of stone from my mountain if you are stuck in the shadows of ceilings and walls, hidden from sun and sky. Go everywhere. Do everything. You will see that all the glossy, the shades of grey, rot and pain, are made from the same dust of stars. You are the dust of stars. The dark side, and the light.*

*Hagrid's Mama*

Dear Hagrid's Mama,

Those weren't the only things I wanted to tell you. Actually, only parts of the previous messages were true. There's just one thing that's true above everything. Literally. And that's my attraction to giant freaks like you. I want to fuck a giant. I want to tumble from your grunting heights. Did any of my messages turn you on, Hagrid's Mama? Are you a tall, stinking mountain of flesh and hair?

*Dear Melissa,*

*Thank you for your previous correspondence. Regrettably, Hagrid's Mama is unable to respond to your most recent email. As stipulated in our terms and conditions, seekers are only permitted to submit two Ask's per year. This is as a result of the millions of emails we receive, and our commitment to responding to as many as possible.*

*Thank you for your readership and support. Our work depends on people like you who assist in spreading Hagrid's Mama's words and wisdom beyond our reach.*

*Kind regards,*

*Ms Fick*

*Secretary*

*Hagrid's Mama Inc.*

Dear Ms Fick,

Suck my dick.

Kindly,

Melissa

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Melissa skips ahead to her favourite scene for the thousandth time. Maybe the hundred thousandth. Hagrid walking Hermione, Ron and Harry into the Forbidden Forest, his face bruised and scratched. Bats dart from high branches as dusk thickens into darkness.

Grawp appears, a fleshy hill rising from the gnarled roots and shadows. An ancient Oak in giant-human form. He thrusts his arm towards them like a muscly branch and grabs Hermione. Her tiny form is dwarfed in his palm, held in the folds of his fingers. Melissa always pauses the film there. She closes her eyes and imagines a different unravelling of the scene, while she unravels.

She breathes out a satisfied sigh, the day's tensions dissipating. She packs away her laptop and notebooks, and does her reality checks. Back of hand, palm. Read a sentence. Light on-off-on. She hasn't had a lucid dream in ages. Then again, she hasn't been keeping to the practice as much as she used to. She turns off the lamp, turns on her side, and waits for sleep.

A path opens up ahead. At first, Melissa feels a catch in her breath, a sense of foreboding, unease. And then she recognises this place she's in. The thick, bat-flown darkness and the trees. A deeper, more awake realisation drops. Hand check. When she turns her hand over, palm up, a finger disappears, and another extends to double its length.

'I'm lucid!' Adrenaline. Heart rate rising.

'Calm, Mel. Calm,' she says, actively slowing her breathing, focusing on one of the trees ahead. She doesn't want to wake up out of excitement again.

'Grawp!' she shouts into the darkness.

She hopes he doesn't appear straight away. A lot of the pleasure is in the anticipation, the search in the roots and the tree trunks for her tree-man. Her mountain. Her giant fuck buddy. She can't get over-excited now though—lucid, not awake, is what this needs.

He appears in a shadow just ahead, his eyes catching the moonlight up in the canopy. She meets them. He sees her. All of her. Her inside her. There is no shame in the forest. No forbidding.

His arm reaches for her, and she falls into his closing fist. His calloused skin rubs against the back of her legs. Tugs at her shirt. Singes her bare skin. His fingers squeeze her together, crushing her ribs, her breath. He holds her up to his face and then plunges her downwards. The elated falling almost wakes her. She counts to ten while she runs her hands down his giant, hard, dick, breathing in his earthy, beastly stink. There is no way that would fit, even in a dream.

He places her on the ground. She lies on the forest floor, damp leaves and twigs pressing into her back and thighs. She wills his hand towards her, spreading herself apart for him. His thumb is inside her. His giant, triple-dick thumb. A rough, barky branch biting into her like a wolf ripping through bird flesh. He presses her, twisting, thrusting, pulling her apart.

It's almost over.

'Wait!' she gasps.

He stops and pulls out.

She breathes in the rising, rippling pressure and wills him back inside. He thrusts in hard, breaking her apart and kneading all her parts back together. The burst of effervescence sends her straight back to awake. She is back in her bed, twisted in the sheets, heart and pussy pounding.

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Dear Ms Fick,

Please could you pass this message on to Hagrid's Mama, unless it breaks your previously mentioned rules and stipulations:

*Dear Hagrid's Mama,*

*I fucked your son last night. Thanks for bringing him up nice and rough. I'd love to meet more of your children, and one day, if you fancy, you.*

*Kindly,*

*Melissa*

If you can't pass it on, Ms Fick, there's no need to fret. You can just suck my dick again. I know you like it.

Kindly,

Melissa

## A List of Common Misconceptions

A fiscal shrike is not a word or a murderer. A fiscal shrike is a blurry-edged shadow, circled in pen and recorded one late afternoon.

Ghosts are not scary, they're translucent echoes. It's a myth that they're clouds breathing fog. They're just beyond bridges, handing out flyers—they're lonely.

A rabbit hutch is best left empty. The best place for rabbits is a backyard in France, their legs tied in strings before boiling.

An elephant is not a lion or a crane. An elephant is a bull-ring moment. A herd of elephants is a thrill for a matador, or a ring for a stamped out death. An elephant and a lion come clear beside each other. When they're painted on zinc in an unmoving face-off, confusion's blunt edges are erased. Elephant and lion are both words, and words that chant well together—that's how I meant to say it from the start.

A passage is not a safe thoroughfare. It's too lined with doorways to kitchens and junctions, shadows and quick-clicking tiles.

A saluki is not a friend or an omen, and a group of them doesn't exist. There's really just one, its bark is quite silent, and it stands on a bank streaked in mud.

A rabbit is not a toy or a cloud. A rabbit is best drawn in charcoal. A group of rabbits is lethal. Their feet are not lucky, their tails are not cotton, their ears are too long and all veiny.

## Poems

It wasn't until I was alone, one night in my room, that I began to hear their poems. It was dark, past midnight; I looked up because of something small. The mosaic frame across from me caught my eye, its lips were moving. Its blue green lips cut in bits of glass were unglued and loose, forming words though I heard no sounds. I was alone and I had never seen those lips, their sidelong smile, their green glass shine, the crooked teeth moving in rhyme. The frame was dictating a poem, the first I heard in my room at that time of day. It said something about words that twist and turn, from the world outside, with the world inside, two palms in a prayerful pose—large sleeves catching loose leaves and sun-burned stones. I took too long to find a pen, and by the time the words had loosed their coils my eyes had closed, my ears were shut, my breathing was slow and deep. The next I heard came from a shell—a cowrie that asked in dark tones—*throw me back to the whales and the fish and the sea-turned sand*, and then spoke about being an eye, staring from a ledge in this room: *my iris has spread, hard lilac, curved edge, pupil sucked in through teeth*. I was alone when I heard it say *black holes and sleep, collects in my curved over ends, I hold in a roomful of dark*. This time I had a pen, one fast and quick to write. I used the bold shadow of a twig, a line, navy blue against brown-grey stone. I followed pages and a morning sun, listened for leaf shadows, unshadows, darker branches unlit. The cowrie's poems were filled with hollows, *late afternoon, dark seeps out, the room fills with ink*. The cowrie has been silent since then. One afternoon, quite late, I was alone at my desk, and the window dictated a poem: *a turtle dove flies*. It spoke in glassy tones, of the trees and *a crowd of wings through a gap between walls, red facebrick, another painted green*. It made up the walls, facebrick and green, though I'd heard the turtle dove through the morning. I sat, and I wondered if the green painted trees, if the facebrick was mine through the glass. *Viscous click, bee-eater wings; beak thick with velvet sound; glass of liqueur, green underwing, flashing black bead for an eye*. I'm not sure how the window knew about the bee-eater. You couldn't see or hear him from this wall. Perhaps it's dictating a poem it's heard dictated by another pane, another page.

## Alice

Alice crossed the border when she was 11. It was an easy choice—either that, or Egyptian Goose. She'd rather cross the border than wear those dark browns and honk from a roof in the morning. Border-crossing is old hat—it is ancient sombrero, broad-brimmed bicorne, tatty snap-back or ageing Australian, the straw unravelling, minus a few corks. The bicorne was her favourite. It was so large that when the rains came she could turn it over and sit in it, floating over floodwater in dandruff-specked felt. Maybe it was Napoleon's—if it's true that human heads have shrunk in size over time. The bicorne-boating was dicey here and there, but she resisted the violent pulls and soft twangs of kindness that threatened her buoyancy. She steered herself in wide arcs around paddling dachshunds, bedraggled flamingos, dissolving kittens, their yaps, pink legs and desperate mewling all fading into streams of pathetic bubbles as she neared the sea. She stored those sounds in strands of memory, echoes and dull flutters of trapped drongos, fork-tailed and suffocating in bundled blankets, water-saturated, sinking, and spiralling into her amygdala. It was a mistake—a nose following an almond scent.

Alice, though unusually short for her age, was always gifted with following her nose. It's likely she was born with an exceptional memory for scent. An aunt, much taller than her, but rather less clever, once remarked that she should use her scents. The suggestion seemed illogical at the time, but when Alice asked her to clarify which scents, this aunt changed colour in rapid increments, swelled up like a very warm balloon and floated away. It appeared that this aunt was so shocked by the course of events she was unable to speak, except in the language of wild boars and very thirsty camels. Her groans and grunts travelled the strips of blue sky, sending flocks of birds into blossoming curls and looping flights that offset various migratory paths, and ultimately contributed to the accelerated melting of the polar icecaps. But they were already done for in every case—suit, unsolvable, just in.

Since then, Alice—in memory of her well-loved aunt—began paying special attention to every scent she identified. She learnt that peppery ones made her sneeze; sweeter ones gave her an aggravating tickle in the back of her throat; bakery smells took control of her feet; and schwarma seller smells caused uncontrollably stringy saliva threads to weave their way from her lips to the floor in quick-snapping strands. She followed scents to their sources, and developed all kinds of systems for memorising, categorising, utilising the more common ones. She then moved on to the more particular and peculiar ones. Her ultimate aim was to join the non-scents to her system, though that would be far in the distant and decidedly hazy, dust-specked future. And she wasn't so sure that would be useful, though there was a nagging twitch in her eye that hinted it would be. Nevertheless, Alice developed an exact science for following her nose, regardless of its distance from the ground.

Ground is not what awaited her on the other side of the border. Well, not the grounds she knew—not the rich chocolate loam, or the salty-cracked sand, the powder-stung clay or the grass-infused lawn. The only ground on the other side was an active kind. The crushing and pounding and powdering kind. The kind where its scent was stamped out and dissolved into air. Alice searched.

She wasn't sure what for. It took some time for her to notice her centre point had been squeezed, wrung out—she was 11 after all, alone, with a collection of old hats, no home and shoes far too large. Even worse, there seemed to be no scent to steer her. Her nose aimed high, sucked in low, she sneezed and blew it, stuck in a few fingers, but nothing. Nothing to smell, nothing to follow, no way to write up a glossary of terms to begin to understand this strangeness.

Alice crawled under her giant bicorne, shut her eyes and waited for sleep. She wondered if Egyptian Goose would've been a better choice.

## Green Circle

A dot appears. It's green, dabbed there like an unwanted colour. It stays still, alone in featureless snow.

The dot moves in a curving arc, rising into action as required. This continues into night hours. Reels of film record the pleasing trajectory.

An arc ends abruptly and breaks. It splits in more ways than mathematically possible. There are streaks and circles in multiple thicknesses, new colours, curves and sharp angles.

The reels of film have melted in their casing. There is no evidence. There are textures, prints and flights of thick smearing. An arc has climbed and then split. Dot-made trajectories are everywhere. And dots.

It's impossible to deduce which dot is the original green dot. The red dot that sits highest called out and original green responded. The response is shown in a bold angled streak, unbridled and bleeding bright yellow.

Yellow has drained to the soft pile of butters and chicken fluff lining the base. They're all mixed together, melting and cheeping, indecipherable and impossible to stifle.

A crowd of blue dots congregates around the red. They're circling in coils and wide arcs. They've sent pink and white streaks to all edges.

The green dot is lost. It's drained of blue and yellow. It's spread in coils and feathers all over snow. The snow might not be snow. It's ended a featureless blank filled with dots and feathery fluff smeared with butter.

## My Friend Asked Me to Speak

My dear friend asked me to introduce her at this reading. She asked so nicely, so often, with so many different tones and palms full of sugar, pink and white. I couldn't refuse with my mouth or my tongue but every vein, cartilage cap and fleshy strip said no. They twisted disagreement in my gut, swam it to my nerve endings; they sent *n*'s and *o*'s to platelet plugs and blood cell streams. The letters failed to join, my fluids couldn't spell. Though when I answered, an *e*s and a *y* lurched in my throat and merged below my palate. *Yes*, I said with my mouth. *Thanks*, she said with her teeth. *Yes* and *Thanks* echoed between us and our eyes trailed the fading hiss. She wouldn't have asked if she didn't want me to. But a line of crocodile back scales stood up along my spine, pointing north, or south.

It landed on our shoulders as we sat together on the couch—the way we used to live. The way we understood the deep pools of the other's eyes, before mine turned to glass, before hers turned away.

I lay the contents of an old box on the bed. The Diaper Babies we would drop to the bottom of the pool; a box full of hair from the hairdresser's; a butterfly, stiff and blue, to clip loose wisps from my face, her face, our faces. A pencil, unused, covered in gold shine; another with a heart on its end, an old heart, rubber, with legs and arms that twist and stretch. An envelope whose seal is a stain, freckled in dry brown spots. Photographs cut out: mother, father, brother, sister, friend, cat, dog, dog, grandmother, cousin—four dead, three distant, one faraway, one forgotten.

Why did she ask me to speak. I could land up skinned, sun-dried and handbagged, my skull buried in sand, for the ants.

I'd rather not. I'll call her. I'll send a letter. I'll say everything I've wanted to say in blue pen on a white page, its edges singed with a candle like a pirate map. I'll put it into the old box, folded into a smaller rectangle, wrapped in a red shirt, forgotten like a ritual, like a secret long held, short-lived, spreading the ends of a shirtless tail, that tail that dropped off like a stub encrusted in some kind of shit, unwashed, wrapped up and boxed.

## The Door

There was a door there like he said. I'd never noticed it before. It was red. Dark lines were scratched into the wood by who knows what. Grime and smut had collected in the grooves over centuries, maybe even millennia—that's how dark and dense the grime was. I picked at it with a rusting loop, holding a torch and driving the wire as deep as I could.

'You'll split it,' said Ben.

'I don't care.'

How the hell would I care about splitting a door that had been hidden all these years. I'd walked here, hidden here, told stories here; I'd lived years of hours of life here, and I'd never even seen it. Let alone pushed on its creaking hinges to look behind it.

## In the Library

She sits in the middle of the room. The girl. The girl with the curl resting on her forehead, a wisp of smoke and turning. The room has high ceilings, high windows, high shelves framing edges of an arching roof. Beams reach from wall to wall, wooden and coated in dust. It smells of gone days, musty dreams and the ends of corridors (those primary school corridors)—with their cracks and deep lines, drilled in straight rows into concrete. The room is a library, a church, a forest, a hall of books and old mirrors. The girl is a pillar, a mystic, a toadstool, a red cloak on a crumb-strewn path.

She sits in a chair. It's green. Her safe word is also green. She uses her safe word for many things. There are things to be protected from, things that claw and tear and smooth rusted edges that would keep their rough porous frame. Sometimes her *no* sounds like *yes*, sometimes her *yes* sounds like rain, sheets of it, pouring in clear panes. Sometimes *green* slips from her lips in a streamline of tender new stems, bluegrass, fields of wheat and tea-trees. Sometimes it slips from her mind, or sits on her tongue like a stone, grey and smooth and still.

*Green* hums from the tall shelves, the forest of words and trees that line up in spines and spaces between, soft cushions of air and ferns. The shelves are rooted in wooden floors, sand and deep ground, furrowed by worms and graves, treads of feet and trails of ancient snails, their shells crushed to sugary grains. Ants carry grains home along dark winding curves that narrow then close in a turning coil of hair. It rests on her forehead.

The shelves are heavy with Napoleon and Henry's, Nefertiti, Cleopatra and Zeus. Words march across pages in disciplined lines, their boots heel-to-heel clicking time. Galileo drops a feather, it meets a thousand more, a cloud of dismantled swallows. Flocks of birds every colour and kind fly through the cloud, landing on beams, clucking pain, screeching crackers and crumbs. Crumbs settle on the girl's silent head in the green chair below. She crosses her ankles and lets the crumbs roll to her lap, to her knees, to the floor.

The girl feels the words crowding the room, the whistles, deep groans trickling blue. Plates run off with spoons, cows jump over moons, and she walks between shelves alone. It's bliss, gold-glass, a boat sealed in a bottle at sea, green sea, green boat, an owl, a cat, buckles and delicate peas. Trumpets and long plaits of hair meet knights and long-fingered toads. Lily-pads land on her shoulders, dress her feet, they leave shadows and bumps from old roads. Bumps spread, goose-flesh, lined in clear strands of slime, her skin creeps in oil-rippled sheen, flakes off in herrings and scales. Jolts of panic ripple her endings, glowing-eyed eels in dark caves, setting sparks in coarse salt. Her hair is crawling in mandolin strings, dull twangs and dead lovers to comb through with whalebone teeth.

The library was green long before, the shelves lined in moss, the floors in carpets of leaves. Now all that's green is the chair, and she's left it. It's a pale green dot in the distance, clouded by dust and red stars.

Her feet are glued to the floors, her eyes to the spines and their words. She drinks them in thirstily, they dry out her throat with spines and cones, she coughs out air. Her throat is a tunnel, a

vacuuming hole, bottomless and hungry for sentences, for paragraphs, chronology, latin names astrology. Her jaw unhinges, her mouth opens in a wide arcing cave of black and grey. The ceiling birds fly in circles, winding air into curves; they fill whirls with words, with faces and crowding, fingers and stomachs and stones. The girl pulls her feet with air-coloured strings, knees-up puppeteer between shelves. She feels less and less like a girl, her gaping face fills with old pages.

The words run, scrambling paragraph edges, pages topple margins, bury bottles in cellars and snares, bats circling tunnels through brick. The girl. The girl's eyes are green, but they're shut. She watches coils of luminous dots, spirals blue, red and white. They twirl behind her eye sockets, circles winding colour, every colour but her eyes. Her gaping mouth widens, lips folding over nostrils, bending below her jaw. Her teeth are bared, yellowed, stained in commas and seeds. There's a word on the tip of her tongue, a spark, a leaf curling terror-flung birds. Her tongue is coiled, knotting her word with the world.

The words, the whirls, the lists culture reason, the resin, sap clear amber dripping. Shelves ripple in heat, and the birds, the birds shoot arrows in quivering claws and wings beating echoes, turning air. The words cover stones, and the stones begin clapping, roaring applause from floors to beams. Stones clap with stones, words whirl into worlds, stones become stars, tiny flames, tiny cones of orange tongues unfurling.

The girl curls into girls, into words and their whirls, folds into worlds beating air. She opens her eyes, they're holes, empty sockets, they spark in blue-red and white bone. *Fire* she breathes, through curling tongue, written teeth, comet tails, her curves scaled in letters and lines.

Smoke raises floorboards in thin grey-white shadows of finger bones, clavicles, bent over wrists that dance against blackening walls. Blue flames spread in shallow warm pools, floors lighting leaves in dried crackling. Fire-breathing fire climbs hard-back shelves, spreads walls, ripples red bound spines. Pages cackle and hiss, browning and curling, dropping from shelves, heavy stones, lumps of coal. Paragraphs broken in fast licks of flame, stories untold, dismantled and ground into ash. Tendrils of once-upon myths curl to steam and shrink into points of white light, new myths billow ash and burning.

The girl's eyes stream, empty holes gushing sap, forests and trees all aflame. The word, one word, one creeping stem, creeps over window panes, smoking roof. *Fire* says the girl, *red* through her curling. Her eyes her mouth, holes swallowing flame pages and seared air. Smoke fills her ears with ashes and whispers, fables index her passages. Heat raises the roof, thundering stones, old cannons smoking crowds pounding windows. The girl, she says, *yellow, stop, grey*.

One creeping stem has covered the roof, the outside walls, the tiles and tremouring. Leaves thicken and cover the library in waves of evergreen curls and turning. A creeper tide pulls high with the moon, dark-blue sky, pulls a rope, waves reach high shores with their sighing. The library is covered in leaves, in branches and ropes of bark, darkened hollows.

The library fire rages and roars inside. It swallows and spits and billows and smokes, it eats. The girl watches, black holes. *Blue* she breathes. Her lips curl from her nose, her unhinged jaw. Her gaping mouth closes. The creepers are heavy on windows, light dim. She sees them through

panes. A word is at the tip of her tongue. She tries to speak. Her mouth is filled with ground, with shadows and worm-made furrows, ants following curves, carrying charred bits of birds and words.

## An Interview

*Which skill did you want to work out?*

A secret skill.

*Which secret skill?*

Where he doesn't spin straw into gold.

*Are you talking about Rumpelstiltskin?*

No.

*Who are you talking about?*

Marzipan.

*Can you tell me some more about Marzipan?*

Marzipan floated off the diagonal sponge cake. Also in a fit of rage that almost split the cake in two.

*Ah. Also like Rumpelstiltskin. Did it split the cake in two?*

No. It split the cake in seven. And can we leave Rumpelstiltskin out of this? I'm not talking about him.

*Sure. How did the cake split in seven?*

I'm not sure. Marzipan got filled with air, rose like a pancake-flat hover-disc, and then folded in on itself.

*And then?*

And then it plummeted to the floor in a graceful, sugary arc.

*And the cake?*

Split into seven parts.

*Could you say how the cake split?*

I just did. It sounded like a poem.

*What happened next?*

Marzipan landed on the floor.

*And then what happened?*

It got caked in dust.

*Did anyone pick it up?*

No.

*Is it still there now?*

I'm not sure. Maybe.

*Is the cake still there?*

Some of it.

*What was the scene when you were last there?*

I don't want to talk about that.

*That's great. This is not meant to be an interrogation. What do you want to talk about?*

The secret skill. I've already said that.

*Marzipan's secret skill?*

Yes.

*Not spinning straw into gold?*

You shouldn't say spinning straw into gold like that.

*Like what?*

Like you're talking about Rumpelstiltskin. I'm not talking about him.

*Sorry, I didn't mean to.*

I'm not talking about him.

*No, we're talking about Marzipan. What is his secret skill?*

It's secret skill. Not his—it's.

*My mistake—what is it's secret skill?*

I don't know.

*What do you know about it?*

I know that it's not spinning straw into gold. I know it's something to do with Marzipan. I know that the sponge and Marzipan belong together.

*Okay. I think we can work with these things. Can you tell me more about the sponge and Marzipan? We haven't spoken very much about the sponge.*

I've already told you everything I know about them.

*How do you know that they belong together?*

It's science. You don't get Marzipan without sponge.

*So what does that mean for Marzipan now it's on the floor?*

It's not Marzipan anymore.

*And the sponge?*

The sponge is fine.

*Is it fine for sponge to split into... 7 parts, was it?*

Yes. Forget about the sponge—it's fine.

*So the sponge is fine, but Marzipan isn't Marzipan anymore, since falling on the floor.*

Yes.

*What is it then?*

That's what I need to work out. The only way is with the secret skill.

*I see. Does that help you learn more about what the secret skill is?*

No. It's not about fucking Rumpelstiltskin. I've told you that. I've told the other guy that, and you all want to come back to this same fucking loop about Rumpel-fucking-stiltskin.

*Sorry, I didn't mean to come back to Rumpelstiltskin.*

You people don't actually care.

*Look, I know we don't know each other yet. I really appreciate your honesty despite this, and let me assure you—I do actually care, but I know it's too soon for me to prove that. This problem we're trying to solve is mysterious and, frankly, more fascinating than anything else I've spoken about to-*

*day. I don't expect you to trust me, but let's try and stay with the important thing here—Marzipan and the secret skill. Do you think it has anything to do with the sponge?*

All I can hear when you speak is Rumpelstiltskin Rumpelstiltskin Rumpelstiltskin.

*I know you're angry, and I am completely comfortable with that, but what I think is most important here is working out what the secret skill is. So what have we got so far?*

Well nothing new since we started *this* discussion. I don't know what the fuck I'm paying for.

*I think we need to keep going, even though you're angry. Anger is good, it might help you remember something differently—or something new.*

The secret skill is *not* naming things, or *guessing* the names of things. It's something else.

It's something to do with *not* spinning straw into gold, and it has *nothing* to do with Rumpelstiltskin.

*That's great. We can work with this. Not naming or guessing names... something to do with not spinning straw into gold, nothing to do with Rumpelstiltskin. Can I suggest something?*

Yes.

*Let's write all of this down. Maybe seeing it from a different perspective will help us make some connections.*

Okay.

*Just give me a minute, I'll get some more stationery from out there. You just relax and see if you can think of some more clues.*

Okay.

[therapist leaves for short period, returns with a box of stationery]

*Okay, let's get set up. How about we use the table?*

Sure.

*I'll lay out the pens, and you can choose the paper size?*

Fine.

*A3—great choice. I'm thinking a different colour for each clue. Or do you think each clue needs its own page?*

Maybe.

*Do you think we need a page for the sponge cake?*

I don't know.

[knock on the door, receptionist enters]

Yes, Mark?

Sorry to disturb, Doctor, you're almost out of time. Mrs Gold called and she's pulling up outside in five.

*Oh, thanks. We'll be out in a minute.*

*I'm sorry, looks like our time is up.*

Did he say Mrs Gold?

*Ah... Yes. He shouldn't have actually said her name while you're in here with me. Sorry about that.*

Gold as in what the secret skill is not spinning straw into? Are you missing this?

*Good point, I'll add it to my notes. But I'm afraid we'll need to wrap things up for today. Set up your next time with Mark if you'd like to keep working on this next week?*

Well as long as you don't get stuck in that Rumpelstiltskin loop again. And stop circling round and round the fucking sponge.

*Noted. We'll get straight to Marzipan's secret skill when I see you next.*

Sure, see you then.

# Story Sum

after Joanna Ruocco

She covered her eyes with her palms. She flattened her palms on the table. She closed her eyes and squeezed. She opened them. She stretched her eyelids until they almost split. She listened for a flesh-lipped rip. Her eyeballs dried. She heard their mucous crack. She stood up. She sat down. She stood up. She sat down hard. It hurt a little. She counted pages. She counted books. She made fresh piles. She named herself something sharp. Kim.

Kim read 4 books. Kim wrote 4 pages. How many books wrote four. Kim ate 1 apple. Kim ate 1 apple again. Kim ate half a grapefruit. Kim hid 1 chocolate. Kim found 1 hidden chocolate. How many grapefruits subtract 1 chocolate. How many chocolates add 1 grapefruit. How many ladles scoop out hips. How many hips make Kim.

A page is worth two apples. An apple is worth 1 slice of cheese. 1 slice of cheese is worth 3 pages. 1 chocolate subtracts 4 pages. What is the remainder. Kim is asking to repeat the question. Kim had 1 question. Kim requested 1 answer. Kim has twice as many answers as questions.

Kim decides to go for a short walk. She starts from her chair. She ends at the end of the road. How fast is Kim. She sees a bicycle on the road. On the bicycle: 1 bag of apples, 1 bag of books, 1 bag of hair elastics, 1 cat. 1 rand for an apple. 5 rand for 5 books. 0 rand for hair elastics. 1 untagged cat. Kim wants 1 cat. The cat is 0 rand. The cat comes with everything. That is non-negotiable. Take everything and get 1 cat. 0 cats for 1 bag of apples. 1 book and 0 cats. 3 bags and 1 cat for free. Kim is angry. The cat is not free. The unit is cats. How many bags on the bicycle if you subtract the cat.

Kim snatches a bag of apples. How many apples in the bag. There are 15 apples in the bag. 1 apple is red. 1 apple is green. 1 apple is angry. 1 apple doesn't like the cat. 15 apples roll down the road. How many bicycles crash. How many bones make a body. How many trips to the fence does it take to lose 1 bag of books. How high is the fence. How many apples make one quarter of the hour. How many cats follow Kim home. What is the difference in speed. What is the distance in metres. How many times will Kim cover her eyes. How many eyes does Kim have.

Does Kim have a cat. If you tick yes, how hungry is the cat. If you tick no, how many black cats live at the house at the end of the road, and how many times does Kim walk by there.

How many cats does it take to make a sentence. How many bones does it take to end a question. How many times will Kim check the fence. What is the remainder. If the remainder is zero will Kim change her name.

How many Kim's make Sasha.

## Everything made sense and nothing was ugly or fat

A lot of my sisters' friends are buying this new energy drink called HAPPY. It makes you feel things. Inside and outside. Bubbles rising in orange and sparkled orbs just below your ribs, kicking at the base of your lungs in vibrations and shock therapy. It tastes like grapes from a market in Tuscany. Or cherries plucked from evergreen trees in an ever-sunlit field in the ever-north of Ireland, in a place unpopulated except by sheep with kind eyes and people your age doing things you like doing, looking for a person to turn their team into an even number.

HAPPY is cheap, and usually stored in the aisle with the canned fruits and vegetables. It's also non-perishable. It makes you, non-perishable. It creeps across your bone protrusions, between your hairs and blemishes. If you drink it at the right temperature, HAPPY will cover your blemishes for good, those on your skin, and those on your spleen—even those on the deepest lateral roots of your heart and the soles of your feet. That's why all my sisters' friends are buying it. That's why she's buying it. That's why I'm selling it. I can't drink HAPPY. I don't have any blemishes, no dry skin or acne scars, no stretch marks lining the backs and insides of my thighs. I don't need to drink HAPPY, I just sell it.

I was born to sell it. And if I wasn't, I was trained to sell it. I walk between houses saying everyone's getting it, everyone's getting it, everyone's getting it. Even when no-one is. I carry on saying everyone's getting it until they start getting it. They do. I sell glasses too, and ice-trays and thermometers. Also small children I find in the parks where old streets end and new streets begin. I only sell those children running about on their own, not those lying in prams or on blankets, in laps or swinging on child-sized swings. People don't seem to mind. They're all so drunk on HAPPY you could tell them anything and they'd believe you.

I don't know what would happen if I stopped selling. Maybe they would gouge out my eyes and rip my nose straight from the bone. Perhaps they'd soak the bloody nub in a tall glass of HAPPY, with ice pulled from one of my trays. Once chilled and bloodless, they could give it to an unattended child in the park. The child could bury it at the base of a sturdy tree, or stuff it into an empty HAPPY can, cutting their fingers on the sharp edges of the tiny hole that it runs from, and sucking the blood with glee. They don't need HAPPY, those unattended children, they have glee.

## The trees are losing their leaves

The trees are losing their leaves. It's Thursday. The sky is wide and empty of clouds, just blue. I leave the room and walk the path at the end of the garden. I listen for touracos, for lizards scuttling, for the fish eagle pair at the lagoon; for the words being formed by waves breaking shore over hills, a distant breathing. I listen for the breath of two lungs; one on my right, one on my left; and the snap of the thread that joins them to the trunks of these trees.

The trees are still losing their leaves. It's Saturday. The sky is pale and full of wisps and turning. I leave the room and climb the tree that reaches highest, shaking more leaves from its branches. I narrow my eyes and watch ghosts turning wisps and air. I look for yellow, for pale green and curling; for coils of incinerator smoke and the edges of hollowed out bones. I look for evidence of rising, a weighted path between the sky and bare crowns of these trees.

The leaves are losing their trees. It's Tuesday. The sky is deep and clear. I search its heights for my face. I look for eyebrows, nostrils, a jaw lined in fine, white hairs; for ears that point north and south, straining for birdcalls. I look for eyes rimmed in bark and frowning, for teeth yellowed with dried out leaves. I look for evidence of ageing, thickening earlobes, bird claws and pouches for excess fluids. It's loud here. So loud. I stop and feel my face for humming.

My friend, my friend, my friend,

I call on you three times. The first time, to say the words. Friend is a beautiful word, but *my* makes its beauty a stone I hold, cool, in my pocket. You're far away, I'm far away from this seat, this desk, this greenscape through the window. Memory lies down, a forest of trees becoming ground. My friend, I call on you a second time to wake me up, wake up the bird asleep on my shoulder, its beak cool and hard against my collar bone. Make it twitter its feathery secrets into my ear, speaking your morning voice, a cup of coffee clicking against tiles. My friend, I call again. I call you friend. I call you *my*, but I can't remember your name. It's merged with ink and white and a calendar in the background, a pile of books and a blank screen.

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Dear Johannes,

Birds aren't dank here today. The air is thick with them. Beaks and wings and horny feet all scratching at branches and table edges. My crime is a puppy. No, a kitten. A little one called Whitey. She smelt of paraffin and disappeared. Last seen walking across the soccer field. My hula hoop is leaning against the wall. A striped circle that's forgotten how to balance on a bark-ring of air. Pink is a good colour for a journal cover. Even better if it's decorated in multicoloured owls wearing glasses and speaking cinnamon. I have an active set of knuckles. They're chipped. Chunks left behind on a tennis court twenty years ago. Fuck. How. Twenty years pass like one of those dank birds. Maybe I'll go to the zoo to remind myself I'm free. And that the world can be a shit-show. My tooth is still on the windowsill. I like seeing it there, next to two cowries and a dusty palm-cross from my mother.

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Hello, hi,

I remember the feeling of a crowd. The sound of it. A crowd in a foreign land, an anomaly, enigma, salted statue in a cemetery along the coastline outside Florianopolis. How did hearing unknown languages, voices-in-translation, known-but-different languages—become a distant memory. The smell of KFC in a parking lot. A group of four donkeys crowding me into a corner between a tree and a wire fence. Hello. Hello boomerangs against my wall. Hi. Hi. Say hello, tree. Pencil case. Half-empty glass. How did a crowd in an unknown city making words I don't understand, wheeling a wagon over my foot, trying to sell me shit I don't want, hooting always hooting, hassling me, grabbing my ass, displacing my ribs, tying my galloping tongue—how did it become the place I'm yearning now to be.

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He positioned the hand on the piano to play an F major, the chord I could never play on the guitar. I asked him to do it. A strange request, one I tried to unrequest, but I couldn't stuff the words back into the hole in my mouth. When I tried to push the thought from my mind, it kept coming back in dreams and images hidden in swooping flocks of birds above the city. The first time I saw a severed hand, it was part of a collection held by a character on stage in Reunion. A netting bag filled with hands spoken about in French. I could never know whose hands they were, and why they were there. Perhaps they'd been willingly given. Perhaps they were rescued from a detainment centre somewhere, from writers who wanted to have a better excuse. Fog rose from the stage as the long-thick-haired crone stumbled along with her bag of hands. And now I have my own. Playing F major on the piano. A grey thing making a single tone. He has to hold down the keys for it. It's all a farce. We'll try again. Or maybe not. Maybe I should leave this strange place.

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Dear birds,

How do you know the direction to swoop in when you swoop altogether in those artistic crowds of flying? Maybe there's one of you that knows, and the rest follow—or is it some strange language of vibrations and breezes, thermals and turns of the wind. Your wings seem to point one direction, your small little arrow-heads sprung from a bow shot into forest or sky. I want to watch a birdscape. Like the one I watched from the bus in Mthatha. Or the barn swallows that arrived on the golf course the day I did. The thousands on thousands flying in to roost near the airport at sunset. Their specks in the distance remind me of lake flies. There's something less elegant about lake flies. But why. They also fly in formation over water, lava lamp clouds hovering on the horizon, or reaching land and dying in droves. I ate one of those lake fly patties in that little town outside Makuzi. It was like eating a dried out sponge made out of the smell of fish.

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Dear Gone,

I'm starting to forget the way you look. The curve along your jaw. The smell you leave in the passageway after taking a shower. The way the ticks like to congregate in the fur around your neck. The way you laugh, the way you sat at the table almost crying when you realised what you'd never be able to learn. Your muddy paws on the back of my legs. Your search for a book title on my shelf, one somewhere between what I most loved, and what left me indifferent. I'm starting to forget the touch of winter grass on the back of my calves in the veggie patch. The late afternoon sun turning the hills gold, and the way they turn green in November. I want to remember the mad dash in the rain from the front door to the toilet round the corner. I want to remember the wonder of finding another person in the kitchen in the morning, talking to them about their night's sleep, their plans for the day, when it will rain again. You've gone. I'm not sure if you've gone. You'll look different if you come back. You'll probably have a beard, or new freckles on your arms, longer

legs, sharper ribs, or a new pair of shoes that make me wonder why I said no those years ago. That you is gone. Like that me is gone. All gone.

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Dear Unnameable,

I couldn't work out how to address you. I started with Dark, and then Buzz... then thought it was more of a ring. Then more of a weight. But then Dear Weight reminded me of the letter I wrote to my leg fat that time, and the weight lifted a little, some of the blurred lines through the window sharpened. Then the words on the page grew self-conscious once they were called words on a page, and the weight began to layer itself again on my shoulders, soft serve ice-cream filling a tub in folds from slow-turning metal, mechanised spatulas. A pile of shells sit beside a revived orchid on a table whose top is shaded in algae. The sky is white, light grey. The air is thin and cold.

## Anthropocene

The sea doesn't move anymore, which is strange. The moon still waxes and wanes through the days and months and years. The sun still rises and beams its blistering glare across space; it still sets its reflection in the filmy sea's skin, dark swirls of what is, was and will be. But the sea just pools there, where the edge of things used to be. What's the use of an edge when the thing has been drained of its blood, its life fluids and egg yolks, over-easy, drop-down-dead.

We need a new name for it. This black pool that separates land from land, boats, stretches of distance to travel to reach another edge. We also can't use *edge* anymore, if the thing contained by those exact edges has lost its thingness. Though perhaps not. Maybe thingness is all it has now, and its lost something else.

This edge is so exact, unchanging with the no more-ness of tides. That moon motion has frozen, those static waves, ripples and currents have ended that metaphor for human-ness. Maybe that's it, maybe the motion died with the metaphor that died with humanity, the thingness of humans—though *thingness*, again, is the wrong term.

Thingness. Thingness is all there is now. Concrete thingness. The stuff of poetry. Perhaps this is proof of something else that was really the stuff of poetry. Are these records, these lists of archived things, dead things, things extinct, things gone—are they still poetry? Those names for things whose forms were greater than forms?

A tree. Is a concrete yellowwood that reaches higher than the cluster of skyscrapers a tree? And that sculpture garden filled with exposed roots and hollows, owls in silent flight... Owl flight was always silent. Perhaps the owl locked in floated limestone is truly an owl in flight. I can't use the word *truly* anymore.

Clouds don't gather anymore. The sky does. It gathers in strips of blue and alternating densities. When the wind blows, the bits of hydrogen sky meet over the inky sea. They don't often make water anymore. The threads between their atoms—the spines and chains—unlocked hands long ago and dropped to their sides, resigned, tired.

We need a new name for the edge of this sea, the edge of this ground, this hard cracked heel, this brittle nail at the end of the arm of anthropocene. If only gods still flew these skies, carrying the sun across the land in a chariot of flames. If only boulders and hills still met sweat and sturdy feet, and eagles picked at liver on craggy stone. They were better than us—those myths that we made.

The dinosaurs were better than us. They buried their bones in layers of ground, and we found them after the comet. Their bones were a message from the land before time that we didn't understand—they were better than us, and they knew. We hung them from high ceilings, dug them all up and labelled them. We should have left them in the ground. We should have opened up gaps around them and lined those bones with our bodies, left our mark in their skeletons, mouths open, hands folded, sockets all filled with sand.

## Untitled

I like to wake up slow. It's best when the wind is blowing and I have nowhere to go. Even better if the house is empty but I have plans for the evening... especially if they're plans I can easily cancel, or move to midday—or 3pm, or tomorrow (or next week). I like to drink my first cup of coffee in bed with a book. Something soft and slow. Something set in Cuba, maybe, or an anonymous island with flamboyant trees lining a quiet beach. There should be tendrils of fictive cigar smoke, the kind that doesn't tar lungs; and rocking chairs, sun-bleached cotton dresses. The wind should die down around 10am. The sun will have filled the veggie patch with warm breezes by then, the children should be gone from the yard. The 10am coffee would be moved outside, with a folding chair, a stool, a bag filled with activities: sketchbook, poetry, pastels, journals, fineliners, that soft, slow novel. I like to sip at the coffee and the activities. I flip open a book, read a few pages, exchange it for another. The sky moves along.