

# **Acorn Girl**

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

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Gina Kukard

November 2018

## Abstract

My thesis encapsulates a coming-of-age novella told through short vignettes of flash fiction and prose poetry. It makes use of the distillation and fragmentation of these forms to explore themes such as the nature of violation, and works between genres to engage the tension between inner and outer realities, and the blurred lines between passivity and resistance. Moving fluidly between memoir and fiction and set in modern day South Africa, it draws inspiration from both my own experiences and the writing of others, especially Raul Zurita's resistance poetry in *Dreams for Kurosawa*, Claudia Rankine's subtle absurdity in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, bizarro elements as seen in Athena Villaverde's *The Clockwork Girl* and the use of physicality to explore the emotional world, as seen in Shelley Jackson's *The Melancholy of Anatomy: Stories*.

**Contents**

Acorn Girl .....4

Your Life in Boxes..... 128

Glossary ..... 149

References ..... 151

Photography ..... 151

# Acorn Girl

## Lungs

She knows never to trust that a cough is just a cough in the movies. She also doesn't trust too pretty girls (not in the movies but in real life). Or loose earring backs. Or anyone who wears red and pink together or anyone who changes their eye colour (in real life) or anyone who has the tongue of a chameleon or says trust me (in the movies) or liquid on the bathroom floor (in mov— only in real life) or frayed ropes or eulogies or the two men in the distance coming down the same side of your street (in the movies) (in real life) (in real life). Or brandy drinkers or that it's only one drink or that the food here is just fantastic or too friendly uncles or that the smell of shoes is not coming from you or that the milk is just fine, really or that some of my best friends are gay or black or disabled but here's just one teensy joke or that the plane somehow stays up in the air or Donald Trump or that the police will take things seriously or that the police who ring your doorbell are really police at all or that your employer won't make you pull down your panties to check if you've got your period to prove you're the one who left the mess in the toilet or that E. coli levels in the water are fine or that they're doing everything they can to find those little coloured girls who were raped and murdered and left by the river with their faces covered in flowers or wound down windows at the robots or trees in lightning storms or that microwaves, phones, smokes, milk and pills won't give you cancer. Or that a cough is just a cough (in movies) (but maybe also in real life).

## Body

### *How to Make an Acorn Figure*

What you will need:

- Three acorns: one large to be used as a body, one smaller to be used as a head, and one just smaller than the body to be used for balancing
- Two match sticks to be used as legs, two half matches to be used as arms and one quarter match stick to join the head and body
- One nail or sharp pointed knife to make holes in the acorns
- A 15cm wire (not thick) to be used for balancing
- A pencil

Method:

1. Start with the body. It is important that you start with the body because it is easier to work with, and it keeps the head from unnecessary strain as the torso is pieced together.
2. Pierce a hole in each side of the body acorn. Insert a half match into each hole for the arms.
3. Pierce two holes in the bottom of the body acorn. Insert two matches into the holes for the legs.
4. Pierce a hole in the points of the big and small acorns. Insert a quarter match stick into both holes to join the head to the body.
5. Pierce a hole halfway down the back of the body acorn. Insert the wire into the hole.
6. Pierce a hole into the side of the third acorn and insert the other end of the wire into the hole.
7. You now have a complete acorn figure with a wire running down its back to the third acorn. Stand the acorn figure on your left index finger facing you; bend the wire that the third (balancing) acorn is slightly in front of the figure. Adjust the wire so that the figure stands straight up. You can also draw a face or clothes on the figure.
8. You can hang the acorn figure off any surface. It can perch on the narrowest ledge. On a finger. On a shelf.



## **Hair**

Tits, they call her. Or variations of it. Nice tits, great tits. Which girl are you talking about? The one with the big tits. Most men say it softly. About her, not to her. She can only just hear them. Women are the worst. They call them boobs. They come up to her, two by two sometimes, in the girls' bathroom in bars. Wow you've got big boobs, they say. Are they natural? Can I feel them? They lift them and drop them. Then one woman grins at her friend; looks back at the girl. Have you ever been motorboated? The girl measures how much hair has outgrown its dye on top of their silly heads as they blow air into her cleavage. They are laughing. The girl joins in. When they go, she wipes off their spit with a piece of toilet paper. She thinks: the women say boobs but they should say tits because that's how they feel about them.

## **Knuckles**

The girl sits at the apex of the year surrounded by streamers, balloons, confetti. Tomorrow tired knuckles will scratch up and discard them. Someone switches on the kitchen light and she can see the baubles have already begun to tarnish.

## **Eye**

Sometimes she feels like a third eye is sprouting. Not in the middle of her head like they said it would, but as if a new one has rooted itself on top of her left eye and is growing, pressing hard against her eyelid. As if it wants to see, too.

## **Arms**

She comes to her senses beneath a guy on a picnic table near the public pool. Her arms stretch out and hover there like matchsticks, neither pulling nor pushing him away. She suspects she had scratched her itchy fingers on his zipper after too much wine, and now he is fucking on her and that is that. Later, his friend asks him if they were outside playing *stinkfinger*. She thinks: maybe you can call it rape. Maybe not.

## **Gums**

The clinic receptionist calls her a white dog under her breath as she hands over her file. The girl sits back down, fishes in her handbag for an apple. She bites into it deep enough to push back her gums and leave blood on the apple's flesh. She bites off this piece quickly so the waiting patients don't get grossed out by her blood.

## **Shoulders**

Her clothes wear her shoulders like the price tag is showing.

## **Fists**

She craves salt. She remembers a TV chef chucking fistfuls of salt into a soup pot. He said the flavour is in the salt, and she wants all the flavours. They go to a restaurant and his mom is there. A sinewy little fish. His eyes flit from his mom's salad to the girl's pasta.

## **Skin**

Sometimes Sunday lunches are wonderful. Her mother makes a great feast and everyone gets along harmoniously. More often than not, Sunday Lunches are caucuses. The girl, her two sisters and their mother draw lines, prepare for a world war. Their borders impossible to cross, relations untenable; each family member representing a continent.

Her mother is Ireland, conflicted within but largely peaceful from an outsider's point of view. She has a glass of wine and tries to keep the peace amongst her offspring.

Her younger sister and the consummate salesperson of the family is China. She's on the up and up and she defies anyone to stand in her way.

Her youngest sister by ten years is Peru. Beautiful but full of impassable mountains and hidden dangers. Her comments as lethal as any drug faction's bullets.

And the girl is Uganda. Scarred but still standing.

Somehow it all fits. China, please share the potatoes. You do not need sixteen wedges on your plate.

Peru, I can call people by shouting too. I meant *go to* Hannes and tell him the food is ready.

Did you finish the mayo again? Uganda? I'm talking to you.

No, it wasn't— Ireland, please tell China to pass the damn potatoes.





## Brain

[China]        Why am I China?  
[the girl]     Because you're the entrepreneur of the family  
[China]        No I'm not  
[the girl]     Dude you have literally tried to sell me my own skirt before  
[Peru]         I wanted to be the Netherlands  
                 Coz in Amsterdam there's legal prostitution  
                 No I'm joking don't take that seriously  
                 And legal doobie  
[China]        The sixties called, they want the word doobie back  
[the girl]     Peru is beautiful and you dress like that Tomb Raider chick, so be happy  
[Peru]         Ganja

## **Armpits**

Her foster brother visits her in her dreams. Sometimes he is mangled from the car wreck. Sometimes he is fresh and the warmth of the summer is in his overalls. He hugs her and she breathes in his armpits, peachy urea and spices. He says words she can't make out. And then he goes, taking all the smells in the world with him.

## **Cheeks**

He touches the points of her cheeks when she smiles, sometimes. It is her favourite kind of violation.

## **Wrinkles**

"Because Oak trees can live for 250 years or more, their acorns were credited with preserving youth and life."

—Superstitions by Deborah Murrell, pg. 201

## **Legs**

When she was little she thought that water drops that dried on her skin caused freckles, little kisses from the sun. When she was a teenager she thought that her stretch marks were days marked out on a prison cell wall. Older and cellulite was proof of your womanhood, older and spider veins were having spider babies on her thighs. They laughed at her old lady legs and she felt the metaphors dry up.

## **Bones**

It feels like there is moss in her bones.

## **Eyes**

No one knows that her eyes are blue. She has heard them guess at so many colours she's starting to believe she's been hunting for her eye colour all wrong. Like questing for mushrooms that aren't toxic. She is gouging eye colours out of the muck in the forest and not seeing them at all.

## **Heart**

Her mother was raped in the last week of August. It's been ten years but she still wakes her mother softly, gently, with repetitive sounds but no touching. Like finding a pulse, at first faint until you press harder, her voice will strengthen: mom, mom, mom, Mom, Mom. But she won't wake her mother with a HEY! No one will ever wake her mother like that again.

## **Elbow**

She mishears things sometimes. Like that Katy Perry song, "Don't be afraid to catch [fish?]". Like when he leaned his elbow out the car window, said I love you, and then never came back.

## **Ears**

She has that damn Katy Perry song in her head for weeks.

## **Nose**

Ireland's necklaces are tangled in a heap on the bedspread. The pendants have dulled with age. There's a silver cross and tiny theatre masks, an Egyptian ankh, a wooden arrow and an onyx heart. Fallen soldiers they had to cut off her neck in order to operate. She smells their cheap metal while her boyfriend promises that he will never break her jaw again.

## **Gut**

She is becoming great at math. There are ten *skyfies* of naartjie. There are ten *skyfies* of lemon. You get eight slices out of a tomato if you cut it fine. She learns how slowly you can eat a single slice on her walks around school. And there are eight walks a day. One slice per period. Regimented slices at regimented times.

## **Heart**

At 4am, in Swan Lane, her mother was being raped. At 4am, across town, she was having sex. She bites her fists sometimes. She thinks: how did my heart not know? How did it not feel like something was breaking?

## **Heels**

In the mornings her heels ache. She rubs them with Vaseline, thinking: they've been running without me. All night. Fast. Far.

## **Spine**

When she was little her Oupa made stick men from acorns. A long wire ending in a single acorn speared the back of the acorn man's torso and hung in an arc below the figure as ballast. It allowed the figure to stand, like a spine, and rock gently on the points of its matchstick feet. He made a whole fleet of them for her to hang off her fingers. She pushed them and they would teeter silently for ages. Back and forth.

## **Throat**

She's watching a soapie but they want to watch the six o' clock news so she hands over the remote. After the fifth murder hijacking robbery rape she moves to leave but they pat the couch. Watch with us. And she doesn't want to upset them so she sits back down. She stares at the screen and opens her mouth and lets the cock of the world fill her throat. Fill her airways, her lungs. Fill all the spaces where the words should be.



## **Bones**

There is mould in the house.

## Temples

She never met her biological father, but her mother says she has his hands. She studies them in her solitude; then runs the backs of her fingers over her temples as one would a baby.



## Palms

The scrape of coins on a wooden table. Five cents. Ten cents. Fifty cents. Palms that stink of copper.

How much did you find?

R5 in the couch. How much more do we need?

## **Mouth**

There is a rustling sound coming from the kitchen so she goes to inspect it. It's summer and the fridge has been sold to make rent. A packet of cold meats bought two days earlier is on the kitchen counter, writhing. A little closer and she can see the maggots: their slimy white bodies through the flimsy plastic. Some of them have dropped to the floor and flip about mutely. In crime shows on TV, two or three maggots crawl over the dummies like caterpillars. Maybe a cockroach will pop out its mouth, add to the gore factor. Here there must be hundreds of maggots, thousands, enough to make the whole packet undulate as they sew in and out of the meat. Triple-layered, oh God—are they cannibalising each other to get to the few square centimetres of flesh? She quits the kitchen, the house, tries not to throw up. Tries to escape the noise of thousands of mouths wanting. Eating.

## **Stomach**

“Acorns had a number of uses, most of which originally stemmed from them being the fruit of the sacred Oak tree of Celtic and pagan belief. They were carried or placed under the head to cure cramps or rheumatism, and eaten to relieve a stomach-ache, loose bowels, and fever.”

—*Superstitions* by Deborah Murrell, pg. 39

## **Hair**

You know, Oupa says, I knew a little girl who used to eat her hair too. She got a very bad stomach-ache and had to go to the hospital. When they opened up her stomach, they found a full wig of hair.

## Ear

A friend tells her he had a dream about a place for souls too sad for heaven or hell. He saw a girl on a table being eaten by seven others and laughing hysterically. A moth flew into her ear and she started weeping. When it flew out again her laughter resumed.



## Cells

[Overheard in a bar] People die with regular monotony around here.



## **Neck**

An acquaintance has been murdered in a farm attack. The woman had taken in their dog when they had to move for the hundredth time and had no place to keep him. She remembers the woman as a hippie in her sixties with a chunk of rose quartz slung about her neck. A rose quartz for universal love. Closing her eyes, the girl sees a wall of fists: raised, holding rocks, holding knives, slick with blood. She thinks of how her mother told her to never raise a fist where a word would do.

## **Shins**

She won't learn where all the light switches are located in the new house. Every time she does, within a week they need to move again. Her shins grow accustomed bumping into things in darkened rooms. Time passes and they do not move.

## **Back**

Did you know you have a map of Orion's Belt on your back?

Really?

Here. Three moles, looks exactly like Orion's belt.

I didn't know that.

No one else noticed?

No.

## **Sternum**

She wants to climb down his ribs and make a nest in the hollow of his sternum.

## Eyes

She goes to a wedding reception held at one of the nightclubs in town. The bride is seventeen and a high school dropout. Her fiancé is a twenty-one-year-old mechanic. Before the wedding party arrives, she helps the mother-of-the-bride to spill bougainvillea over the tables to cover the red wine stains, sweep up the *stompies* from the tacky floor.

The bride and groom take pictures over the back of the groom's motorbike. The bride is leaning back so you don't see that the bodice of her rented dress is too big for her bust. She doesn't look at the groom much, but her gaze sweeps over the nightclub: from her father's belching contest to the bar counter sagging on stacks of crates. She lifts her chin to the camera and smiles.

## Body

If a body had to burst into confetti, what snippets of a story could be seen in each flake?



## **Eyelashes**

Her second cousin is passing through town and asks if he can spend the night at their house. He's a pastor in the Baptist Church and his wife is at home, pregnant with their first child. The first thing the girl notices is his lack of pigmentation: white hair and eyebrows. His eyelashes are so fine they're almost invisible. She doesn't get along with her cousins so she makes an effort to be friendly with him. He invites her for a drink and she tells him what a mental adjustment she has had to make for her first year of university; the issues she has had with philosophy in particular. She explains the free will debate to him: how philosophers have proved that everything is predetermined. It's a depressing thought, but people really have no free will, she says. He tells her a joke. They laugh a lot.

A block away from the house he stops the car.

If free will doesn't exist, then I can't be held responsible for my actions, he says.

He holds her by the shoulders and tries to jam his tongue down her throat.

She jerks back and escapes the car, thinking: Did I smile too much? Did I sit too close? How did I encourage this when I was only trying to be friendly?

The car crawls next to her.

Get back in the car, please. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

She ignores him. That night, she double checks the latch on her bedroom door.

He apologises again the next day and she finds herself saying it's fine. Don't worry about it.

## **Teeth**

She gets headaches from how tightly her teeth are clamped together.

## **Stomach**

No porridge for Goldilocks. All the bears had

Was a sachet of tomato sauce

And the end of a loaf of bread

With the mould cut off.

## **Rectum**

There were days during the divorce that her mom wouldn't eat. The girl would come up with some excuse to visit her grandparents who lived a few blocks away, because Ouma was better at getting Ireland to eat a few bites of food. Ireland cried a lot. She never laughed. Time and again, the girl asked Ouma to put on the movie *Down Periscope*. She didn't particularly enjoy it. It was an adult movie about the navy and she would rather have watched cartoons, but there is a scene in *Down Periscope* in which one of the crew members farts, and the expressions on their faces always makes her mother laugh. It is worth an hour-and-a half long movie for the two minutes in which she hears her mother laugh.

## **Blood**

When she was little she thought Oupa's beard was made up of veins and capillaries that had gotten lost and grown out of his skin. She was terrified every time he picked up a razor.

## **Hips**

Sometimes it feels like the ball of her hips is unplugging itself from her sockets. Like one day she'll stand up and her limbs will splinter from her skeleton like fleshy pick-up-sticks.

## **Eardrums**

The doctors tell her her eardrums look like papier mâché, they have burst so many times. When she was little, they told her she might go deaf. Now she wonders if that didn't accidentally happen. Maybe God has been speaking to her the whole time without her hearing Him. Or maybe it's a language difficulty. She listens to opera and thinks: if God could speak a language it would be Italian. Maybe nobody hears God speak because they tune out foreigners and he's speaking in Italian.

## **Chin**

The moving billboard demands her eyes at the intersection. She wonders how many people have died with their chins pivoting towards Nike.

## **Head**

I knew a boy, Oupa says, who liked riding with his head out of car windows too. Until a truck came past and cut his head clean off his shoulders.

## **Ears**

[the girl]      I helped Peru with her English networks this week. It was so nice to have her actually listen to me for half an hour.

[China]        Good. She should be getting 90s for English!

[the girl]      90's for Peru... this is a real convo:

                    Question: Comment on the meaning of the poem and how it makes you feel.

                    Peru: It's about death. I don't like death.

## **Lungs**

She smokes a pack a day but won't leave the house while the wildfires are raging on the outskirts of town. She's worried about smoke inhalation.

## **Cheeks**

The last time she gave a man a rose, he reddened. What did you do that for? He left it in a puddle of beer on the bar counter.

## **Forehead**

She has a drink to calm her nerves before a flight, an interview, a driving test. She has a cigarette before she talks to someone on the phone or to new people for the first time. She has to put something into herself to take something from herself.

One morning she wakes up on the bathroom floor with a scratch on her forehead. She realizes that in her drunken state she has been using her shoe as a pillow, and the scratch is from the jagged end cap of the shoelace.

## **Earlobes**

Silly girl. Stupid girl. Fucking idiot. What did you think you were doing? You don't think. You never think.

She closes herself in the bathroom and tuts and squawks and slaps her forehead.

You think you're so great. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Had to do that. Had to say that. What a dumb bitch you are.

In a minute she will stuff her shame back into its box. Imagine it smaller and smaller until it winks out of existence. Until she has to return to the open. So far no one has caught her.

## Sweat

In the heat of summer the tiled floors sweat and she dreams the house is thirsty.



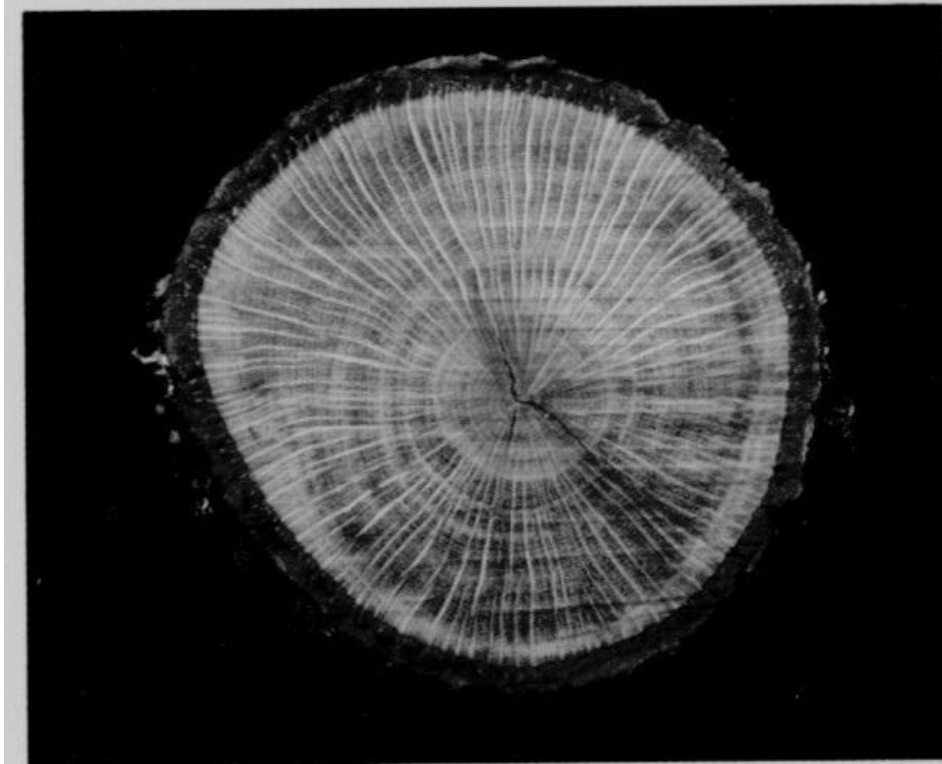
## Chest

The house watches the girl approach. It wants to look its best. Its crumbling eaves, its sandswept hems. She is taking pictures. Her skirt snags on a clump of rusted barbed wire and she bends to work it free. The house angles the sun so the trees cast better shadows across its stone face. There are three other people with the girl. They stick cameras through the glassless windows. They duck under its loose and shaggy joints. One slides beneath the branches growing through the threshold. The house strengthens the wattage on the sun through the clouds. It wants to show them everything. The broken shoe lying at its garters. The leaves in hymnal colours snowed up around the open toilet. Someone lived here once, it says proudly. Look at the basins scattered in the sitting room. Look at the jutting spokes from where they took the roof off. Someone put those in once. Someone. Someone.

## Brain

Her memory is fragmented. She wonders how much she has seen that she hasn't seen. How many little events she has experienced that were only ever given importance by her mind. Have you ever tried to sketch the sun? Was it ever more than a circle? A circle with little triangles radiating away from it? A circle in the corner of a page with spider legs? How much do any of those look like the sun?

Below: A cross-section of common oak (*Quercus robur*), showing the conspicuous medullary rays.



To the best of her recollection everything in this book is true. Except where it isn't.



## Head

She writes: When your classmates have all paired up for Breaktime, notice how the air parts for your body on the walk to the library. A boat cutting water.  
Notice.

*Reality is very thin here, easy to spread and mould between your fingers. If you breathe in too suddenly it will pop in your mouth like bubble gum. And you can keep it there, nudging it into an acorn, or you can blow it out. Slow. Slower. You don't want it to pop.*

*And here on this boat you can set up your fishing pole and catch a fish that never was, or watch a sunset still to come. And if the storm comes while you are sitting here,*

*you could row across the gunmetal lake, back to shore, where you can hide in the tall bulrushes. Grow small so the thunder won't find you. Hitch a ride on a wandering lizard. His name is Ben, and he will tell you how he lost his tail, and which moths are tastiest to eat (the striped ones).*

*And you could hide from the rain in secret tunnels under the blown leaves, and climb the thorns of the acacia like a ladder of bones. But do not misstep! And do not break the thorns that house your ancestors. And do not listen to their cold pleas through the bark. For if you hesitate, the tree will drink you like sugar water...*

*you could stay in the boat until the rain makes it sink, and follow it down to the deep side of memory. You can breathe there for now, remember: the sunset is still to come.*

*And there are swallowed things in the dark to look at... cutlery, statues, lies... stark in the light of discarded oyster shells and last week's crisps packet that the wind snatched from you so you ran ran ran to catch it but it ended up in the water so— Do not step on the stonefish! His face is his back and his back points up. The mud prawn will never answer a direct question, but if you follow his trail you will be further than the nearest you can get (be careful, his mother bites). And if you hear a muffled bell in the water, swim for your soul, swim for your soul...*

## **Cells**

She had a fear of water until the age of nine. Even now, she hates to duck her face under the surface. She thinks she might have drowned in a past life.

## **Back**

Her mother told her to never turn her back on the ocean.



## **Flesh**

Corn husks float in water.

## Ten Fingers

Premise: A short art film about a woman who lives in a portable cage. She is the main character of this piece, the alpha female, so we will call her **ALPHA**.

The cage is made of wicker and wire and starts midway up her thighs. Her elbows and forearms stick out through arm holes. She can raise and lower the cage a few centimetres but cannot escape it entirely.

Her hair is pulled into a bun out the back of the cage; so she has limited movement. A catch mechanism is set into the front of the cage which she can open to feed herself cylindrical foods like carrots and celery.

On the inside of the cage she wears no makeup and a body stocking. False eyelashes have been wired to the front of the cage and the bars above them (for about 5cms) are painted blue. A child's paper cut-out of lips and eyebrows completes the 'face'. Oversized clothing is stretched over the cage itself.

Various items are wired to the bars and clatter against them as **ALPHA** moves. These include a credit card, a school tie, a can of pepper spray, and an inflatable frog key ring.

1. [Close-up] of a hand in black and white. Garish 1950s **'The Cage!'**

style writing appears: The hand is counting off numbers on its fingers. Scene fractures. **ALPHA** is pushing a trolley through the vegetable aisle of the supermarket. She's wearing a (very large) white shirt and a denim skirt over the cage. [Close-up] of the trolley contents: a loaf of bread, a carton of milk and a bundle of

spinach. [Wide-angle] as she approaches the counter. No one takes any notice of her. She has to pull her arm into the cage while the cashier waits for her to pay, her arm brushes against the school tie. [Close-up] as she looks at it.

2. [The scene swims out of focus. Refocuses.] A father figure is shouting at a seven-year-old **ALPHA** wearing a school uniform. [Wide angle] as he takes her by the ear and throws her into the bathroom, where she forgot to flush the toilet. [Close-up of his face][close-up of her face] She says something muted. He shouts: *Do you have to be so goddamn smart all the time?* [Shaky cam footage] as he throws her back into the bedroom and slams the door. He shouts: *Stay the fuck out of my sight.* **ALPHA** picks at a frayed lampshade. She starts to pull long, thin wires out of the lampshade and knot them around her waist
3. [Wide angle] Adult **ALPHA** is sitting at a park bench and eating a carrot when she gets a call. She dives into the cage to retrieve the pencil nib in order to write on the serviette. A close up of **ALPHA'** s face as she looks at the pencil.
4. Audio: A teacher shouting. Scene swims into a school assembly. [Establishing shot] shows Ten-year-old **ALPHA** sitting with the beginnings of the cage in disarray around her. She is still wearing her uniform on the inside. The teacher is shouting at the students. [Close-up] as she tells them the caretaker has found fingerprints on the walls separating the cubicles in the girls' bathroom. *Who is the pervert that is spying on little girls urinating?* She tells the children that person will help the caretaker clean the

bathrooms. [Camera zooms in] on **ALPHA'** s face. She is bright red and clutches her arms around her. Then she picks up the wires and focuses on braiding the cage.

5. [Flashback] **ALPHA** stands on top of the toilet, squirming during break. [Close-up] of her eyes and forehead as she glances over the tops of the cubicles. It is clear she is desperate to pee but every time she sits down she jumps up again because someone else has come in. There are always people in the bathroom. The break bell rings. [Wide shot] as two girls leave the bathroom. [Close up] as in the stall, **ALPHA** scrambles off the toilet. She lifts the lid, pulls down her panties and sits. [Camera focuses on the cubicle door].



6. [Flash of a hand counting, **five fingers are down!**] [Dissolve][Camera pans across basins to bath] Adult **ALPHA** is taking a bath in her body stocking and the cage. It's a large bath. [Close-up] as she cleans the bars of the cage with an old toothbrush. The water is covered in pink glitter bath foam and the items wired to the cage float about. [Camera zooms in] as an inflatable keyring in the shape of a frog floats to the top. A door key is attached to it. She picks it up and studies it.
7. [Close-up] of the key dangling from her hand. A fifteen-year-old **ALPHA** is in the living room, surrounded by boxes that people are unpacking. She twists the wire as the father figure yells at her. [Close-up] of spittle flying as he shouts *Where have you been?* and *How can you lie with such a straight face?* and *Go call your fucking mother and get the fuck out of my house.* The cage is  $\frac{3}{4}$  's finished.
8. [Wide shot] as **ALPHA'** s mother comes into the kitchen wearing a stricken expression. *What's wrong?* **ALPHA** asks. **ALPHA'** s mother sits down. She doesn't say anything for a moment. **ALPHA** waits. Her mother tells her she found her biological father; that he had died of a brain tumour three months before, that he left behind a wife and son. [Close-up] of **ALPHA'** s face. She claps her hand to her cheek in shock and doesn't speak. [Close-up] of her mother's face, worried. *There's something else*, she whispers. She tells **ALPHA** her biological uncle heads up one of the churches in town. She's organised a meeting with him on Thursday. **ALPHA** claps a hand to her other cheek. [Wide angle] as **ALPHA** stands up and gives her mother a hug through the cage bars.

9. [Scene dissolves][Camera follows] as **ALPHA** pads out of the bathroom, hair wet, the cage in a fluffy pink bathrobe, and sits down at the dressing table. She begins re-painting the bars with colour while mimicking the facial movements of putting on make-up. She looks into the mirror enigmatically.
10. [Cue dramatic music] Garish 1980s animation style slogans start shooting out of the mirror in jungle green Chillers font, they are increasing in size. Phrases include: **You're lying! A baby born out of wedlock is an abomination! He would have told us! You're tarnishing his memory!** Pink phrases include: **Just look at the photos! Don't you see the resemblance?! She just wants to know her family!** [Scene fades to black]... [Giant letters appear]...

**THE CAGE IS  
COMPLETE!**

## **Feet**

Her fifty-year-old aunt buys shoes two sizes too big for her. She is convinced that, this way, she will not grow out of them. She keeps her toes curled so they don't fall off her feet. She swaggers in a splay-legged, cowgirl sort of way, keeping her feet beneath her so that she doesn't accidentally shoot a flip flop at you.

## **Shoulders**

Before the divorce, Ireland shopped monthly at Pick 'n Pay. Across from the supermarket was a curio shop. The aisles were mausoleums, packed with still life figures: crystal ornaments, disturbingly life-like cats. The first time she went there alone, the bony shopkeeper stalked her footsteps. She made the girl read the sign on the shelf out loud:

**“Nice to touch**

**Nice to hold**

**If you break it**

**Consider it sold!”**

Do you know what that *means*? The shopkeeper demanded. The girl nodded. The woman strode to the counter to ring up a customer's purchase. Some women should learn to take better care of their children, she sniffed. The next time the girl came into the shop, the woman screamed: *Never come in here without your mother!*

Between sobs, the girl told her mother what had happened. Ireland flew into the shop.

She doesn't know what happened after that— only that they never went into that shop again. And every time they walked past, the old woman would stare at her with those little black eyes. Nowadays, when she pictures the devil, she sees a scrawny woman in a brocade dress, gesturing at a sign with her shoulder.

## **Sleep**

The town they move to is so thick with stories they are seeping out of the walls overnight. Like sleep from a watery eye.



## Body

When she is fifteen she goes to a church that believes that humans can perform miracles. One of the members, Stan, tells you about how God reformed him of homosexuality. Another member, Unathi, works in Stan's carpentry business. When Stan leaves to visit his parents for the weekend, he returns to find Unathi's body swinging from the beams in Stan's garage. It has been three days; the body is swollen with noxious gases. Stan calls the church elders out to his house. The girl is too young to have been called, but word travels fast in small towns. They tell her about how the congregation surrounded Unathi's corpse, laid hands on him, and tried for hours to resurrect him.



## **Calf**

Three days.

Brothers and sisters— I tell you the truth. It has been three days. Seventy-two hours.

There is holy significance in threes.

God himself has three attributes: omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence

There is birth, life and death.

Three phases of life: Child, adult, senior

And three forms of matter: animal, vegetable, mineral

*Wood is vegetable matter. The chair is wood. It lies on its side, unmoved from where he kicked it.*

There are three primary colours: red, yellow, blue

*His face is purple. Purple is a mix of red and blue.*

Body, mind, spirit

*There is no mind or spirit on the floor in front of them. Only a body. Jesus, there is a body on the floor.*

Three divine principles: light, heat and life. Brothers and sisters, I ask you now to close your eyes and pray with me.

*They can't close their eyes, Pastor. They're waiting for the corpse to blink.*

Oh Lord, you have given us miracles. You have told us that through you we ourselves can work miracles—

*They're trying to breathe through their mouths because of the smell but the air tastes waxy.*

*Blue flies are crawling everywhere. All over him.*

—And you have told us that we must work those miracles, Lord!

*Pastor moves his feet. Nothing else has changed. Someone has already cut the corpse down.*

*The nylon washing line was taken off and tossed to one side, red where it cut into his throat.*

Brothers and sisters, join me.

*They hesitate, something feels blasphemous, but the Pastor has said the Spirit is walking amongst them. Who are they to argue? They join Pastor. They circle the corpse.*

With our strength, this man will rise again! And he will walk out of the tomb  
*the garage*

and back to his family like Lazarus! Say Hallelujah!

*Hallelujah...*

Say praise Jesus!

*Praise Jesus...*

Say it loudly, my people! Today we will witness a miracle! Today this man will rise again! It doesn't matter that he's been dead three days! It doesn't matter that he killed himself! The Lord will work through us, my people! Rest your hands on his body, my people!

*They rest their hands on his various body parts: shoulder, waist, calf.*

*Up close: the rot.*

Now brothers and sisters, pray! Pray with all your heart and mind and soul! Brothers and sisters, I will ask you this three times:

Do you believe?

Do you believe?

Do you believe?

## **Pancreas**

Gabe was one of the customers at the pub she worked in. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but he still came in for a Coke Light at five o'clock, every day. One Monday he told her that his brother Len had been killed while fishing in the Okavango Delta. Len's friend had been attacked by a crocodile, and when Len had attempted to rescue him, the croc grabbed him by the leg and dragged him away instead.

Knowing that he didn't have much longer to live, Gabe went to visit his children overseas. On the return flight, he elbowed his wife and pointed down the aisle. Look, there's Len! He said. He stood up to greet him and fell over, dead.

## **DNA**

Ouma hated sport. She felt Oupa neglected conversation for the soccer rugby boxing tennis athletics cricket. Double pneumonia took her in June 2010, at the height of the Soccer World Cup fever in South Africa. All night people celebrated. Chains of cars like DNA strands lined the streets. People donned hats and honked vuvuzelas in gaudy colours. Ouma had a rebellious streak, thinks the girl. She's sure the old lady chose her time of death very carefully.

## **Nose**

As a child she was expected to find a corner somewhere and avoid the socializing adults. She painted the apocalypse on a pillow case once, a nuclear rocket rising out of the earth with a toothpick and fabric paint. Now she is stuck at a party she didn't want to go to, and the smell of fabric paint comes to her again. It feels like a premonition.

## **Head**

She lives in the past because there's more room back there.

## **Fingernail**

Her stepfather liked white walls. After the divorce the first step of Ireland's self-imposed therapy was to paint each room. Green, lilac and turquoise, canary yellow with royal blue arches. She stencilled and mottled the white out of the house. Ireland spent the longest time in her own bedroom. Three days painting vertical pink and peach bars and drawing trellises of fingernail-sized flowers by hand. She changed the sheets and dusted and made the double bed. Then she closed the door and spent the night on the lounge floor, so she could watch TV until she fell asleep. The room was for show. The bed was too big.

## **Lens**

When he talks about the family, Oupa says he has been blessed with eight granddaughters. He brings his camera to every gathering, until it earns him the nickname Kit Kodak. He wants to record them growing up. When he's in his eighties, her aunt sees him leafing through one of his photo albums. I don't know why you're bothering with that, she says. We're just going to throw them away when you're gone. Oupa rarely pulls out his battered camera anymore.

## **Breasts**

Boys have fire trucks and girls have dolls.

Boys have adventures and girls have pretend weddings.

Boys can own things, girls can only be owned.

At ten she cuts her hair military short and wears baggy clothes, so people won't see her breasts. She is happiest when people mistake her for a boy.

Boys have agency, boys have a destiny. Girls are there to be love interests, or to be something a boy can save.

One of her stepfather's female friends is perplexed by her strange identity.

It's cool to be a girl, she says. You can wear pants and pretty dresses, and boys can only wear pants.

You can have lots of different hairstyles, and boys can only have one.

And girls can wear make-up, and boys can't.

There is a silence while the girl wonders what else the woman will say to change her mind, but she just looks at the girl, confused.

It is only at thirteen the girl realizes she has not been born into the wrong body, but into the wrong society.

## **Brain**

She wants things to be chronological. To make sense. But memory is just a story within a story within a story.

She keeps cracking shells to find herself enclosed in a bigger shell.

Inside the shell the split sounds like thunder.

## Head

The adults were fighting again so she went to sit in the bough of an old tree. She pulled out her notebook. She noticed the way the air stilled, how it parted for her body. Noticed the light that caught the concrete border of the flowerbeds, how it snaked outwards like a yellow river.

*The tree began to tremble.*

*“Tell me what is wrong, Tree,” she said.*

*And the tree told her.*

## Body

Where’s your boyfriend tonight where’s your husband tonight what’s a pretty girl like you doing behind a bar would you like a drink would you like a smoke what time do you get off what’s your name again

I’m glad Rick only hires girls to work behind bars you should wear a lower cut top to make more money give me a smile hey I’m talking to you can I ask you something

Can you loosen your hair I want to see you with loose hair can I get a double brandy and coke get me the coke from the lowest shelf so I can see you bend over does your boyfriend like you working in bars can I get your phone number you’re taking too long turn up the music here have a drink one drink won’t kill you why can’t you drink on duty call the manager I’ll have a word with him it’s only one I’ll tip you next time I’ll give you a tip haha here’s a tip wear a hat in the sun no I don’t need a glass it’s in glass what did that cunt say I’ll fuck him up hey hey barlady one for me and one for my dad over here tell me who’s the best looking haha cheers to the queers and applause to the whores what no I like a bit of hair why you want to feel like you’re fucking a fourteen year old hey barlady how about a body shot just one I’ll pay you here I got R250 for one body shot how about R350 why are you so *mislik* give me a smile give me a hug give me another double hey I’m just trying to be friendly

## Liver

“...In the 1600s, a juice extracted from acorns was administered to habitual drunkards to cure them of their condition or else to give them the strength to resist another bout of drinking.”

—New World Encyclopaedia

## Hair

The bar she works in is in a retirement town. Aside from a few degenerates, her customers are mostly white-haired men between sixty and ninety. They never tip, but they call her sweetness and listen to her stories, and when they're being pushy she reminds them of their manners, and they laugh. She introduces her boyfriends to her 'honorary dads', who interrogate the boys. After a particularly rough night, during the dead hours between three and five pm, Steve asks for two drinks and tells her to put her head back and nap. He'll wake her if anyone comes in. She buys him a drink in gratitude. He dies a few months later. She tells her sister about it. It is the third death this month. China tells her she needs to make friends with more people who aren't about to die.

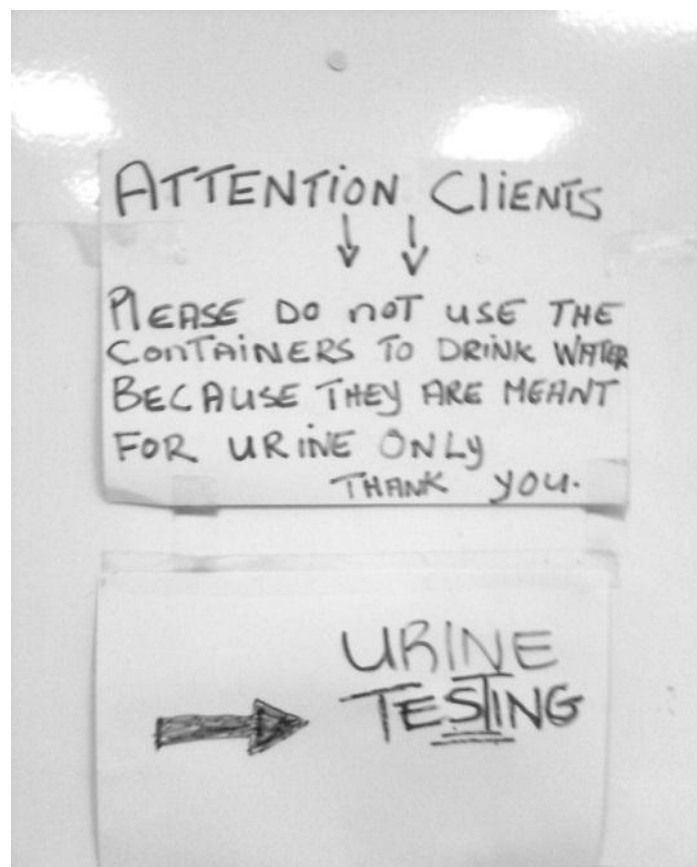


## Noses

China has her first seizure in Matric. It is on Ireland's birthday, a full eyes-rolling-back, collapse on the ground seizure. The doctors take some tests and diagnose her with epilepsy. They give her some pills to stop the seizures, but they keep coming and the doctors keep switching her medication. Each time she needs a consultation, her family drives the two hours to Port Elizabeth. They don't have medical aid, so they spend days at a time in the Provincial and Livingstone hospitals. Livingstone is the worst. In the queues waiting for the doctors, a man vomits up gouts of blood. The nurses wrinkle their noses, but otherwise take no notice. Another patient tells China he waited in queues with his wife for two days. At the end of the second day, his wife died in her chair while waiting to be healed.

## Bladder

In the corridor outside the hospital bathroom, there is a cart of urine samples. Some may have spilled. All over is the stench of urine. There are handwritten signs stuck on the walls. One tells her she can get toilet paper from the blood room, wherever that may be.





## **Head**

*The swim took the girl out into the ocean, just beyond the reefs, and there it abandoned her to sink to the bottom. A passing jellyfish noticed that she needed air and attached itself to her face.*

*The bottom of the ocean was chalky as old fabric paint. Once she touched it, the pigment stuck to her and she could walk normally. A humanoid creature walked past her with box-shaped limbs that seemed to be unplugging themselves from its body. It wore sandals on its feet, which were several sizes too big for it. Every now and again it would kick off its shoes and flip into a headstand in the water. Its eyes were attached to its soles. It flipped its feet towards her and stared for a long moment. Judging by the magnificent bulge in its stomach, she had the sense that she was safe only because it had already eaten.*

*She felt something brush her shoulder, and turning, looked into the eyes of a half-woman, half-serpentine figure. Her hair was all textures and all colours, her mouth ringed with needle sharp teeth. Two sea snakes curled in white arcs around her throat. She said something in a language that sounded very much like Italian and crooked her shoulder upward to a sign. It said: No soliciting.*

*The girl tried to respond but the language she spoke sounded nothing like Italian. It sounded more like: Have you seen my doctor? I'm waiting to be healed.*

*The scatterlimbed creature started to retch, regurgitating its meal of crayfish. The serpentine woman shook her hand in front of the girl's waist: an urgent, give it to me gesture. The girl stretched out her hand and dropped whatever she was holding into the waiting hand. She looked down and saw that it was a pearl necklace. The woman broke it immediately; she swam away and began looking for discarded oyster shells.*

*The girl tried to tell her, you can't sew oysters back together like that, but a disturbance in the water told her the scatterlimbed creature was looking for her: she would taste better than crayfish. The jellyfish swam off her face in fright. It stung her but she held onto it as it propelled them to the surface.*

*Once she broke the surface of the water she realised that the storm had not yet abated. Sucking lungfuls of air also meant sucking rainwater. The more rain she drank, the more she changed the density of her body. The salt left through her pores, and in its place feathers*

*sprouted. She started floating out of the water, she could smell the sulphur of the lightning calling her. She shook great, billowing wings of black and white and the rain slipped off her back. She wheeled towards the heart of the storm.*

## **Muscles**

Her muscles remember all the high places.

## **Veins**

People ask her when she started writing and she says nine-years-old, because that's when others discovered she could write. After submitting an essay for English, the teacher called Ireland in to scream at her for doing her child's homework.

Ireland came to her, frowning.

Uganda— did you copy this from a book?

No mommy.

Alright then, what does this word mean?

She showed the girl the essay, which was covered in red pen circles and the words: SEE ME at the bottom of the page. Ireland pointed to the phrase: *the smell of popcorn wafted in the breeze*.

Wafted, like danced, the girl said, you could smell it coming towards you.

Ireland kissed her on the forehead. You're talented, my child.

Then she ran to the phone to brag to everyone that her nine-year-old knew the meaning of 'wafted'.

The real story is far simpler. The girl was seven and playing at a friend's house. They sang along to some songs, and then they started making up their own. The rhymes were out of her mouth before she registered them in her mind. This was *fun*. This was maybe the most fun she had ever had. She may not have written them down, but she felt the words threading through her veins like laughter.

## Nerves

### *How to Play 'Musical Things'*

The purpose of the game: to come up with enough money for rent. The person who can pay twelve months consecutive rent wins!

The rules of the game:

1. Sell the fridge. You can negotiate with another player for maximum **R500** and get a **1/4 rent token**. You can sell your fridge **one** time in a month. It must be bought back before it is resold.
2. Sell the furniture. You start off with two beds, a coffee table, a cupboard, a stove and a kettle. You can sell any of these maximum **one** time in a month and get **two food tokens** or **1/8 rent token**.
3. Sell the microwave for a maximum **1/6 rent token** or **three food tokens**. You can do this maximum **three** times in a month. Remember to buy cheaper, unreliable versions the next time you have one of the **two 'Spare Cash'** cards.
4. On the board there are various **'Marginally Bad luck!'** squares. If you land on one, read out the card. There are roughly **two hundred and fifty** of these, and can include phrases like:

*Light bulb in kitchen has burst*

or

*One of your appliances is missing a plug. Take apart an existing appliance to fix it!*

If you have already sold the appliance, negotiate with another player to buy back an appliance card for a **1/8 rent** token.

You might end up with a scenario like this:

The light bulb from the bedroom was taken for the garage which was taken from the other bedroom which was taken from the hall which was taken from the bathroom which was taken from the kitchen.

You may end up with two light bulb cards per household. Remember to take these two cards with you when another appliance breaks so you can see what you're doing to fix it!

Remember two prong plugs are useless because you don't have any double adaptor cards.

5. On the board there are also various '**Obviously Bad Luck!**' cards. These include:

*Be wrongfully accused of stealing. Walk out of your job.*

*or*

*A water pipe leaks under your house with no obvious signs for three months.*

*The municipality is suing your landlady who in turn sues you for R40 000.*

*or*

*Your neighbour tells you you need to stop looking at him funny or he will feed your cats to his dogs.*

This is the most fun part of the game because you need to move out almost immediately. Scan the **Available Houses for Rent** cards and see if you can find something in your price bracket. Remember that now you need to come up with **double the rent** to pay the deposit! Remember that current legislation means it needs to be a **third of your income** (provided you still have one!)

All set? Good luck!

## Kidneys

Ouma is in hospital for two weeks before she dies. They take the bus up to Joburg to visit her. She seems lucid at first. She tells them she has never eaten crayfish. Ireland tells her when she is better they will buy her a huge crayfish in a fancy restaurant on the coast. That reassures her. Then she beckons them closer.

That's if they will allow me out, she says.

Ireland pats her hand, you'll be better soon.

Not the doctors—the police.

Ouma tells them she is in a witness protection program and the doctors are keeping *him* away from her.

I don't know who he is, but he's a baddie.

They play along at first, but soon they realize Ouma is serious. Ireland tries to change the subject, but Ouma interrupts.

She tells them that a woman and her child had come to visit her: people who had been in the plane crash on the news the week before.

And I saw Charles as well, she adds.

Charles was Ouma's brother, who had died of a heart attack in his driveway twenty years before.

The nurse tells them hallucinations are common with pneumonia, they should say their goodbyes. The girl is angered at her lack of hope. Ouma will get better. After a couple of days the nurse comes by with the most recent chest X-ray. Ouma's lungs are clearing— *she is* getting better. Ireland can't get more time off work. They kiss Ouma and tell her they'll see her soon for that crayfish. Halfway back to town on the bus, they get a call from the girl's uncle. Ouma's kidneys are failing. She dies two days later.

The girl leaves the house. Takes the long road into town at 2am. She wonders what the nurse said when she discovered Ouma's body. If the nurse had thought: I told you so.

The girl walks past the beach and wonders what crayfish tastes like.

## **Arm**

China gets what the doctors call ‘Alien Arm’. She’ll be relaxed, talking to you normally; when all of a sudden her arm will start jerking. She clutches it to her chest and bends over to try control the pain. The doctors call these petit mal seizures and chalk them up to her epilepsy. When the girl questions how it could be epilepsy when there is no history of it in the family, they are dismissive. They give China more pills to take. She is having up to twenty seizures a day.

## **Fist**

“Oak and ash trees are said to predict the coming season: if the first leaves to unfurl belong to the oak, summer will be mostly fine; if the ash is first, it will be a wet one. Even with modern science, the unpredictability of weather means that this type of superstition lingers on despite all rational logic.”

—*Superstitions* by Deborah Murrell, pg.16

## **Hand**

Oupa used to put a sweet in his fist and hold it behind his back: guess which hand, he’d say. If she guessed right, she was a *champion guesser* and he would unfurl his fist to present the sweet. The girl is convinced he kept a sweet in each hand, just in case.

## **Brain**

The Joburg dream:

1. Get tired of the city
2. Move to the coast
3. Open a bistro
4. Get rich
5. Retire.

## **Vagina**

When she moved to Port Alfred, Ireland went into business with her ex-husband. He would front the money from the sale of the house in Joburg, she would run the restaurant. He pulled out after a month, and Ireland became the only single female pub-owner in town. And she was an attractive outsider to boot. Wives wouldn't let their husbands near the Bistro, for fear she might seduce them. When the local newspapers misprinted the ad for

### **BALLYHOO BISTRO ON THE BANK OF THE KOWIE RIVER**

as

### **BALLYHOO BISTRO: BONK OF THE KOWIE,**

Ireland decided to turn it into a joke (after a full refund and reprint, of course). She devised a shooter in a split glass: half Jagermeister, half Peppermint Liqueur, topped with Amarula—the Ballyhoo Bonk.

She held a ladies night and had her least attractive customers perform an almost Full Monty— fat men went right down to satin thongs. It was so successful that the other bars in town began to host their own Ladies' Nights. Despite this, the Bistro couldn't afford to pay its staff by September. Ireland's boyfriend broke up with her. Her kids were living with her ex. She sold the business in October and the new tenants asked for a payment plan. For the next few years they would pay off the money a thousand rand at a time. Ireland had a nervous breakdown and went to recover some pride in Joburg. The girl ended up living with her stepparents. The women in town took no notice.

## **Head**

In the hospital, Ireland met a real life Crime Scene Investigator. She told her about an accident she had worked. A truck had taken off the top of the car, along with the driver's and passenger's heads. They were parents. Their two-year-old was in the car seat in the back. Her father's head was on the seat next to her.

## Neck

A man in the newspapers cheats on his wife, then stages her hanging to look like a suicide so that he can be with the other woman. The letters pour in, lambasting the other woman.

How dare she steal another woman's husband? —Annabeth (52) wants to know.

She should be charged with murder too!! —Exclaims Thobeka (39)

Karma will get her. —Elisma (24)

## Head

*This is what the tree told her:*

*There are a great many rivers in this world, and each of them comes with its own personality. There are some that are driven by good hearts. Fat and mellow bodies that like to give gifts to the people. Good fishing, strong crops. A river with a good heart is content to laze in bed, contemplating nature, lapping against the shoreline and making mud for little children to play in. Such rivers are fine friends to have.*

*A river with a bad heart is a different story. They are full of zeal and anger at being confined within a narrow cot. They toss rocks around their beds and throw great tantrums when they feel strongest, usually when full after drinking from the great storm clouds. They are jealous of life on the land...Such glorious freedom! Such happy faces!*

*Cuvo was a river like this. He hated being alone and trapped between the banks of his narrow cot. He loathed the creatures that came to take from him. Always these inferior creatures would take from him. He hated the trees most of all, they never stopped drinking.*

*That morning, Cuvo was swirling a few fish around when he felt something touch his side, it was the root of the tree the girl was sitting in. Now everyone knows that if you dangle your feet over a dock your toes are scratching the River's back, because a river lies face down on its bed. It takes enormous strength for a river to lift himself to see what's going on. Some rivers never do, so they have to be good at telling what touches them just from the feel of it. That is how the River knew it was a root, which could only mean it belonged to a tree that*



*was standing just outside the water. This enraged Cuvo so much that he spat at the Tree and said:*

*“I feel you tree! I feel that your roots are weak and your soil eroded. Do you feel the air is changing? As soon as the rains come tonight I will drown you and forever the fruit you bear will be underwater, and black, and full of worms!”*

*After the tree had finished her story, the girl looked out over the river and thought for a long time. She watched the tree’s thin, dense branches and broad leaves, the way its grey roots knobbled out of the ground. The girl smiled.*

*“I have a plan,” she said.*

## **Hand**

She waitresses at Ireland’s restaurant after school, and all her tip money she sneaks back into the till. It’s not nearly enough. The sales aren’t covering the groceries, the alcohol. Now when people arrive, she has to tell them there will be a ten minute delay on their order. Someone needs to run to the shop to buy the single chicken breast, or the tonic water that the customer has asked for, before their meal or drink can be prepared. One woman tells her it is highly disrespectful to make them wait so long. And to make us sit at picnic tables too! What kind of place are you running here? The girl apologises.

At night while waiting for the last tables to leave she sits down on the jetty by the river and draws up budgets in her head. She can make jewellery to sell. Would people buy her poetry if she aged the paper and stuck a feather on it? A speedboat putts past slowly and its sole passenger holds up a hand in greeting.

## **Chin**

Her colleague tells her that to work in the hospitality industry, the only thing she needs to perfect is the slow nod and sincere apology.

## **Pupil**

At 3am, two men pop their heads around the door of her bedroom. One head above, one head below. When they see she is alone, they come inside. One stands guard at the foot of her bed, holding up a hunting knife so the passage light can glint off the blade. Don't make a sound. We don't want to hurt you but we will if you make a sound. The other takes her cell phone. Rummages through her handbag. Opens her wallet in front of her. The butterfly flies out. Where's the money? He asks. I'm unemployed, she says.

The one who is creeping around like Elmer Fudd starts towards the stairs. This agitates her and they have to tell her again to shut up. *Ssssh. I'm hunting wabbits.* Ireland and her boyfriend, Hannes, are asleep upstairs. Bugs Bunny holds the knife like a carrot, regarding her over its tip.

She prays for the wooden stairs to creak. If this is a cartoon, the stairs will creak.

*Yes!* The wood lets off a crack that could wake the whole house. It wakes Hannes, who sees the wascally thief's head sticking out around the corner. Elmer gestures to Bugs and they link arms and skip down the stairs, followed by Hannes, whooping and shooting off a paintball gun like Yosemite Sam. Bugs and Elmer jump through the bars they jimmied off to get inside the lounge and the 'That's All Folks!' scrolls across the curtain.

Hannes puts a latch on her door but she can't sleep. And she can't tell her family that she can't sleep because break-ins happen to everyone all the time and nothing *really* bad had happened. The family prices alarm beams but they are laughably expensive. Alarm systems are for rich people. They buy a portable beam with a red pupil for R200 and set it up at the lounge window. It isn't much, but she can sleep.

## **Fingers**

After the break in, the CSI dusts for fingerprints in the kitchen. He says it's common for thieves to eat before they steal.

## **Navel**

The worst thing about losing her virginity is not the pain of a foreign object forcing her bones apart. It's the smell in the room. Dirty socks, the smell of him, the smell of her, the musty stench of his testicles, the fishy discharge that leaks down her thighs. The nausea. She feels sure there is some mistake. That her body is built strangely. It isn't like this in romance novels. In all the stories she's read, they have never described how sad and vulnerable she would feel as she picks his pubic hair from her navel.

## **Teeth**

The people in the bar are loud. They talk and eat and cackle, but they are melting into their clothes. Lipstick runs into the cartilage of their ears, fake eyelashes come undone and stick to their shoulders. Bright-tipped fingernails stick up out of the muck of them, brandishing cigarettes. Beard stubble comes loose follicle by follicle and embeds itself in the puddle of their thighs, along with their tie clips. Their eyes turn opaque and the folds of their cheeks cover them. The only thing that remains is their teeth, still chattering, chattering, clamping into their predestined grooves. CSI can't match their dental records to ID them because they don't stop moving long enough to take a dental impression.

## **Wrists**

Her stepfather legally adopted her when she was four, so the first time the girl met her new grandparents was at the Spur. While the adults were talking, she slipped onion rings onto her wrists and said: Mommy, do you like my new bangles?

The girl was always too outlandish for her adoptive grandparents. Her grandmother favours China, to whom she gives her favourite pearls. This never saddened the girl. Everyone has a favourite grandchild, and she is her maternal grandfather's. She is Oupa's.

## **Scar**

Edna is one of the regulars who used to come into the bar, an old lady who loved Sambuca as much as her paisley blouses. When one of the young male patrons can't find his car keys, she offers to help him search. She does this by standing behind him and squeezing the front of his pockets, then his back pockets. Then she slides her hands inside his jeans, down the back of his underwear, reaches between his legs and cups his genitals while he swats at her hands. All in full view of everyone at the bar.

Edna stops coming in after a few years. Dementia leads her silently all over town. Her daughter has to hide her car keys because they never know where her next distress call might come from. In her current mind, Edna's husband is still alive and she's back in her thirties.

The man she fondled still comes into the bar. He loves to tell the car key story. It seems to be a mark of pride, a kind of scar he shows off. The girl imagines it is the kind of scar she would conceal with foundation and a scarf.

## **Legs**

At night people talk about the house settling into itself, but it feels like the opposite. She listens to the house plead and thinks of Ouma, who slept in her armchair for twenty years because of chronic back pain.

She watched Ouma board herself up, first in her house, then her room, then her chair. Saw her gutters fill with leaves, paint discolour with rising damp until the plaster cracked into thousands of spider veins. Young as they were, they tried to run the wind through her rooms. The rest of the time, the only sound was from the TV. Sometimes she sucked at her dentils, varnished herself on gossip from Ireland. Other times the shadows of the rain on the windows would catch on her face.

After a few years in the new town, the girl visited Ouma in Joburg. They had a fight because the girl wanted to see an old school friend and Ouma wanted the girl to stay with her. I'm lonely, Ouma cried. Can't you see I'm lonely?

## Thumbs

### Semi-successful Sunday Lunches:

- 👍 The time Peru asked China to stop bugging her, so China chased Peru around the kitchen with a chicken carcass while clucking.
- 👎 The time Ireland baked a cake for an hour before realizing she had set the oven to grill, resulting in a charred and gooey mess.
- 👎 The Easter Peru asked her sisters to help her change the dressing on a finger she had cut the day before. The bandage stuck to the wound and she screeched and sobbed and demanded to be taken to hospital for an hour before they could oil the gauze off the cut, which turned out to be less than a centimetre long.
- 👍 The time Peru, annoyed with China, lifted a chair to threaten her and the seat insert popped off onto her head.
- 👍 The time Ireland threw a tantrum because another cake was burning instead of baking. China shouted: *This is the most stressful family on the planet!* then tried three times to slam a door that made a gentle whoosh sound instead.
- 👎 The time the girl got overly passionate during a debate on Caster Semenya sustainable agriculture women's rights fracking Donald Trump abortion and had to leave the room to simmer down.
- 👎 The time Ireland and Peru communicated in a made up language for the entire cooking process and still managed to understand each other perfectly.
- 👍 The time China and her boyfriend, Honduras, made a pact to not bait the girl with controversial statements, and managed to last ten minutes before China said: I never ask Honduras to cook. Cooking is a woman's job.

## Body

There is a song they used to sing in Sunday school:

*A wise man builds his house upon the rocks*

*House upon the rocks...*

*A foolish man builds his house upon the sand*

*House upon the sand...*

She makes friends with people who build their houses in the sea. They wedge poles into the sand by snorkel. They spend hours hammering nails underwater; giant blows that make less than a plinking sound when they hit. They vacuum out the water and starfish and cover their cracking walls in art. They hang balconies like necklaces. They light fires and the wet wood smokes. Most of the time, it is easy to spot their loose structures sticking up out of the surf. They are the people who don't hail the helicopters when the floods come.



## **Shoulders**

When she is sixteen, her best friend, Leigh, gets kicked out of the house by her alcoholic mother. Ireland offers her home for Leigh and her boyfriend Tiaan to move into. One day they get into a friend's car and Tiaan tells the girl that Mazdas have clap sensitive light switches. She tries it and the lights flicker on. That's incredible, she says. What she doesn't see is that every time she claps, the driver subtly presses a button beneath the steering wheel. Somehow everyone manages to keep straight faces at her amazement. It is only two weeks later, when they are relating the story to a friend, that she finds out they were joking. They laugh and wrap their arms around your shoulders. That's why we're your foster siblings, Tiaan laughs, rolling the 'o' so it makes an 'ah' sound. Leigh agrees. You're our slower sister.

## **Appendix**

She believes marriage is an archaic institution. Something humans have grown out of needing, like an appendix. Every 'we've-been-married-for-ten-years+-and-look-how-happy-we-are' couple cradles a secret within them that threatens to rupture. The longer they've been together, the more devastating the secret.

## **Chest**

Nick built a bar in the granny flat outside his house and filled it with sports memorabilia. Every night, his wife Linda goes to bed at 9pm and Nick stays up to finish his beer. He cradles the glass against his chest as he walks around the bar, reading the captions to his pictures and stooping to fiddle with the little knick-knacks he's collected over the years. Linda wakes up at midnight to find the security systems still off. She goes out to the bar and finds Nick asleep with his head on the counter. After elbowing him awake and marching him off to bed like a drill sergeant, she locks up. Nick's reasoning is that he'd rather fall asleep warm in the bar, than frozen next to his frigid wife.

## **Head**

*The girl took out her knife and began to shape the tree's branches, cutting back the overgrowth and using the old dead shoots to make a ferocious mask. The women from the village came to draw water and became afraid; wanting to run away from the tree, but the girl calmed them and explained the tree's problem.*

*And the villagers told her they wanted to help. The girl said to them:*

*“Bring your cooking pots to the river side, and make fires beneath them with the wood I have taken from this tree, and bring palm leaves from the village, for there is a great storm coming.”*

## **Chest**

Frantz the fisherman was married to his wife for twenty-one years before he left her for his colleague, Seuntjie. During their marriage, his wife would often show up at work with patchwork bruises colouring her face. Now Frantz comes into the bar dressed in pink tights covered in fish guts. His left eye is purple, and even as they sit at the bar he and his boyfriend get into an argument. Seuntjie punches Frantz in the chest, and the girl frog marches them out of the bar. She feels no pity for him.

## **Knees**

When she lost her virginity, her boyfriend was intent on making her orgasm. People moaned and shuddered and scratched each other's backs, she had read. So she moaned and shuddered and scratched his back. Don't do that, he said. Do what? Her heart raced, was she so bad at acting that he had discovered her faking it? Don't scratch, he said. She nodded. Please let this be over soon. He made her kneel to take him into her mouth. She thought: so this is a prayer too.



## **Toes**

She knows a few pieces of trivia about her biological father.

Q: True or false— you inherited Christiaan Boshoff's toes.

A: True.

Ah fantastic! That was an easy one, wasn't it?

Yes

But still nicely done! That takes you up to R100. Now for R500!

Q: What was Christiaan Boshoff fatally allergic to?

A: Bees

Right again! How is she doing it, folks? No cheat cards on you, right? Haha, kidding, kidding. For R1000!

Q: What was Christiaan Boshoff's profession?

A: He was an engineer.

Oh, I'm afraid we're going to need more from you than that! Civil? Electrical? Mechanical?

Uh...

Come on, you can do this! Let's give her a round of applause! [audience claps]

I'm sorry, I don't know...

## **Back**

Sometimes it feels like there is something hovering behind her. In her imagination it is a giant bee.

## **Heart**

She is looking for abandoned places to photograph. It turns out to be as easy as finding abandoned people.

## **Cheeks**

Ireland tells the girl about the time she took Peru to get her legs waxed for a school social. The beautician surprised Ireland by asking if she'd ever been on antiretroviral drugs. Ireland told her she had, for three months after the rape. The tests came back clear. The beautician nodded. It's your cheeks, she said. Those deep wrinkles are common with ARVs, they dry out the skin and destroy elasticity around the mouth. Ireland has spent ten years with scars she never knew about.

## **Arm**

It's winter. She tells Tiaan not to use a newspaper funnel to pour petrol onto the fireplace, but he tells her not to worry so much. He's invincible. In a flash, the arm of his jersey has caught alight and he strips it off, leaving a streak of flame down the tiled passageway. They put wet towels down to smother the flames. His arm is an angry red colour, but not too bad given the amount of petrol he used. He jokes that he is actually a member of the Fantastic Four— He just forgot to say 'Flame off!' She punches him in the other arm.

## **Head**

*The rains came that night and across the land the river's voice could be heard saying,*

*"A little more water and I will stand up, and draw forward, and engulf you, Tree!"*

*And the girl knew that it was time, and sat down on the burgeoning banks and dangled her legs over the side; and though Cuvo's fury beat against her ears and his waters struggled to grab her feet and snatch her away she spoke softly.*

*“River, River; why are you not afraid? Surely you know that tonight you will be swallowed completely by the Monster Kongamato.”*

*And the river laughed and tossed his blind head and made a show of greatness. And the girl smiled and whispered,*

*“River, River; Kongamato has been burning villages and roasting food with his fiery breath all day, he is so thirsty that he is flying to gobble you up now.”*

*And the girl gave a signal to the villagers, and as one, hundreds of feet marched down to the riverbank. Cuvo felt the vibrations, as if the very land itself was trembling. The river was quiet a moment, and then it laughed and pushed at the side of its cot, and a bank crumbled into the waters. The girl scrambled to a safer spot.*

*See, girl! I too can make the ground shudder,” The River said.*

## **Tongue**

When she was fifteen, she went on a day trip to a strange city where she was accidentally separated from her friends. As it was growing dark and her cell phone had died, she asked the way to the police station. The officers treated her kindly, told her she could use the phone to call someone. But she couldn't remember a single phone number. She and Ireland had just moved again and she couldn't recall the new landline.

She sat at the station for three hours. People filtered in and out. A middle-aged coloured couple told her they were there to bail their daughter out for a DUI. There were some issues with the paperwork, so they sat and spoke with the girl in a mixture of English and *Kaaps*. Sometimes they didn't understand each other, but there was gesturing and mime to make up for the language difficulties. They spoke about the Eastern Cape climate, then went on to road works and politics and the youth programmes around Alexandria, where they had just moved, and how much the wife liked to chew *naartjies* while watching TV and how it drove the husband crazy until he had to go outside and look off into the distance for a while; and did the girl know Sari Immelman who used to work as a receptionist at the school in Port Alfred?

They went inside to sign some more papers and a young isiXhosa man who used to work for the post office before he became a trash collector came out and sat with her. He was also waiting for a friend's release. Again, he and the girl communicated through the wide gaps in the language barrier. He offered her some Cheasnaks and they finished the bag. They shared halting stories like they never would have done at school, sitting on a playground during break without class or culture or language or peer groups to separate them.

## **Heart**

"Naturally, once a relationship has begun by whatever means, people generally want to know if their partner truly loves them. Again, superstitions can help put the mind at rest—or not.

To pursue an answer, you can place two chestnuts before a fire, giving them the names of two people you know and care about. If the chestnuts burn steadily side by side, the couple will most likely marry and live a happy life together. If the nuts burst or jump away from each other, the couple will not. This experiment can also use apple seeds, peas, and plums or plum pits, depending on what is at hand and in season.

As another option, you could name two acorns, one for yourself and one for your lover. Drop both in water and, if they float close together, the two of you will marry."

—*Superstitions* by Deborah Murrell, pg. 67

## **Skin**

Leigh and Tiaan have a daughter together, and marry a few years after that. The girl is one of their bridesmaids. She has never seen a bride look more relaxed on her wedding day. They host the wedding at the Botanical Gardens in the spring after the rains. The grass springs underfoot and the air rejoices with choirs of birds.

## **Chin**

She was sixteen when she had her first kiss. She had grown softer by then. Her hair had lengthened and she wore make-up. She smiled and talked to boys, all the things you were supposed to do to get them to like you. At a sleepover party she met a tall, black-eyed seventeen-year-old boy. They spent the night flirting. He came up behind her and held her around the waist. It felt safe.

Later, they watched someone play video games and held hands under the blankets on the couch. They played with each other's fingers. Then he took her hand and placed it on his jeans, directly over his penis. She lifted it off immediately. A few minutes later he put it back. This time she curled her fingers around his erection, felt the wet spot on his jeans. She didn't want to disappoint him.

He took her into the bedroom, lifted her chin and kissed her, and for one blissful moment the gears in her head clicked off and she didn't think at all. No self-consciousness, just his tongue moving in her mouth and his arm curling her closer into him. He broke the kiss.

Sleep with me.

I'm not a slut.

I'm not a gigolo.

It was a silly comeback but she laughed anyway. She thought of telling him she was a virgin and then dismissed the idea. She was playing it cool and hard to get; boys liked that, didn't they?

Not tonight, she said, and went to bed.

The next morning she tried talking to him, but he ignored her and went to sit outside with the other boys. They were drinking orange juice and playing cards. She blamed herself. She blamed him. She blamed all kids playing at adult games and losing, losing, losing.

## **Body**

When Leigh is 27 and Tiaan is 32, Tiaan is in a car accident. Leigh wakes up with a bad feeling on September 1<sup>st</sup>. She and Tiaan had been fighting, but it was not like him not to come home. She goes to the police, who inform her that he has been killed in a car accident. An hour later they tell her there were actually three people in the accident, and that one has been taken to hospital in Port Elizabeth. They don't know if the survivor is Tiaan. There were no IDs on any of the bodies.

## **Atlas**

The bone in the back of her neck aches sometimes, like her head is too heavy for it. When she learns in biology that the bone is called the Atlas, she thinks: that figures.

## **Teeth**

When she was twelve, the girl was asked to watch Peru while Ireland made dinner downstairs, but there were cartoons on TV. When she eventually looked up, Peru (who was eighteen months) had made her way over to the staircase. The girl screamed as her sister tumbled down the ten steps. Ireland was there immediately, inspecting Peru. Her teeth had split her lip and her mouth was bleeding badly, but otherwise she had no scrapes or bruises. In a few weeks they discovered that Peru's front baby teeth were rotting in her gums; the fall had damaged the nerves and she would need to have them pulled. Her step-father asked the dentist for a letter stating that Ireland was unfit to have custody over the children. The dentist gave it to him.

## **Shoulder**

Tiaan survives the crash, but is in a coma in the hospital with severe swelling on the brain. After ten days, there has been no improvement in his condition and his kidneys have started failing. They switch off the life support. He dies on the 11 September 2017, leaving more questions than answers.

This is what they find out:

1. The *bakkie* crossed the road at the bend without braking and hit a tree.
2. One of the occupants was flung through the windshield and hit the tree dead on, he was killed instantly.
3. Tiaan was found in the backseat, his friend was discovered outside the car.
4. There was cocaine found in Tiaan's pocket, but it may have been unopened.
5. A man in a car travelling at 120kms on the road saw the bakkie overtake him, *like he was standing still*.

This is what they don't know:

1. Why they were travelling between Port Alfred and Grahamstown at 1am.
2. Why, if they were buying drugs, they wouldn't have bought them in Grahamstown in the first place.
3. Who was driving: Their wounds were inconclusive as to where they were originally sitting.
4. Why the paramedics and police mentioned a third passenger, if none were ever recovered, or came forward to testify.
5. Why they had no IDs or cell phones, shirts or shoes with them.

At the wake, the girl sits behind Leigh with her hand on her shoulder, letting her know she is there. They play a slideshow of Tiaan:

1. He is holding a bottle in every photo.
2. He is teaching his daughter to swim.
3. He is smiling and playing practical jokes on his friends.
4. He is teaching the girl to blow smoke rings
5. He is passed out on the couch.
6. He is hugging Leigh.

## Thighs

She crumples the hurricane in one hand. Sitting in the graveyard, acorns dig into her thighs.



## Eyes

They come to gawk at grief and then they don't come at all.



## Lips

She was inside her old school to host a creative writing workshop when she heard a strange noise echoing down the passageway. She joined the class at the door to peer outside. A parade of ghosts came walking down the corridors in single file, each with a hand on its head and a finger to its lips as she had been told to do in pre-school. It was a gesture meant to stop little kids fidgeting and be silent; but these were teenagers, adults. It made a funny sight and she giggled along with the class until she started recognising some of the ghosts.

Close to the front was T.J. Molefe, the class joker. She remembered in English he'd softly call, '*Mary*' (for that was the English teacher's name) and when she'd turn around he'd whisper, 'had a little lamb.' A car crash got him at 22. As the ghosts came closer, she noticed T.J.'s expression wasn't laidback anymore. None of the ghosts looked particularly peaceful or free like everyone says people do when they die—they looked purposeful. There was a blue haze above their heads. They did not seem to have any substance to their bodies but their school shoes squeaked down the polished floors and their bags grated against the rough walls.

One by one they filtered into the classrooms and took up empty seats. T.J. came into her class, followed by another of their old classmates; Alex van Rooyen, who was killed by his appendix at 27. The students squealed and held their noses to escape the burnt ozone odour the ghosts gave off. At first there were only two in the class. Then seven. Then thirteen. When the seats were filled they started lining up between the desks. One of the students passed a page to his friend through the chest of one of the departed and the girl told him not to be rude. The ghosts were unresponsive.

The principal marched in and informed the ghosts in a high pitched voice that they would need to register and see the governing body before they were allowed to attend class. He tried to forcibly remove Alex from the front desk, but his hands passed right through him. Alex took no notice of him. But then he never had in life either. The principal starting waving an exam pad at the ghosts. Perhaps he thought if he could generate enough wind force, he could blow them away. But he tried to do it in a casual manner, half at himself as if he was hot, so that the living students wouldn't laugh at him. He eventually left in disgust.

The girl stood in front of the class and tried to keep the workshop going. She wished one of the ghosts would say something, but they just kept watching her with their fingers glued to their lips.

## Circulatory System

### ✧ Veins

The first time a boyfriend tells her he loves her is in a song he specifically wrote for her. She breaks up with him.

### ✧ White blood cells

Sometimes her lovers ignore her if she tries to break up with them, so she cheats to get out of relationships. When she tells them, it is over for good. She leaves them before they leave her.

### ✧ Red Blood Cells

There is nothing more restrictive than the idea of marriage. She jokes: you expect me to sleep with one man for the rest of my life?

### ✧ Capillaries

They always end the game too early. To date, she has never said 'I love you' first.

### ✧ Atriums

Girls talk of their conquests, but only to a select few friends. The ones who will probably not call them sluts.

### ✧ Bicuspid valve

She loves sex because it makes her feel wanted. Revered. Relationships are just prolonged foreplay. The happy nest lasts at least three months, in rare instances six. Once she can lay a red thread to map each territory of his body, the urge to explore elsewhere returns.

### ✧ Arteries

She has a low threshold for temptation.

### ✧ Ventricles

She goes to a free therapist because Google thinks she might have a sex addiction that feeds off her binge drinking. The therapist tells her a person is not a house.

You can't just keep leaving them.

She is in a tailored black and white striped dress and her pink lips perfectly match her shoes. She has a wedding ring bolted to her finger. She eyes the girl like she is tallying her net worth and finds her wanting.

You need to break the pattern or it will keep recurring for the rest of your life. She says.

The girl is sure the therapist went home and said to her husband: I dealt with such a slut today.

## **Head**

*She is the Impindulu bird. She controls the thunder with her claws, her beak, her shifting moods. Her lies split the heavens. In the craven hours she drinks his blood and transforms, and he doesn't notice how distant his thunder is becoming. Maybe he doesn't notice because Impindulu birds are usually men.*

*She meets someone who traces the spots where she has drunk of his blood. He draws between the puncture wounds, the red x's, uses his body as a map. Here is the exit, he says, pointing to a spot above the river of his veins, just stop draining me.*

## **Nerves**

"An acorn placed on a window ledge protected the house from lightning strikes."

—*Superstitions* by Deborah Murrell, pg. 201

## **Gall bladder**

Become a speed reader learn Russian, French, Mandarin learn how to make a birth chart and live simply and sustainably learn yoga and how to meditate give back to the community and environment help people who can't help themselves volunteer learn homeopathy and kinds of stones and alternative forms of healing learn history and obscure mythologies master something every day break patterns of rejection fear ineptitude foster greater compassion and

connection to the earth and the creator be nicer to other people be fearless and determined cultivate social side live in the moment limit yourself to two drinks only drink water eat less sugar finish everything you start be a billionaire be famous be ok with being yourself own houses in the woods and islands and mountains live in the idyllic places of the world meet people from every country walk across Africa wear a sumo suit climb mountains go bungee jumping white water rafting learn to swim learn to surf go to Guatemala go to Disneyland learn to drive own a Lamborghini invent something be loved be adored have an adventure every day set foot on each of the seven continents go to Svalbard Cote d'Ivoire Pnomh Penn see midnight sun see the snow and make an angel leave a legacy see Macchu Picchu live like a local learn the guitar the drums how to make candles have sex in a tent and a meal on a rooftop learn everything about volcanoes learn jazz and salsa and seduction and which wines come from where join a gym and get a massage and get a manicure and be laid back and be an adult and live in slogans and for god sake be happy about it.

## **Face**

During their marriage, Ireland and the girl's stepfather had money. They produced a boxing show for Supersport called 'Punch Line'. They went away for holidays to the Gariep Dam, and sometimes the whole family would join them.

On one occasion, the girl managed to convince China and her cousins to sneak out of their chalets at 3am, to go and watch the sunrise on the other side of the resort, overlooking the pool. At 3.30am her stepfather's car pulled up and fear turned her arms to lead.

You selfish bitch! Don't you know what time the sun rises? You endangered your sister and your cousins for nothing! You could have gotten them killed!

They pulled up outside the chalet.

Get inside and stay the fuck out of my sight!

The girl went inside. Ireland brushed the hair out of her face. We were worried about you, she said. He's just angry because he cares.

## Skin

She started school in 1995, a year after Madiba came into power. She went to a predominantly Chinese school in Cyrildene and her group of friends was mixed: Black, Chinese, Taiwanese, Muslim, Portuguese and Pakistani. It was a happy rainbow after a storm they knew nothing about. For years she held onto the rainbow dream because of her childhood. Dug her fingers in and held onto the belief that everyone was born equal, that negative views wouldn't touch them because they were the foundation of something great, something so much better than anyone could have anticipated. They just needed the chance to become adults and they would show everyone how to love.



## Scar

The girl was taller than most of the girls in her grade 1 class, and she hunched in her desk when someone spoke to her, to shrink to their size. That was very important to her, that they were on the same level. With her desk mate she had to hunch more than most.

One day her teacher handed out a questionnaire.

4. What is your favourite colour?

8. What is your favourite food?

She was halfway through filling in her sheet when her desk mate glanced over at the page.

No, you must say happy for that answer. She smiled.

The girl looked over her work. The question was:

What do you want to be when you're older?

- a) Rich
- b) Famous
- c) Happy

But I want to be famous.

Yes, but she'll mark it wrong. It's happy.

The argument grew heated. Other classmates joined in, giving opinions.

But if she wants to be famous, won't that make her happy?

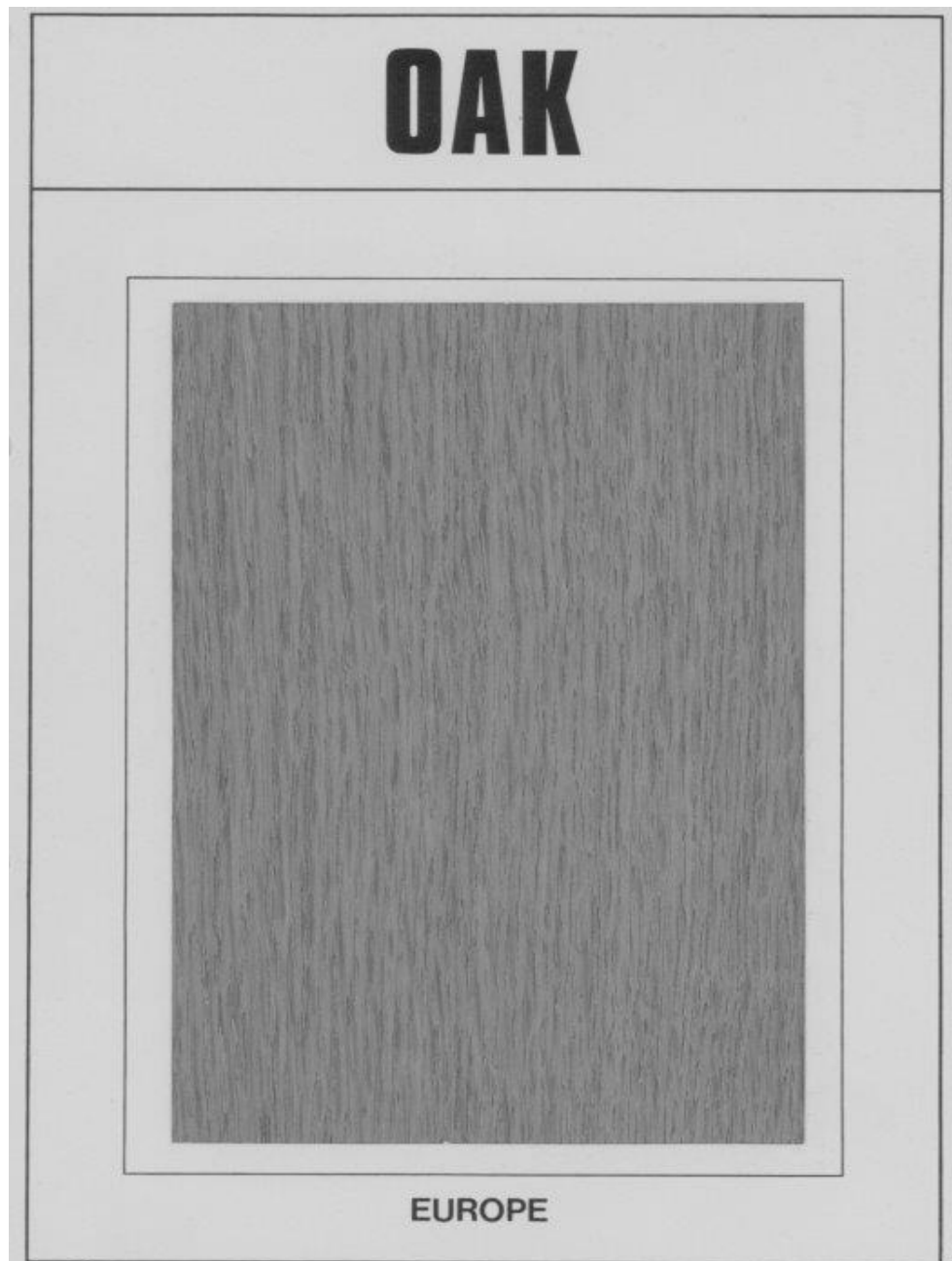
Why not rich? *I* want to be rich.

But it's not the right answer.

In the end, the girl circled and coloured in and crossed out and re-circled the two answers so much it scarred the page: too scared to write down the wrong answer, too stubborn to fully give in.

## **Hands**

When she was nine, her class took a trip to the Apartheid museum. Afterwards, she looked at herself with guilt. She looked at her white hands and pale legs and blue eyes and blonde hair and hated herself for the first time. She was ugly. Her heritage was ugly. She was South African but she was called European. Her own people called themselves European. She had never been to Europe. She couldn't point it out on a map.



## **Breasts**

She wants them to let her be the paranoid one for a change. They think she doesn't see the two people coming towards her down the road; that she won't know she needs to hang back, watch their legs. Moving away or moving towards her? Moving away or moving towards her? Her eyesight isn't great. She waits for their legs to bow outwards or inwards. She waits to see the flutter of a chiffon scarf if they're women, or if they're wearing hoodies, she scrutinises the cut of their jeans. Baggy around the knees— it's men. Then she crosses to the other side of the road, or she walks in the emergency lane, illuminated by the streetlights.

They think she doesn't know to listen to footsteps as they pass her. Moving away or moving towards her? To turn her head as if to scratch the side of her neck, just to catch a glimpse of how far away they've gotten. To walk opposite to the bushes, the empty school grounds, the deserted parking lots. To walk proudly with long strides, and not like a victim. To clasp her femininity to her like a greatcoat when someone whistles. Or shouts hey mummy. Or moves closer. Closer. To avoid eye contact to stop men moving closer. How quickly she can gauge from how far away their voices have come. How keenly she can feel the absence of a pepper spray in her hand. It takes one quick motion to pull her keys out while walking. No dawdling to open the gate, no rummaging in the handbag slung between her breasts and tucked under her coat, kept there so it's harder to snatch. They think she doesn't know, but she knows how to be safe.

## **Jaw**

Joyce was the domestic worker who worked for the family when the girl was little. After her trip to the Apartheid museum, the girl tried to get Joyce to sit in the passenger seat on the way to the taxi rank, while the girl sat in the back. She wanted to show Joyce that she respected her as an elder. But there was a stiffness to Joyce's jaw as she sat that hadn't been there before. The girl had shamed her. She hadn't wanted to, but she had shamed Joyce nonetheless.



## Hips

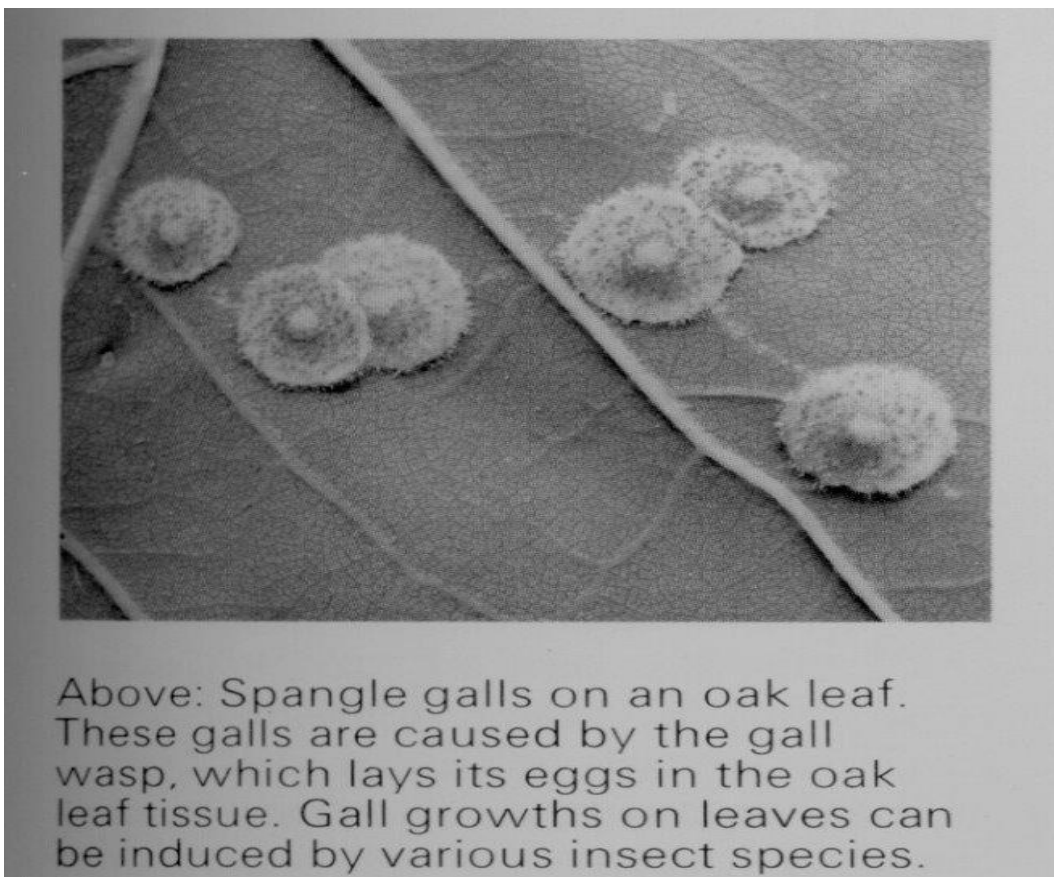
During the poor months, she knows that four wraps of toilet paper will last at least one forty-five minute class. She has five minutes to get to the next class, so she can duck into the bathroom to change. It takes a few messes before she figures it out, but nothing that a jersey wrapped around her hips can't cover.

## Ears

On the first day, when it's heaviest, she can always ask a friend to slip her a little *something* under the desk. She asks in code, quietly, away from ears that might hear her and judge her.

## Ovaries

Peru's friend tells her that a wrapped, unused *something* fell out of her bag last week and a boy said: that's disgusting.



## Vocal cords

When she was little, her mother used to tell her nostalgic and funny tales about the television industry she used to work in, the smart and eccentric people she worked with, how she made her way from a bookings clerk to a director and production manager.

At twenty-four, the girl moves to Joburg with all these stories solidified into one ambition: to become a director. She has no formal training or degree to back her. What she does have is 12k in savings and her charm. She stays with her uncle and cousins around the corner from Supersport, and next door to the studios is a bar. She is used to navigating the politics in bars. Despite the difference in customers, there is a soothing familiarity about them. She is friendly and outgoing in bars. She thinks, I just need to make one friend, the right friend, and I have an 'in'.

A few weeks later she meets Paul, a back screen visuals operator who works in Supersport. They start dating. He introduces her to his boss, who offers her a job. They move screens, they unbolt the structures, they mix the screens behind the presenters for the live feeds.

She hates the work. She doesn't mind the heavy lifting, but she can't get the hang of the hundreds of cables and the machines they plug into. Everything is unfamiliar. Her bravado disappears. She's insecure about her abilities, and her natural inclination is to turtle when she's around strangers.

The boss calls every day to make sure they are at work, and Paul speaks to him. Her crippling shyness stops her from using the phone, but she waves at Paul and he passes on the message: Uganda says hi.

When the boss tells her he can't confirm she's there if he hasn't heard her voice, and is therefore not paying her for two months of work, she knows she has no recourse. She walks out. She walks the streets of Randburg until she can't walk anymore. Then she goes in search of a bar. She stuffs her ambitions into the empty bottles and leaves them on the counter.

Paul leaves work to meet her and make sure she is okay. It is then she knows how much there is between them.

## Hair

At eighteen, she starts a course in journalism at University. Her first project is something to do with revealing hidden feelings and the professor reads out clips from past students' papers. There is one report from a white girl who had combed her black roommate's hair for her, and how she had poured *Jik* over her hands after her roommate had left, to clean off the germs. The girl changes majors soon after.

## Finger

At the resort, the girl plays tour guide to China on their way to the shops. She points to a large hole in the ground.

That is the Big Hole of Whatsitsname, she lies. That giant pipe in it is the easiest way to get to Hong Kong. It's a lot like a water slide once you get inside. But it's only for big kids.

China isn't paying much attention. Come, you said we were going to race, she whines.

In a second. See that hill? It's a no man's land. People get to about halfway up, and then they just disappear. Cars drive without drivers. You just become invisible. As if to illustrate her point, a car drives up the hill. It has tinted windows.

See! The sun reflects off the windows *because there's no one driving*— she doesn't finish. China is already racing towards the shops. Last one there turns invisible! She calls over her shoulder.

## Hips

After the girl has been living in Joburg for six months, China and Peru stop off for an overnight visit on their way to a wedding. China has gained twenty kilos from the medication the doctors have given her for her epilepsy. She's depressed, she barely talks and she sleeps most of the time. Peru tells her China has been like this for months. A walk around the supermarket tires her out completely. Her hips are covered in purple stretch marks. Her arm still shakes. The meds are not stopping the seizures. The girl tells Peru: that is not my sister.

## **Knees**

She finds textbook excerpts online. She borrows books from the few friends she has managed to make. She travels the hour to Grahamstown by bus every day because it's cheaper than renting a room close to the university. Some days she gets there at 6am for classes that start at 2pm. She begs friends for a lift back to her home town on the days her classes run late. Her stepfather asks her if they've released her results for the June exams yet, as he hasn't been able to pay her second year fees. The day she realizes she can't pay the bus is the same day she misses a test and loses her DP. She has to drop out of university.

## **Glabella**

The move she most clearly remembers is the one after the divorce. It was into the house across the road from the one they just vacated, the one in which her stepfather continues to live. A thin strip of road separates the houses like a glabella, the smooth strip of skin between your brows.

Ireland takes to checking out his second floor windows from her ground floor ones. If the curtains are closed in the daytime, she reasons, he must have company. People tell her she is being silly. He can't have moved on that fast.

Every holiday her mother and step-father attempt reconciliation, and the gap narrows slightly. But by the next week's break-up, the houses can't seem further apart. When her step-father leaves Ireland a letter saying that he has been seeing someone else for two years, Ireland takes a car key to his newly varnished gate. He paints over it, but for months afterward you can still make out the deep grooves of the metre high: BASTARD.

## **Heart**

She moves in with Paul, who lives in his father's house. His father, in turn, lives with his wife a few suburbs away, but comes to the house on a daily basis. Paul's father is a leading cardio-thoracic surgeon. He is part of Doctors and Artists and he makes sculptures out of found objects. He makes decorative pewter covers for light switches. He buys and sells guitars. Though the house looks unassuming from the front, the rooms are papered in expensive artworks, and furniture his father has made.

Paul leads her into the back garden, past the vegetable patch, into the greenhouse. His father also breeds orchids. This is Greenhouse one of three. It is built into an old swimming pool, and at the deep end, through Plexiglas doors, are the rare and blooming plants. A stone island festooned in moss juts out of the gravel, and vibrant orchids hang around her, wired to scraps of pottery. A mister keeps them at a balmy humidity, even in winter. They smell of jungle earth and sun. Paul points out the Cymbidiums and Paphiopedilums and Cattleyas, names she's never heard of.

The girl thinks back to her Oupa, who dug up five squares of concrete at his house in Bez Valley and planted a rose bush in each cavity. He took photos proudly every spring. The roses' names were pink and red and peach and yellow and white.

## **Skin**

Is white a colour? Someone asks her. Is white not the absence of colour?

## **Blood**

Her stepfather forgets that she dropped out of university because he ran out of money to pay for her studies. He tells her she will pay back every cent he has wasted on her in the past year. She hauls out a cliché from the family stockpile: Can't get blood from a stone.

## **Face**

*[The Acorn Maidens: a Karuk Indian myth]*

*‘Once acorns were Ikkareyavs (“spirit people”).*

*Then they told them:*

*“Ye are going to go, ye must all have nice hats, ye must weave them.”*

*Then they started in to weave their hats.*

*They said:*

*“Ye must all wear good-looking hats.”*

*Then all at once they told them suddenly:*

*“Ye would better go! Human is being raised.”*

*Black Oak Acorn did not finish her hat.*

*She picked up her big bowl basket.*

*And Tan Oak Acorn did not clean her hat*

*[did not clean off the projecting straws from inside].*

*She just wore it, she turned it wrong side out. She finished it.*

*But Post Oak Acorn just finished her hat out good.*

*She cleaned it.*

*Then Tan Oak Acorn said:*

*“Would that I be the best acorn soup, though my hat is not cleaned!”*

*Then they went.*

*They spilled [from the heavens] into Human’s place.*

*Then they said: “Human will spoon us up.”*

*They were Ikkareyavs too, they were Heavenly Ikkareyavs.*

*They shut their eyes and then they turned their faces into their hats when they came to this earth here.*

*That is the way the Acorns did.*

*Tan Oak Acorn wished bad luck towards Post Oak Acorn and Maul Oak Acorn, just because they had nice hats.*

*She was jealous of them. They wished her to be black. Nobody likes to eat Post Oak Acorn.*

*And Maul Oak Acorn does not taste good either, and is hard.*

*They [Post Oak Acorn and Maul Oak Acorn] do not taste good,*

*[their] soups are black*

*And Maul Oak Acorn is hard to pound.*

*They were all painted when they first spilled down.*

*Black Oak Acorn was striped.*

*When one picks it up on the ground it is still striped nowadays. It is still striped.*

*She was striped all over, that girl was.*

*But Tan Oak Acorn did not paint herself much, because she was mad, because “my hat is not finished.”*

*When they spilled down, they turned their faces into their hats.*

*And nowadays they still have their faces inside their hats.’*

*—Moowon Online Magazine: Excerpted text from John P. Harrington’s Karuk Indian Myths*

## **Skin**

Paul brings home a sheepskin he inherited from his grandfather. She wrinkles her nose. Is it yellow with age or is it naturally that colour? The sheep was that colour, Paul nods sagely. He was an outcast from a young age because of his yellow wool. He used to stand in the corner of the field and count all the other sheep, but he kept falling asleep because that’s what happens when you count sheep. It was the first recorded case of sheep narcolepsy.

## **Throat**

After living in Paul's father's house on and off for three years, she still has trouble talking to him. She thinks it's because they are stuck behind other words which she has never had the courage to say to him. I'm sorry to keep living off your hospitality. I'm sorry I take up so much space. I'm sorry I'm not good enough for your son.

## **Ankle**

The brief conversations she does have with Paul's father feel like one-sided sparring matches, though Paul tells her she reads too much into things. His father lends her a book and tells her to read page 90's explanation of karma. If she likes it he can find her a copy.

She wonders if he is suggesting that karma will get her for sponging off his son. She has been unemployed for the majority of three years. She failed at running a jewellery making business. She left a copywriting and stewardess job. She left her job at Supersport. She is a writer without a day job, a bartender without a bar. Paul pays for everything. She sponges.

She rolls her foot onto the ankle and presses down until it hurts.

Give me two hours and I will finish the book and return it to you, she says.

If you take only two hours with the book, you won't have understood anything.

## **Ears**

A few days before Christmas, Oupa would call all the children he knew on the telephone. He had a tiny silver bell he would ring for just such an occasion

Ho Ho Ho! This is Santa Claus... What's your name, little girl?

Oupa?

No this is Santa Claus. Do you hear the bells? That's the jingling of Rudolph's sleigh bells on the roof!



## **Bladder**

After Ireland's nervous breakdown, she comes back to Port Alfred. She moves in with a friend named Kobus who is taking care of an elderly alcoholic named Hans. Before the month is out, the girl's stepparents evict her and she moves in as well.

Hans pisses himself regularly and wanders around the house without pants on. There are lavender air fresheners in every room to mask the scent of urine and body odour. He goes through a 5l box of red wine a day. They have to turn the stove off at the mains because he tries to cook himself meals, forgets the food and wanders back to bed. One day they return home to find the kitchen is full of smoke. Hans has stuffed raw bacon in the toaster. He also meets Ireland anew every day because he does not remember her. He calls the alarm company to inform them there is an intruder in the house. They burst in when she is fresh out of the shower and has to explain to them what she is doing there.

Kobus buys her sisters Christmas presents and tells them they come from Ireland, who cries when she hears it. She has not been able to afford gifts.

Her sisters come over every few weekends. When they do, the girl and China stay in the spare room opposite Hans'. A heavy, locked door blocks the smell once they are inside it, but to get to the room one of them must hold her breath and dash down the corridor, fumble with the keys and open up for the other to come in. They must do it quickly, so none of the smell gets in the room. They play rock paper scissors and Uno cards and the loser has to open up for the winner. They spend a lot of time silently laughing and gagging while the winner makes faces and mouths: Ugh, I'm dying here, hurry up!

## **Heart**

Oupa begins all his stories with: When *I* was a little girl, (this and this and this happened.) Or he says, Oh I know him. He and I went to different schools together. Or he says, See, I told this man to be out of my parking space at... 14.27. And there he goes. What a nice man.

## Tongue

One day a little girl was sitting in her Oupa's study. She was watching him make acorn men, and while he did so he told her stories.

"When *I* was a little girl," he said, "My Oupa told me that the creator wrote the secret of life on a block of ice and smashed it into a thousand little pieces, and he gave a sliver of ice to all the creatures on the earth. And once the creatures had swallowed their little shard of ice, they could speak one little portion of the secret. Some creatures had a bigger shard than others, and they could speak more of the secret. Some only got a tiny little piece, and what they could speak was limited because they didn't have tongues. But each creature expressed their bit of the secret in different ways. The bees buzzed the secret, the hippo grunted it, and the guinea fowl twittered it. The hyenas laughed their portion of the secret, the horses neighed it, even the branches of the trees rustled in the breeze, for they too, had been watered by this secret."

"And what about humans, Oupa?" the little girl asked, "We have so many words and we make so many sounds, which is the one that is the secret?"

And Oupa smiled and said, "One day you will know."

And he would say no more on the subject. But the little girl was not satisfied. "I want to know," She said to herself when she went to bed that night. So she decided that that was exactly what she would learn.

The next day, the girl started to listen to all the animals she could, and whenever she found a new one, she would write down what noise it had made. Sometimes she had to look on the computer to find the sound the animal made, and other times she had to lie on the ground, right on her stomach, to hear what sound the dung beetle made as it rolled across the floor.

It was a lot of work. Every bird made a different chirp; some had much more language than she had ever thought they had. She learned that each animal made a different sound when it was looking for food, or calling for a friend, or defending its home. She tried to put all the sounds together and ended up with very long, nonsensical words. Every few weeks she rearranged the order.

And while she did all this, she also studied the dictionary. She was looking for one sound, or one human word, that would tell her the secret of life.

She thought she found it a couple of times. When she went to high school she thought the secret might be 'Friendship.' At university she thought it might be 'Learning'. At work, she thought she'd found the secret in the word, 'Money' and when she met her boyfriend she thought the secret might be the word, 'Love.'

She asked her friends what the secret could be, summed up in one word. Some said, 'Power,' or 'Motherhood' or 'Happiness'. Some said 'Botox' or 'Bacon' or 'Beer.'

The girl was getting older. Other words kept getting in the way of her mission. She kept an acorn next to her bed to remind her of it, but after a while she realized she hadn't picked it up in months.

One morning she got out of bed and stepped on the acorn, which had fallen off the bedside table in the night. The shell cracked, and there was the secret.

## **Brain**

[Heard in class] We remember glimpses of the past, but what is it we forget? How do we fill those holes?

## **Ears**

Her mother's cry pierces the floor of heaven. She screams: is that it? Is that all you've got for me?

## **Eyes**

The raindrops run back up the windscreen.

## **Nose**

The smell of storm water. The smell of creosote.

## **Mouth**

Fear in her mouth. It tastes like dust.

## **Feet**

It's storming in Joburg. Their car is stuck on a hill. The water is rushing inside the car. Pooling at their feet. The handbrake is on but the car skips backwards. The storm drains are full. The river. The river. The Jukskei River is behind them and the water is pushing them down the hill. The heat inside the car has fogged up the windscreen. She is ten. She shouts: what can I do? Ireland says: find a rag, wipe the windscreen. The girl pulls her sleeves over her hands. She wipes the windscreen. Ireland is praying out loud.

## **Arms**

He slams the door and Ireland slides down the wall onto the carpeted staircase. The girl curls up next to her and feels her mother's sobs echo in her arms. Her sleeves are prepared to wipe the windscreen until it shatters.

## **Tooth**

Yellow moon outside the window. Yellow as a werewolf's tooth. The moon is snarling at her and she bares her teeth back at it.

## **Ribs**

Keening.

## Legs

So much life has passed since then. She tells herself she scarcely remembers any of it.

## Head

*And the girl said,*

*“River, River; that vibration was just the echo of his great wings! Surely you know Kongamato’s wings are made of hundreds of snakes?”*

*And the villagers clambered down the banks of the river bed and waved spiny palm fronds back and forth quickly over the river’s back, and as they slid off each other they rustled and hissed like hundreds of little snakes.*

*And the river realized there was a rippling over his back like that of great, uneven winds.*

*“River, River; can you feel Kongamato’s hot tongue tasting you?”*

*And the villagers came all the way down the banks and emptied the coals beneath their cooking pots into the river and the river hissed in fear. He paused a moment and tried to laugh it off a second time, but his voice was higher, more nervous. He was becoming afraid, and that made him angry, and the pouring rain was making him stronger. Slowly he started to lift himself out of his great bed. He pushed his shoulders up with all his might and lifted his great watery head; back bent, and opened eyes that glowed bright and cold as pearls.*

## Genes

Acorn: “Old English *æcern* “not, mast of trees, acorn,” a common Germanic word (cognates: Old Norse *Akarn*, Dutch *aker*, Low German *ecker* “acorn” ... Gothic *akran* “fruit”)...fruit of the open or unenclosed land”.

— Online Etymology Dictionary

## **Womb**

Because of the ten year age gap, when Peru is a toddler people automatically assume she is the girl's daughter. Sometimes it feels like she is. During the divorce, the girl bathes and dresses Peru and makes up all sorts of stories for her. She tells her that stars are balls of gas—human gas, and that every time Peru 'makes a bum-sneeze', she forms a new star. Peru determines to make her own galaxy. She tells her pre-school teacher this, who asks the girl to tell Peru the truth because she is farting relentlessly in class.

## **Brain**

[Peru]           What's a 'budding William Faulkner'?

[the girl]       It's a kind of flower

[Peru]           And a 'Virginia Woolf'?

[the girl]       A fluffy dog that comes from America

## **Lips**

She works in a book store with a woman who had given birth to a stillborn daughter twenty years before. The woman buys herself one of those very life-like baby dolls with the soft skin and keeps it on her bed. She buys it baby grows and nappies and changes it frequently. She won't leave the house at night because she needs to take care of the doll.

Her first child, a son, was born deaf. She sent him to a school where they cable tied his hands behind his back so he couldn't learn sign language. She says she made him read lips so he would be more normal.

## **Muscles**

The girl dreams of adventure. She gets restless and depressed after reading epic stories—she wants to live them. At thirteen, during one of the girl's moody spells, Ireland grabs her car keys. Ok, she says, let's go adventuring. You tell me where to turn, right left or straight.

Nope, that's a one way street.

The girl laughs. Her muscles loosen. After twenty minutes, Ireland says, I have no idea where we are. Good, the girl says: this is the adventuring part.

They guess their way around a few blocks for another fifteen minutes until they reach a shopping centre.

Ah, I know where we are now, Ireland says.

On a visit back home, the girl describes the area of Joburg she's staying in. Of course I've been there. I lived in Joburg for thirty years, Ireland laughs. I know those streets.

What about that time we went adventuring and you got lost?

Ireland sucks her lips between her teeth and grins. She had known where they were all along.

## **Toenail**

After nine months in Joburg, Ireland calls the girl to tell her that as China's seizures have worsened, she has gone for a contrast MRI. They pump ink into her bloodstream and take pictures of her brain close-up. And there, in the dark cloud of ink, is a tiny white worm in her brain matter. The doctors tell her that it is the egg of a tapeworm she had eaten in pork that was small enough to pass into her bloodstream and attach itself to her brain tissue. It had hatched maybe two years before, and its death throes are what had caused the seizures to worsen. The doctors say it is not a misdiagnosis though—China still has epilepsy. They give her tablets and the seizures stop entirely. Two years of agony had been caused by a parasite the approximate size and weight of a toenail clipping. Secretly, she stops taking the medication for epilepsy. She has been seizure-free for four years.

## Neck

*Barbie was the leader of the Amazons. She held a nail file spear crusted with red nail polish blood. She was also a witch, because she had the magic ruby toe ring around her neck. Once she was the great protector of the water bottle, but Ken had snuck up with his band of rebels and attacked them. He fought her on the great stair cliffs and held her sister Theresa hostage until she withdrew. He popped off Theresa's head and sent it to Barbie on the back of a giant purple bear. Barbie wove a spell around the head, and Theresa's eyes popped open and told Barbie all about Ken's camp. He had held them in the cave under the bed and tortured them.*

*But it is not his fault! Theresa said, it's Action Man's doing— Ken's supposed bodyguard. Action man put an emotion reducing curtain cord around Ken's waist.*

*Not the one with the red pom pom!*

*Yes, the pom pom belt of mercilessness.*

*How will we ever get the water bottle back?*

*I don't know...it's impossible to get inside except as a prisoner.*

*Theresa...I swear when I get my magic ruby back I will sew your neck back to your body. You may never again have a neck, but you will live! And with that, Theresa closed her eyes.*

*Brave Brooke Logan stepped forward. She told Barbie how she would act as a scout and be captured by the guards, then when she was brought to the cave, she would seduce Action Man— she would stay with him for the night, and when he fell asleep she would steal the key to Ken's tissue box prison, and cut the cord around his waist. Everything went according to plan. The dolls got naked and lay on top of one another...*

## Sex

Explaining to Ireland why she had discovered the girl's dolls naked and in compromising positions was one of the most mortifying experiences of the girl's young life.

Ok, ok. But if you have any questions, remember I'm always here to talk to... Ireland said as the girl pushed her out of the room.



## Spine

A few months after the divorce is finalized, Oupa calls the girl and her mother into his office.

Oupa had been a boxer when he was younger, and the walls of his office are covered in pictures of boxers and team photographs dating back to the sixties. A newspaper had run an article about 'Kit's Boxing Museum', and Oupa cut it out and mounted it on the wall as well. Since he'd retired from the post office, boxing and freemasonry had become his life. Ouma jokes that if 'Chief' sits still for longer than twenty minutes he falls asleep.

Oupa turns to Ireland first. His opening words are:

You are being ridiculous. Your ex-husband loves someone else, get over it. It's time to stop living in the past.

What the hell, Chief? Ireland says, I can't just stop loving him. I'm not a bloody tap.

You were a single mother before he came along and you survived, and you'll survive now. You have your kids to think of.

Everything I do *is* for my kids.

Exactly. That means you need to eat. That means you need to stop crying. You have to be fine for them, because you are not a jellyfish! What is your surname?

Ireland frowns, tells him.

No, that is the name of that *asshole prick* you were married to.

He's not a prick, Chief—

—What is your birth name?

Ireland Marks.

Yes! I don't care if you have a hundred marriages— you're a Marks. And Marks are not jellyfish!

Ireland sat back and swiped her cheeks with a tissue.

You can be angry, that's fine with me. Angry is better than this depressed kak.

The girl stared at the pictures of the fighters in Oupa's museum. Oupa continued talking. After a while he stood and hugged Ireland.

Are you finished shitting me out now? She asked.

He laughed and Ireland smiled. Oupa asked Ireland to give him a few minutes alone with the girl. He sat back behind his desk.

The time has come for some tough love, he said.

I know, but you didn't have to be quite so tough.

Oupa nodded. Your mom is very vulnerable right now, and you need to step up to the plate. You're the eldest. You need to look after her and your little sisters, okay?

I'm trying, but I don't know how.

Well, you're going to learn. I want you to take care of your mom and sisters, when you can. You're my big girl. Help your mom out around the house, or if she needs help with cooking or cleaning or anything, OK? Promise me.

I promise, she said.

## **Stomach**

Oupa knew all about stepping up to the plate. He was the eldest in his own family. He didn't often speak of his upbringing, but Ireland tells the girl that Oupa's father was a travelling salesman who was away from home a lot while Oupa was growing up. When he was home, he was neglectful, and an alcoholic. He once arrived with two individual-sized pies for dinner. One he kept for himself, the other he gave his wife to share between herself and their five children. Oupa left school at fifteen to start working. He was the one who paid for his younger siblings' school fees.

## **Palm**

A friend tells the girl that her sister is a slut. She concentrates every bit of energy into her palm and hits him. He staggers back. It is the first time she has used her body in an aggressive way. The rage leaks out of her pores until she is oily with it, but she feels no remorse.

## **Arm**

Her radio stops working so she picks it up and flings it at the wall. She holds onto the cable and feels the impact jar her arm as the plastic crunches and the wires come apart. She jumps on the shell. She leaves the remains on the floor. Again, no remorse.

Her family takes their rage out on things instead of people. After the third time their VCR broke, Oupa told everyone he would fix it himself. He proceeded to fix it into the concrete with a steel hammer. Her uncle poured gasoline on a seizing lawnmower and set it alight, then sat down with a beer to watch the bonfire. Ouma flung a dinner set against the wall because no one was helping her do the dishes. Ireland smashed a mirror with a brush because of a bad hair day.

They don't say much. They don't take it out on each other physically. They take it out on things. They laugh afterwards. Crazy family. Must run in the genes.

## **Heart**

One of the nicest things her stepfather ever said about her was to her mother. He said: the main difference between Peru and Uganda is that Peru will love anyone. Uganda will fight for anyone.

## Penis

One of Ireland's friends has lost her job. She moves into Ireland's house with her two children until she can find work. She is a woman who never got over her ex-husband. After discovering that he had cheated on her, she took a brick to his windshield. Although it has been five years since he divorced her and married his lover, Ireland's friend still flirts with him. She won't even sneak a glance at other men. She tells the girl this is because her ex's package is so sexy it would win every contest. At night, she wraps herself in a bathrobe and watches *Beauty and the Beast* on repeat.

## Limbs

"There are various species of oak trees in SA, the main one being the English Oak. These were one of the first, and most popular species planted around Cape Town. Oak trees have a life expectancy of between 300 and 600 years.

The timber is hard and heavy and due to a tendency to rot they often lose their branches and limbs.

Due to prolonged periods of wind and dry summers these trees get stressed which reduces their ability to fight decay, mildew and insects. Older trees are obviously more vulnerable and their roots are also susceptible to rot. Overall Oak trees have a high chance of failure."

—Tree Risk SA

## Body

When she was younger her mother bought a series of books for her at a second hand fête. It was called *How My Body Works* and each issue dealt with a different body part, or bodily process. The Ear, the Respiratory Process, the Skin. She remembers thinking: but that's not how body parts really work, do they? A scar is a scar because someone punctured the skin. A chin is for lifting to receive a kiss. The prominence of a hipbone is used to gauge weight gain. A palm on the back can be threatening. Knuckles on the forehead can be soothing...

## **Forehead**

When Peru throws a tantrum because she wants sweets or is angry at her sisters for ‘looking at her’ or some other toddler-rage fuelled nonsense, the girl holds her at arm’s length by the forehead, trying not to laugh while Peru kicks or punches at the air until her strength is spent. Then the girl will talk to her calmly and authoritatively, and generally Peru will calm down enough to see sense. In many ways the girl has never needed to have a child, because it feels like she has already had one.

## **Uterus**

Besides, how could she raise a child when she never became an adult?

## **Scalp**

[Peru]            You’ll probably have greasy hair by tomorrow... Why? Because you obviously used my brush. My brush that was full of roll on deodorant that leaked in my bag. I guess it’s karma for using my stuff and not putting it back the way it was...

[the girl]        At least my scalp won’t get sweaty.

## **Back**

At fifteen, Ireland takes the girl to the nightclub in town. They share two Smirnoff Spins and dance until 2am. When Ireland mentions this to Clara, Clara purses her lips. It’s not right, she says, children should be in bed by 9pm. Ireland tells her she’d rather the girl went out *with* her, in a controlled environment, than sneak off to party behind her back.

## Bone

One Friday night the girl decides to stay in while Ireland goes out. She is feeling restless, but she is tired of the same venues and faces. Ireland comes in at 3am and nudges her awake.

Steve is having a braai at his house, she says, you want to go?

When?

Right now. Get some shoes.

They get to Steve's house just before first light, and sit and eat meat and salad, watching the sunrise. Hey, the girl says, I got my 3am sunrise. Ireland laughs and knocks the bone of her lamb chop against the girl's. You know, you're my best friend, she says.



## **Hands**

A few months after the conversation in Oupa's study, China forgets her lunchbox at the girl's step father's house. He is not at home, but when China calls the house his new girlfriend, Clara, picks up. She tells China that she will bring over the lunchbox.

It is the first time Ireland has had a chance to confront the woman who had been fucking her husband prior to the divorce. When the doorbell rings, the girl and her sisters crowd at the windows to see how Ireland will react. Time fast forwards.

Halfway through the garden, mid-stride, Ireland pauses. It looks like a hitch in the video.

Ireland continues to her garden gate, unlocks and opens it.

Clara is silhouetted in the frame in yellow rubber gloves. She had just been doing the dishes. Her eyes are those of a frightened duiker. You can almost see her ears tucked back.

Clara hands over the lunchbox.

They speak for a moment.

Ireland closes the gate.

Time resumes.

When she gets back inside, everyone wants to know what she said. Ireland says halfway to the gate she just felt something say: let it go. She felt the tension in her sinews unknot, and as she opened the door she felt free. She just said, "Hi Clara. How are you?"

## **Sinews**

[Peru]            'Sloos gates' or 'sluice gates'?

[China]          Slooze

[Peru]          Liar

## **Intestines**

At twenty-five, she moves to Cape Town because there is a job opening for a copywriter at a hospitality training company. She works in an open office with women who like to change their skins. They wear mohair and cashmere, pigskin leather jackets, crocodile handbags, snakeskin shoes, angora sweaters and suede cardigans. She is surrounded by huntresses. They give her a project and every couple of days she asks them for feedback, because the deadline is in a month's time. Each time, they tell her that everything is alright.

In the deadline meeting they sit around her in a circle, and after the first arrow is fired, the circle gets smaller.

Everything is wrong. Mohair says.

You went in completely the wrong direction. Pigskin's eyes are shining.

The rest lean in with hatchets because they smell her dissent. Manicured talons slice off bits of idea to grind between their teeth. They dig into the project and carve up sentences like they are rooting through intestines.

The meeting lasts an hour. Crocodile Handbag tells her she needs to redo everything by 7am the next morning. It's 16.45 now, she says, good luck.

By the time the girl leaves, the skins on her colleagues have changed again. She sees her own eye blink from the confines of Snakeskin's peep toe shoes. She sees a mole formation that looks like Orion's Belt decorating the shoulders of Suede Pantsuit.

She stays up all night to see what other bits of her are missing. A handful of incisors, a diamond shaped patch on the back of her thigh. Hanks of her hair. She opens the flap covering the gumbo of her stomach contents and counts the organs, one by one.

At 7am the next morning, the girl resigns.



## **Head**

*He held wicker hands up to the moon. He made the streetlights swim like music. Narrowed eyes at her through the smoke curls. Callouses on the pads of his fingers. He pressed them into her until she cried out his name. He said: beg me. She pushed him up against the wall, felt his heart slamming up against her palm, kissed him with the force of her restlessness. He wrapped her hair around his fist and tugged her throat up to meet him. Green-eyed breath. Rum and cigarettes and pheromones. She ground him into her hollows. Sharp arms. Skulls. Flames. He moaned into her mouth, she said: you're begging. He backed her against the mattress and flipped her onto her stomach. Cornered her so that every thrust rubbed her clit on the raised edge. Repositioned. Scythe tongue hewing wild and precious places. His nose, his chin, unafraid to mould, to suck, to get sticky. Head over the edge of the bed so she could deepthroat him as he cried out. She needed. She said: You'll scream for me. He moaned: God I have no doubt. He shook her to the core. Core whispered: Be careful, be careful with this Tokoloshe. Your bed was on bricks but he climbed up anyway.*

## **Palate**

Words cut her palate with their sharp spines.

There are dead bees on the windowsill.

Outside, the moon is a strobe light. So bright the sea is black.

Every rainbow she painted as a child was black.

Blue was the problem.

Blue ink. Blue words.

Blue leaches into her hand from the page

She dredges worlds from the void.

## Spine

### | Coccyx

They catch Ireland's rapist after two years. He has been caught boosting cars in Johannesburg, and is being taken to Grahamstown to stand trial. He is also being charged with two murders and numerous other rapes.

### | Sacral Vertebrae

Ireland is the first to testify. She tells the court the full story. After the rape, she swore to herself that the next time she saw him; she would be the one in control. The court is in session for two weeks. Ireland comes home shaken but with steel in her spine. She looks the rapist in the eye and tells him she does not forgive him for what he has done.

### | Lumbar Vertebrae

The rapist tells the court that when he broke in, Ireland took off her pyjamas and invited him to have sex with her *because she hadn't had a man in a while*. Ireland tells the girl her body filled with revulsion, with horror that the court might believe him.

### | Thoracic Vertebrae

The girl comes with Ireland for the sentencing. The judge tells the rapist that no woman, upon seeing that someone has broken into her house, would willingly offer herself up to him. His defence is laughable. He has proven himself a danger to society, and is sentenced to life plus twenty-one years, to be served in Pollsmoor prison in Cape Town.

### | Cervical Vertebrae

Ireland is not afraid to speak out about the rape. She counsels others who have been the victims of sexual abuse and tells them never to blame themselves. They are survivors, not victims. She tells them about how she looked down at the rapist from the stands and he was nothing. Meant nothing. He was bird shit on a black shoe.

## **Head**

*The only thing that Cuvo saw when he looked out over the land was the giant green Kongamato mask the girl had fashioned out of the tree.*

*And the river collapsed inwards on himself; cowering before the great monster, and shrieked:*

*“Master Kongamato! Take pity on me! Let me live and I will give you whatever you want!”*

*The girl went over to the tree and whispered in its ear, and the Tree, who had not yet spoken to the River said in a deep and booming voice:*

*“I will let you live if you give me your eyes, and make your way to the ocean blind!”*

*And the river cried out,*

*“Anything!”*

*Cuvo was beaten and afraid, and the girl knew that without his eyes, the River would never peek at the deceitful mask of Kongamato again.*

*The River stretched out his hand and threw his pearl-like eyes out onto the earth, and the girl, struck by their beauty, stood impulsively to catch them. Her foot slipped on the muddy embankment and she tumbled headfirst into the dark waters.*

*The Tree stretched out into the water to save the girl, but she could only grab a handful of acorns as the river snatched her up and swam away with her.*

*And wherever the blind river twists and turns, trying to find his way back to the ocean, the girl tosses a few acorns onto the land so that they too may grow into almighty trees. So that their acorns might carpet the world and dam up the river. So that she might, one day, climb back onto the land and return home to her people.*

## Hormones

### 1. **Amygdala** *processes signal*

For many years, her great dream was to chase the sunset. Wherever the light grew rusty, she would stop, in a small town, on an open field.

### 2. **Hypothalamus** *readies hormones*

The family doesn't own a car and she doesn't want to sponge off her friends, so at 23 she pools her savings and takes driving lessons. She twists the key in the ignition for the first time in her life.

### 3. **Pituitary Gland** *secretes ACTH*

Keep calm, keep calm. You're doing fine.

The car stalls again. She closes her eyes, tries to be calm and feel the sensation the instructor talks about: the rear of the car dropping slightly when it's ready to pull off.

### 4. **ACTH** *releases norepinephrine*

She stops the car metres away from the other cars at stop signs. Passing cars feel like they're coming close enough to kiss. She doesn't know how to watch everything at once.

### 5. **Cortisol** *released*

She rolls backwards two minutes into her first driving test, and fails automatically. Ireland hugs her. At least you didn't waste time, she says.

### 6. **Adrenaline** *released*

After fifteen hours she still feels no confidence behind the wheel. She takes another ten lessons, another 3.5k from her meagre savings account. It's worth it, she tells herself. She will be completely independent once she learns to drive.

7. **Heart** *rate increases*

Her second test, she executes perfectly in the yard. The instructor is young and she charms him shamelessly. Then comes the road. She stalls five times at the robots. He blames it on her nervousness and is sympathetic, but tells her if she stalls once more he'll have to fail her. Somehow, she manages to get the car moving. He passes her. In total she has been behind the wheel for twenty-five hours.

8. **Bladder** *relaxes*

When she moves to Joburg, Oupa buys her a car, though he tells her not to say anything or the family will be jealous. As it is, when Oupa starts talking about the girl her aunt leaves the room. The car is a rusted Opal Cadet Cub than is older than she is, built like a tank in the 80's.

9. **Pupils** *dilate*

She asks Paul to accompany her while she drives. With the barest sliver of confidence, she gets behind the wheel in midday traffic.

10. **Mouth** *dries*

At an 8-way intersection on a blind rise, she gets confused about which lane to go into, and the robot changes. The car over the rise doesn't see her turning and she can't stop her car from barreling into his. She feels the bumper crumple, the headlight. The car she hits is a new Japanese model, its side shreds like tin foil.

11. **Hands** *shake*

She can't stop crying. The other driver is furious but unhurt. Paul drives her home; she can't sit behind the wheel. Her chest closes and she can't breathe or see through the tears. She could have killed Paul. She could have killed the other driver.

#### 12. **Stomach** *digestion slows*

It's been five years and her chest still closes when she sits behind a wheel. Paul takes her to a game farm for his birthday and the streets are quiet. The speed limit is 30kms. He tells her to swop places with him in the driver's seat.

Tomorrow, she says, we'll try tomorrow. He gets angry. To appease him, she trades seats. She stares at the keys a long time.

#### 13. **Ears** *experience loss of hearing*

The splinter of glass, the other driver's smothered cry. Google tells her driving phobia is one of the most common phobias. She racks her brain but she can't think of anyone with the same problem.

#### 14. **Eyes** *experience tunnel vision*

She tries but she can't explain the fear that hobbles her. She gets in the front seat at 12:00. After driving for an eternity, she checks the clock, 12:07. Another car comes towards her and immediately she pulls over onto the side of the road. You have to get over this, Paul says.

She tightens her grip on the steering wheel. Why can't I do this? Normal people can do this. Paul says nothing.

You thought you were getting involved with a competent adult.

You sure fooled me.

## **Knees**

Oupa drives in first gear along the Joburg highway. Near a billboard he slows even more and points out the window. Cars speed past. You see here? This is where the accident was last week. You can still see the glass...Yes. Yes Oupa— I see it. Ok, we need to go a bit faster here—

## **Eyebrows**

After roughly ten years of sparse contact, the girl now gets along with her stepfather. They can talk for an hour or so before one of them has to be somewhere else. A small town is not the place for a freelance television producer, and the money that separated them has fizzed away. His demeanour has softened with alcohol and age. Sometimes he says things that make her raise her eyebrows, but she doesn't fight him on everything as she used to. She has learned the value of silence. They keep their conversations to pleasantries; but he still refers to her as his daughter, and every Christmas or so they hug.

## **Arm**

For her twenty-sixth birthday, she goes to a homeopath to help cure her of her driving phobia. He recommends a process called emotional tapping.

The homeopath wants to demonstrate the difference in tension between a belief and a conviction. He says: The more convinced you are about something, the firmer your arm remains when it is pressed down.

He begins with her name, but instead of remaining firm, the arm dips. She laughs: how can I be unsure of my name?

Ah, he says. We'll need to work on your identity first. It's not fully formed. You don't know who you are.

She apologizes.

## **Sex**

“An acorn doused with musk oil and carried in your pocket or in a charm ball will attract the opposite sex.”

—*Superstitions* by Deborah Murrell, pg. 201

## **Nose**

She is a little drunk and feeling sorry for one of her friends, Selwyn, so she kisses him. He tells her he loves her after a week. His grandmother catches them both asleep, naked in his bed. They are on their way out when his grandmother offers to drive them to the girl's house. On the way she lambasts the girl as a harlot. Nice girls don't do such things. She invokes her dead grandmother: what would she say if she saw you do such things? Her disgust is overwhelming. Selwyn sits next to her silently. Halfway home the girl gets out and slams the door behind her. The grandmother's judgements are sulphurous but her grandson's silence is worse.

## **Tongue**

There is a brass ring around her tongue.

## **Face**

She sees a man's face on a poster tacked to the side of a tree. In loving memory. She wonders if his ghost would be embarrassed that strangers knew how he died.



## Heart

Benton is one of the customers at the bar. He has a Capetonian roundness to his speech and a perpetual jelly-like shake to his limbs. He also has some interesting theories about how the ancient Egyptians used sound to build the pyramids. One day he tells her that when a person dies, their spirit is incarnated into something beautiful, like a dolphin or a monarch butterfly. But this does not happen if the person is shot in the heart. No, if a person is shot in the heart, their soul goes home. The girl asks, where is home Benton? He replies immediately: Las Vegas.



## **Floating Rib**

The table is too exposed for her liking. Mid-room. Mid-gaze.

Someone hocks a wad of phlegm down their throats. Rustling,

In the kitchen someone is throwing away a plastic bag.

The tables are low. People's heads stick out like the points on a rack of ribs.

Tall cappuccino in front of her. Roasted coffee smell, cream so thick you can almost chew on it. Sip. Sip. Aah.

Hot.

She circles the rim of the coffee mug, thinks: it's funny how people don't like spaces.

They have to hide the ceramic lip of the mug with foam. They have to hide the emptiness of the room with tables and chairs. They have to stack bowls in bowls and cups in cups and appliances on the counter to keep out the spaces. They put linen in cupboards and fountains in gardens. They have to put something between the goal posts, tuck the covers under their feet to plug the leaks of air, carves grooves into blank trees to remind people they existed. They fill the sea with their boats, the roads with their cars, the conspicuous gap between houses with trash or pylons or fences or more houses. So afraid of emptiness they fill themselves with news and gossip and pictures and information and meals and meetings and gym and church and hobbies and sport and socializing and to do lists with even numbers. They fill the lulls with their noises and eat up photographs of landscapes with their faces. They would unhook the sky like a blackboard and scribble poetry in the spaces between the stars.

A squeal.

A jolt.

Someone pushes past the back of the girl's chair in a rush to greet her friend and they hug and laugh together in the space behind her.

She pictures the tendons on their throats straining, they are talking to fill up the air.

She starts doodling on a blank page. Fuzzy electric-current figures. Sometimes she adds halos where she should add horns.

### **Gums**

For her birthday, Selwyn gives the girl ten blank CD's, and promises he'll put music on them for her. She loads one into her player to discover it is chock full of recorded Top Gear episodes. His mom can't stand her. She gives the girl the toy from an old Christmas cracker. The girl smiles wide enough to show her gums and says thank you.

### **Face**

She is on the beach with Selwyn's family and finds a baby octopus, the size of her face, clinging to the cove shelf. She points it out to Selwyn, who calls over his uncle. His uncle immediately picks it up with a cloth.

Excellent! Nice fresh bait!

The girl argues with him, he can't understand why she won't let him spear it on a hook and try to catch fish with it.

I'll make you a deal, he says. You can set it free if you can hold it in your hand, walk over and toss it into the lagoon.

She holds out her hand and he dumps the octopus into it. The suckers grab hold of her skin and sudden fear makes her drop it. Immediately the uncle swoops down and picks it up. He starts dashing it against the wall.

You won't complain when we've caught a nice big fish, he says.

### **Marrow**

Her bones are missing the gift of marrow.

## **Stomach**

She buys a bag of chocolate chip cookies and takes Peru for a walk on the pier. Peru tells her about school and who she wants at her eighth birthday party and how she has decided she wants to be a chef instead of a teacher, and they share the biscuits and watch the river. There are seagulls skimming off the rocks. The girl tells her that seagulls have very strong digestive juices. They can eat anything. Even biscuits? Peru asks. The girl throws a biscuit out into the river and before it touches the water the seagull has snapped it up and hocked it down. They laugh. Peru's eyes are grapefruits. They laugh again. Peru throws one to a different seagull and it catches it. The rest of the bag is used up seeing how far the birds are willing to fly for a biscuit, how high they can catch them, if they can catch two half-biscuits within a few seconds of each other.

Ten years later, at lunch, Peru says to the girl, do you remember the seagulls and the biscuits...

## **Acne**

Selwyn introduces her to his favourite pastime: target practice. What he does is find a clear patch on his carpet, and shoot semen onto that area. He tells her proudly that his farthest ejaculate was two metres away. His grey carpet is peppered with little dark spots. She tries to break up with him, but he begs her to give him until Christmas, which is two weeks away, to see if he can change her mind. By now he has practically moved into her house and they argue constantly. She tries to leave the argument in a restaurant by going into the girl's bathroom to cool off, but he follows her inside because *this discussion isn't over yet*. She starts counting down the days to Christmas like a child with an advent calendar.

## Lungs

- The first burst of water from the tap, warm from the sun on a winter's day
- Squeezing honey onto a teaspoon until it burgeons but doesn't fall
- Watching dogs playing on a soccer field
- Squishing soap suds onto your face, forming a beard
- Learning that the clumps of moss that hang off trees in the Eastern Cape are called 'Old Man's Beard'
- Easy to peel wallpaper
- The silvery feeling of clean hair
- Finding you have all of the ingredients for the recipe you want to make, in the correct quantities
- The way goosebumps start on one side of your body and cross over to the other side
- Finding a trolley in the supermarket with perfect wheel alignment
- Wet bricks beneath your bare feet
- Patterned dust under a lace tablecloth
- Bouncing to collapse the edge of a low shelf of sand under you on the beach
- Houses that smell as unique as the people who live in them (Is it their cleaning agents? Is it their presence?)
- All the flags on a building flying simultaneously
- Orange streetlights
- Fat olives with little pips
- The wind blowing toward you in the night; blowing something good your way
- Putting down a book to absorb the perfect sentence
- The scramble to find paper because you've just thought of the perfect sentence
- The acoustics in bathrooms and kitchens
- The way everyone at parties congregates in the kitchen
- The first stretch in bed after a long day
- Finding a mirror that makes your body look perfectly proportioned
- The echo of laughter tickling the back of your throat when you remember something really funny
- A lover changing gears with their right hand so they can keep their left hand on your thigh

## Ribs

He asks her if she is okay and she says yes, everything is fine. He doesn't see the words leave her mouth like punches. He doesn't feel them slam the cabinets, the walls, knock the coffee mug out of his hand. She wants to tell him that it's not fine. She wants to tell him many things, force open his jaws and make him chew the syllables one by one by one. But women know to stay silent sometimes. She watched her mother champ it down, swallow water, flush it down, shake her head to keep it down. *Avert your eyes child* is what she told her, without ever telling her. And little girls listen and little girls mimic, and they never know why. *Keep the peace*, mother urges. *Keep it down*.



## Foot

Selwyn follows her inside the house and she tries to close the door but he is using his foot as a doorstop. She tells him: go home; we'll talk about this in the morning. She just wants to spend one night free of him. Eventually, she manages to push him backwards enough to close the door. He whines about the ten minute walk to his house; that the girl doesn't care if he is mugged or murdered. You're being dramatic, she tells him: You live in the suburbs. She closes the curtains on him and falls asleep on the couch. The next morning she wakes to find him sitting on the couch next to her, stroking her face. He had squeezed his six foot frame onto the tiny iron bench in her garden and slept there. Hannes tells the girl he went out fishing at 5am and found Selwyn in a cloud of mosquitoes. Hannes can't stop giggling.



## **Leg**

She breaks up with Selwyn at 7am on December 26<sup>th</sup>, and he makes a great show of being stoic. He thanks Ireland for her hospitality and shakes Hannes' hand. Her sisters are over for the holidays and he hugs Peru and tells her to do well in school. China is pretending to be asleep on the couch.

He shuts the screen door and she waits for the gate latch to click before she turns to her family and says: watch my happy freedom dance! She skips from leg to leg while gesticulating wildly. Peru and Ireland laugh. She turns around to see Selwyn staring at her through the screen door. Were you doing the happy freedom dance because I left? He asks.

Ireland says: No, she was mocking me.

Peru says: Yes, she was mocking mom.

The girl adds: Yes, I was mocking mom.

They crowd the window to make sure his figure is retreating up the street before they start giggling. China sits up. That is the most awkward breakup I've seen in my life, she says.

## **Skin**

The regulars at the bar laugh when she tells them the break up story. They have names for each of her ex-boyfriends. Was this the lifeguard or the mechanic or the pie seller or the one with the staples in his face? They ask. It was the tall, pale guy, she tells them. Oh yes, they say. The one from the Addams Family.



## Ears

*Where the barker calls the moon down*<sup>1</sup>

*The ferocity of time turns her voice into sugar water*<sup>2</sup>

*And far away in some recess the lord and the devil are now playing chess*<sup>3</sup>

*What if we lose tonight?*<sup>4</sup>

*We've got to fulfil the book.*<sup>5</sup>

*You're a shark and I'm swimming*<sup>6</sup>

*I'm nothing but you want my mind*<sup>7</sup>

*I say what of it?*<sup>8</sup>

*I've run every red light on memory lane.*<sup>9</sup>

*Who I was before, I cannot recall*<sup>10</sup>

*Counting backwards, still counting backwards*<sup>11</sup>

*Retrace the steps we took when we met worlds away*<sup>12</sup>

*Up against the wall on a Wednesday afternoon*<sup>13</sup>

*In a cry filled with footsteps and sand*<sup>14</sup>

*And the whirlwind is in the thorn trees*<sup>15</sup>

*And the wind whispers...Mary*<sup>16</sup>

*Just one more year and then we'd be happy*<sup>17</sup>

*We can pretend it all the time.*<sup>18</sup>

---

1. The Decemberists: Here I Dreamt I was an Architect, 2. Cibo Matta: Sugar Water, 3. Chris de Burgh: Spanish Train, 4. Alanah Myles: Just one Kiss, 5. Bob Marley: Redemption Song, 6. Alt+J: Tessellate, 7. Faithless: Crazy English Summers, 8. Joan Armatrading: Drop the Pilot, 9. Dire Straits: Telegraph Road, 10. Eddie Vedder: Long Nights, 11, 12. Anberlin: Retrace, 13. Florence and the Machine: Heartlines 14. Leonard Cohen: Take This Waltz 15. Johnny Cash: When the Man Comes Around, 16. Jimi Hendrix: The Wind Cries Mary, 17. Gerry Rafferty: Baker Street, 18. Jack Johnson: Banana Pancakes

## Neck

“In nautical language, the word acorn also refers to a piece of wood keeping the vane on the mast-head.”

—New World Encyclopaedia

## Mouth

Paul is tired of his job at Supersport so they brainstorm careers he might enjoy. He eventually settles on a career in sailing. He has a stockpile of savings. He asks the girl to come with him, she can pay him back once they start earning money. They go for courses and she remembers how much she enjoys learning. She's not mechanically proficient so she settles on stewardessing. The courses involve practical training in marine fire fighting, security risk assessment, first aid and a component which deals with being stranded at sea. One of her instructors tells her she knows a company looking to hire a couple; a captain and chef to run charters off a 44ft catamaran in the Caribbean, for which she thinks they would be perfect. She adds a three day chef's course to the bill and tells the girl she is ready.

## Eyebrows

[Peru]            Let's play a little game called: if it's left in my room it's MINE

[the girl]        Dude I need my tweezers back

## Tongue

Benton is so busy talking that he takes a swig from a carafe of mostly melted ice water instead of his drink. The ice touches his tongue and he spits it out everywhere. He shouts: Cockroach! There's a cockroach in my drink!

## **Taste buds**

To get to the boat requires a plane trip of twenty-seven hours. It is the girl's first time on a long distance flight. They don't have the necessary documentation to fly direct so they fly Joburg-Paris-St Maarten- British Virgin Islands. On the flight, the girl makes meal plans. Crosses them out. Tries to remember the recipe the course chef taught her for lamb shanks. Is it rosemary that goes well with lamb? Thyme? She has been a vegetarian for years. She has never really cooked meat.



## **Salivary glands**

In summer, in the Caribbean, the air is so thick with humidity it is like breathing saliva.

## **Hard Palate**

The girl has never cooked for anyone besides family, and the year before she had fried them veggie burger patties with the plastic separator still attached. They meet the previous couple on the boat and immediately start calling the chef Annie Oakley. She welds and paints her own tables, is a fully licensed captain and diver, sews her own elasticated tablecloths, keeps the boat spotless, has flambéed her own desserts since she could hold a pan. She has mermaid skin and hair and teeth. She is everything the girl is not.

## **Pate**

She sees an elderly man selling newspapers at the robots. He is shuffling between the cars to get back to the intersection, and his back is to her. He is wearing a tattered cap to keep the morning sun off his head, but the soft tongue of Velcro at the back of the cap is loose and dangling against his wrinkled pate. The other half of the strip; the side with the hard bristles, must have ripped off. Somehow, this is sadder than the news he is selling for R2.50 an issue. She has no money to give him so she sends out a prayer: that someone else will see him. The robot changes. She prays for an overcast afternoon.

## **Uvula**

The girl lasts on the boat for two weeks. She has panic attacks daily. Their first charter is in a week and she can't do it. She can't cook for eight strangers. She's exhausted by the heat half an hour into the day. She can barely swim. She can't figure out how to make the bed because the space is so limited you have to climb onto it to make it. Mooring spots are expensive so they don't often go ashore, and she craves the simple exercise of being able to go for a walk. To feel something stable beneath her feet. Their contract is for two years. She tells Paul she has to leave and he looks like he is going to throw up. All that money wasted. All that planning for nothing. He tells her he will fly her back to South Africa, but he will stay and look for work in the Caribbean.

## **Soft Palate**

She flies the twenty-seven hours across the world alone. On a plane of roughly eight hundred people, her bag is the last one out, nearly forty minutes after they have landed. Oupa has come to the airport to fetch her. When she exits the terminal and he sees her, he starts crying.

## **Diaphragm**

Over Christmas the girl finds work at one of the pizzerias in town. As a thank you to the staff, on Christmas day the boss closes at 4pm, and invites the staff and select customers to dinner. Both the girl and her mother are invited. They play a game of Nasty Santa and the girl tries to swop her roll of toilet paper for something more exciting. Everyone laughs. The boss calls her over and exchanges the toilet paper for a bottle of expensive wine. His wife, Marcia, throws down her present and marches outside. The girl's diaphragm constricts. Ireland goes to talk to Marcia. Marcia wants to know what is going on between her husband and the girl. Ireland tells her she's being stupid: her husband is an Oros Man in his fifties, and the girl has a boyfriend. Marcia says: if nothing is going on now there soon will be. Look at the low cut vests she wears beneath her work shirts.

The girl talks sparingly to the boss after that. She makes sure she dresses modestly around them. She opens the bottle of wine and finds it has turned to vinegar.

## **Eyelids**

Paul can't find work overseas. He has a couple of freelance jobs, but nothing that turns into contracted employment. He comes back to South Africa and for a month she can't stop apologising. He rubs his eyelids and tells her not to worry. He packs the disappointment in a box and rarely mentions it.

## **Eyes**

[Seen on the back of a taxi] No Time for Tears.

## Body

She goes to Joburg to help Paul move his late grandfather's estate. Vultures come to squawk over the bubble wrapped remains of the house. Everyone is so focussed on the move, there's little time for sadness. The girl is given most of the old notebooks, many of them blank. In one, however, are the plans for carving a violin. Though Paul's grandfather was a construction mogul, his hobby was carpentry. The first page has the words:

### *Violin Project*

*(Commenced: June 2014)*

This is followed by two pages of tools he would need, the kinds of wood for the front, back and bridge, suppliers and steps for preparing the wood, two poems about the beauty of violin music and an article detailing a violin tribute to commemorate the start of the first world war.

In the garage she finds a violin template cut out of pine.

She feels like they are from opposite ends of the spectrum. She, a girl who begins things and never finishes them, and he, a man who completed everything— except this violin. Finally, at a point beyond death, they have made a connection.

## Back

China helps the girl run a stall at a Sunday Crafter's Market to sell off old glassware, tools and CDs, and an elderly man begins browsing through the pile of musical soundtracks. He tells them he can't spend too much on CDs, even at R5 each, because his wife will kill him. Then you should probably buy a vase as well, China smiles, so your wife will have something to put flowers in at your grave. He laughs, then tells them about how the local funeral parlour was selling flowers to put on gravesites, and would do a round trip after the mourners had left to collect the flowers and resell them. He continues browsing, clasping the chosen CDs to his shrunken chest.

The girl tells him that anything he doesn't take will probably end up going to charity, and he tells her about the charity down the street which is really a front for drug dealers. He'd call hospice and tell them but he doesn't want to paint a target on his back. He tells them about his sons, an accountant and a graphic designer, and about how the designer wanted to be a

teacher after he watched *Dead Poet's Society* but had a serious accident at university and had to be flown up to Joburg by stretcher but now he's all better and he's going to Portugal for two weeks and he's asked his son to look up an old friend who he lost touch with oh, back in '85 or '87 but it could have been the early nineties and he hasn't been able to find them on Facebook because he's not very good at technology he just lets his wife take care of those things, but anyway this family owns quite a large Port distillery and there can't be too many of those...

He tells them the next time they see him they'll recognise him by the knife in his back, because his wife will have killed him for taking so many CDs. The girl laughs and gives him a discount.

When he leaves, China says: he's been talking to you for an hour straight.

The girl shrugs. She says: Sometimes you just need someone to listen to your stories.

## **Crown**

A motif in roman architecture, also popular in Celtic and Scandinavian art, the acorn symbol is used as an ornament on cutlery, furniture, and jewellery; it also appears on filials at Westminster abbey.

—Wikipedia

## **Heart**

Though she and Paul have been dating for nearly five years, half of their relationship has been conducted from separate cities in separate provinces. For the most part, this suits them. There is a lot of yearning and little boredom.

And he can't leave her if she is already alone.

## **Liver**

A Black Label for Long John. A single Scottish Leader in a tall glass with water for Steve. A Hansa for Hutch. A Coke Light for Dave. A double Klipdrift and Coke for Tiaan.

She has a ritual. When she hears about the death of one of her regulars, the next time she goes out she orders their favourite drink and toasts them with it.

Rosé for Mr Baxter. Jagermeister for Tim. A Hansa for Paddy. A Castle for Bill. A Dry White for Tinks. A Windhoek Draught for Terry. A Black Label for Ernie. A Castle for Neville.

Arthur dies and she orders a small bottle of Drostdy-hof Grand Cru. She wonders how much more her liver can take.



## **Brain**

Which of the people who have left her will escort her through the gates of death?



## Throat

Acorn men are silent, but that doesn't mean they have nothing to say.

## Soles

*A woman and a man walked for many weeks through the country. They couldn't agree on where to stop to make their home. They came to a wide river, and the man said to the woman, "What about here?"*

*The woman walked around in a slow circle. She took in the abundant fish leaping out of the water, and how easy it would be to wash their clothing and fetch water if they lived on the riverbanks.*

*But then she said, "No. When the rains come this whole riverbank might be washed away, and we will have to find somewhere else to settle."*

*The man nodded and the two of them walked for another week, this time coming to a forest.*

*And the woman turned to the man and said: "What about here?"*

*The man took a long look at the tall and beautiful trees and thought about how easy it would be to build a shelter with them, and hunt the birds and the animals they had living in them. And then he said, "No. Not here. When the dry season comes the lightning may strike one of the trees, and the whole forest could be set on fire. We should keep looking for somewhere better."*

*The man and woman walked for another week. This time, they came to a great mountain with a small creek and not too many trees. And the man turned to the woman and said: "This looks like it would suit us. What do you think?"*

*And the woman looked around the mountain and saw that it would be a good place to see if anyone was approaching, and that it was warmer than on the valley floor, but not as windy as the top of the mountain.*

*But then she said, "No. There are caves in the mountain that could belong to wild animals. It would be better to keep looking for something safer." And so then went on again.*

*The rains lashed them and the winds licked them dry. They climbed hills and forded rivers. They travelled along overpasses and tunnels and fields with no roads at all.*

*Some places were too hot or too cold. Some places were too dense and easy to get lost in; others were too sparse and offered no protection. Some places had thorn trees where they might stab the soles of their feet. Others had marsh lands where their shelters might sink into the ground. Some places had too many people, crowded into one area. Other places were too desolate.*

*After many years of searching, they came to a desert. They had not seen any shade for a long time. And the man said to the woman: "Maybe we should have stayed in the forest. It was very beautiful and had good trees for firewood. There was enough water and shade there as well."*

*And the woman said to the man: "Maybe we should have stayed by the river. It was very convenient for washing and fetching water and it had plenty of good fish for eating."*

*They did not say anything about the mountain, but both were thinking it would have been very comfortable to live their lives out of the cold and the wind.*

*"Do you think we should turn back?" the woman asked the man.*

*"I'm too tired to turn back," said the man, "It has been a very long journey."*

*"It has." The woman agreed, "What do you think we'll find at the end of this desert?"*

*"Maybe a good mountain, or a river, or a forest." The man said. "We will keep looking tomorrow."*

## Bones

They drive past a ruined house on the road. It has a curious V-shaped cavity in the wall and she asks Paul what he thinks could have happened. He tells her when a house is abandoned they take off the roof and the corrugated beams. They take out the window panes and the frames. They probably took out the window frame and the top part collapsed, which made it that V-shape, he says.

From their perspective, the V perches above a pile of rubble; together the two make a finished hourglass. It is the most important thing she has seen all week, but it does not make her sad. It does not look like a death. It looks like a victory over bones.



## Ears

In your news at six...

- ❖ Peru has turned eighteen this year and is celebrating her independence with general carousing and pretending to be sober when she is clearly not. She hopes to move to Cape Town at the end of the year to live with her boyfriend and spawn a rugby team of children before the ancient age of twenty-four. This has been the subject of many an international conflict around the Sunday lunch table.
- ❖ China has recently moved to Johannesburg, where she hopes to earn many South African Rands in as short an amount of time as possible. She and Honduras are still dating, though she is waiting on a more lasting diplomatic tie.
- ❖ Ireland misses her daughters and after Peru's relocation at the end of the year, Ireland's new plan is to buy a mobile home and tour the country, stopping at every old lady fête she possibly can and buying up any bargains they may have to offer. She has been living in the same house for five years.
- ❖ Oupa has since retired from amateur boxing, though he still plays Santa Claus every Christmas for the community children. For his 88<sup>th</sup> birthday, he is taking a belated road trip across the country with his girlfriend. Hopefully he will switch into second gear on the highway.
- ❖ Paul is starting up his new business in Cape Town running eco-charters by boat. He is going for the strong and silent captain look and is contemplating growing a beard. The girl has seen him with a handlebar moustache. She would rather he bought a parrot or a fake peg leg.

And the girl?

She never wanted to be herself. She wants to be you. She wants this to be your story now.



# Your Life in Boxes



- ☐ You go to Checkers. You get boxes. You pack them. You stack them. You pack the car. You drive to the new place. You unpack the car. You move the boxes to the rooms where you want them to go.

You're four. You never knew your father. You live with your mom and your grandparents until she marries. You and your stepfather have your first fight because he won't allow you to bring your Barbie to the dinner table, but you don't want her to go hungry. You scream. He screams. Your mother sends you both to bed without dinner. It is the first of many fights.

- ☐ You search for a pen. You label the box. You lose the pen. You think you packed the pen accidentally. You find another pen. It's dry. You find another pen. You label another box. You continue.

You're twelve. You move out because your step-dad is divorcing your mom. Your mom can't pack quick enough. She just wants to get away. Your granddad tells you to rip out the cartoons you pasted in your wardrobe. Leave nothing that could cause him any joy, he says. You comply.

- ☐ You fit towels between items in the boxes so they don't clatter together on dirt roads.

You're fourteen. Your mom is hijacked in the driveway in Joburg. Your step-dad's new girlfriend suggests a tiny, safe town in the Eastern Cape. Everybody moves. Your mom, you, your two little sisters. Your step-dad. Your step-dad's new girlfriend.

- ☐ You don't need bubble wrap if you have towels.

Unit 8C Sandawana: You move into a tiny flat built into the crook of the complex. The rooms facing the corridor have only artificial light. At midday, it is as dark as 10pm. The bathroom has a toilet and a geyser above the tub, and this is where you must make your choice. Either you allow the toilet to run constantly and noisily while you bathe, or you can switch the supply off and instead have the geyser drip water onto your forehead every four seconds. If you sit up in the bath, the dripping noise continues into the water behind you. If you try to patch the leak, you have about fifteen seconds of relief before the adhesive peels off. You learn to bathe very fast.

- Take breaks. Hydrate. Carry on.

You're fifteen. Your mom has a nervous breakdown. She goes back to Joburg for a few months. You move in with your step-parents. You get kicked out by your step-parents. Your mom comes back. You move in with her. Your sisters stay at your step-parents, there isn't enough money for four at your mom's.

- You pack your clothes into black plastic bags. These can serve as mattresses if you don't have them where you're going.

At sixteen you and your mom move into a room at a friend's house. He's a neat freak. You sleep on your bags of clothes in the room because you don't have a mattress, and after a week his anger breaks like the seams on the plastic bags. He calls you animals. He kicks you out. When you ask your mom why she left the coffee table he liked as payment for the week, she tells you it's just one thing less to carry.

- You can't get attached to things. Glasses break. Ornaments break. Plates break. Kettles get sold for food. Microwaves get sold and rebought and resold. Coffee mugs break. You wrap glass in newspaper not to stop it from getting broken, just so it's easier to throw the fragments away.

At seventeen your boyfriend discovers your car in the back parking lot of the convenience store your mom works at. You're both asleep inside it. You've slept inside it for two weeks without anyone noticing. You've showered at your sisters' house while your step-parents are out; things are still tense with them. Your boyfriend offers up his home, and you move into it before school re-opens. This is your matric year.



- ☐ You remove drawers from the desk and cabinet and pack those as you would boxes.

Later, when you have to sell the cabinet and desk, you can tell the buyer it comes with surprises. You can't remember what you packed in them.

You're eighteen when the car gives up the ghost entirely. It just breaks down at the garage while your mom's refuelling it with R20 petrol. On top of this, you have to be out of your flat by Sunday and you sold your cell phones to make rent the month before. The petrol was your last R20, but you have five cigarettes and your charm. Your mom says: fuck it. Let's go for a drink. You link arms and walk down the hill into town. On the way down it starts raining. This is unbelievable, she says, and you both start giggling. You start singing: no home, no car, no cash, no phone, not even a tan! Somehow the song mutates into *Always look on the bright side of life*, which is even sillier because you only know that one line of the song. By the time you reach the pub you're drenched and laughing so hard your sides hurt. The bartender takes one look at you both and offers to buy you a drink. You remember it as one of the best days of your life.

- ☐ When you don't have a lot, you are at your most giving.

Your mom gives people a home because she knows what it's like not to have one. Some stay for months, others leave after just a few days. They are always leaving things behind when they go. Books, a necklace on a wall hook, a note on the refrigerator. Some leave crack pipes. You find little pieces stashed everywhere for months afterward. Some take things. Your new pan, your good jackets, your costume jewellery. Sometimes you have more to carry when you move out. Sometimes less. It all evens out.

- ☐ Chew some ginger for motion sickness. It's okay to feel motion sickness. It does not make you a weak person.

Impressions of the houses and rooms and apartments you live in become a mosaic in your mind. You take a drive down any street in your town and you come across a place you used to live. It becomes a game. Was that the house with the giant hole in your bedroom floorboards? Or the one with the stairs your sister threw up on? Did it have the door with the carving of a sunflower straining out of the grain? You can't remember.

- ❑ Christians make the worst landlords. They'll pray for your finances with you on Sunday the 29<sup>th</sup> and kick you out on Friday the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

At nineteen you drop out of university because there's no money to keep going. You're surprised it made a year. You owe the bus to Grahamstown a gazillion rand that you promise yourself one day you'll pay. But things are sliding with housing again. Your mom is working as a night shift cashier at a 24hr convenience store for R100 a shift, four days a week. R1600 a month. You make a lousy waitress. You get a job as a bartender.



☐ Reasons to Move:

- The house you were renting is sold.
- Your prior landlord is suing you for non-payment of rent.
- Your university is suing you for non-payment of fees.
- The municipality is suing you for non-payment of your lights and water account.
- Your mother is raped and cannot return to that hellscape.
- Your boyfriend used your rent for drug money.
- Your microwave gets too old to sell for rent.
- The house is broken into multiple times.

- ☐ Sometimes boxes split or overflow at the seams. Other boxes are impossible to close.  
You carry these as best you can. You don't waste tape.

People want to give you things as presents for Christmas and Birthdays. Body lotions and books. You accept them with thanks but they're just more to carry. You read the books and give them away. You find a cheap second hand laptop and ask them to send you PDFs rather. Someone lends you their hard drive to copy some movies and there is a folder containing 3000 eBooks on it. You weep like they've paid for your education. They didn't even know they had it; they just copied the contents of another friend's hard drive. You feel like you have all the knowledge of the ages living inside one beaten up laptop.

- ☐ You should only lend what you are willing to part with forever.

One of the strays your mom takes in is a real estate agent named Jeandre. She's broke and needs a place to stay after she's broken up with her abusive boyfriend. After two months, she discovers she's pregnant. After three months, the courts notify you that you're being sued for non-payment of rent. You're confused. Jeandre moves back in with her boyfriend after you learn she's sneaking out to see him like a teenager. You follow up with the courts and learn Jeandre has lost her real estate license. She has been funnelling the rent of three homes (including your own) up her boyfriend's nose.

☐ The Malachite Kingfisher is a good omen.

You saw it on the Sunday. By Wednesday you quit your job and your mother got the flu. And on Friday your cat went missing and a friend couldn't wait to tell you about the dead cat they saw in the gutter.

But it rained

And flowers grew.

☐ *Always look on the bright side of life.*

You're being evicted again. Your mom cries in the kitchen about not being able to provide a home for you. You tell her: you're my home, ma. Everything else is just walls.



- You get so good at leaving; you really surprise yourself when you stay.

At twenty you have yet to leave this hell. After another eviction notice you need air. You start walking to the beach. You have to pass by the marina. You have to pass stacks of rich people's mansions, separated from the real world by a chain link fence. You hold your middle finger up to every single house as you pass it. You wish someone was there to challenge you so you could hit them, but it's just you on the street. It's just you. Swearing and crying.

- When you leave a place, you leave it.

You don't look back, or remember. You look to the next box, and the next, and the next. You unpack them in the new place. You don't go back for any things you may have forgotten. They're somebody else's problem now.

- Protect yourself from bad luck when you move in:
  - Don't move in on a Friday.
  - Don't move in on a rainy day.
  - Don't bring in an old broom.
  - Don't carry eggs into the house after sunset.
  - Nail a bunch of evergreen to the rafters for protection from lightning.
  - Sprinkle a line of salt at every entrance to ward off bad spirits.
  - Plant elder trees at the entrances.
  - Walk into the house left foot first.
  - If you've forgotten anything, wait five minutes before re-entry, look in the mirror and smile.

—*Superstitions* by Deborah Murrell, pg. 61

☐ Don't search for what isn't there.

Hunger is a taste that doesn't leave your mouth. You stand in front of empty cupboards and will yourself to come up with some sort of idea for lunch. You have some sunflower oil, the dregs of a bottle of soya sauce. You had been making tomato sauce sandwiches but the bread has been used up and the tomato sauce has been thinned into pink vinegar. You pour out the last of the tomato sauce and mix a little salt into it. You dip your index finger into the mixture and lick off the salt. You could use a teaspoon, but it lasts longer this way.

☐ If it's not there, it's less to carry.

You're sixteen. Your mother's new boyfriend, Ricky, moves into the house. He is bald and has an infuriating habit of using the word 'hey' as punctuation for his sentences. As soon as he moves in, things start to go missing. Appliances, jewellery, jackets. He tells you he needs to sell some things so you can afford rent and you clear out your cupboards for him. He tells you he got R100 for the entire haul. He constantly begs money from your mom. He tells you he is a police informer and that his handler is 'Captain Morgan'. The garage smells funny all the time, more chemical than weed. But his mere presence annoys you so you don't satisfy your curiosity and find out what he is smoking in there. After four months, you can't take it anymore. You tell your mother he needs to go.

They argue and she breaks up with him. He pours petrol over the doors and threatens you with matches. You and your mom leave the house.

A few hours later you come back to find a trail of blood leading from the kitchen door to the bathroom. There is a note in blood on the wall saying: *I'm sorry I'm a fuck up. Please don't leave me.* The house is empty. Your mom is concerned he's bleeding out somewhere. She calls the police and they proceed to search every bush on the street, but cannot find him. Weeks later you are still finding pieces of him everywhere. Homemade crack pipes, prints on the ceiling. Your foster brother opens the trapdoor and finds half a candle and a hustler magazine up there. His trash is easy enough to throw away. You're just glad he's gone.

☐ It is as easy to leave a job as it is a house.

You try on as many outfits as you can because there is one out there that will suit you best. So far you've worn waiter's aprons and a copywriter's suit, a bookseller's red golf shirt and the all black of the backstage crew. You've carried smart debt-collectors pens and aux cables and tarot cards and reception check-in-sheets. You've worked with aviators and construction workers and with the smell of the deep fat fryer in your hair. You've quizzed people for newspapers and had them scream at you for your telesales. You've washed your clothes of the dust of screens, boxes, kegs and sawdust. You open your closet and find a shirt you've never worn before. You put it on.

☐ When you leave the house:

Shut all the doors.

Shut the back door before the front.

Leave the house through the door you used to enter it.



☐ Maybe it's not wisdom that comes with age. Just fear.

You're twenty. You move into the A-Frame house in Fairlie lane because it's as pretty as it sounds, despite the cheap rental. It looks like it should be made out of gingerbread. The property is for sale for a laughable amount, but your mother prays a lot and tells you that this house is it. You find treasures in the long grass of the garden. Old coloured tyres and a cracked vase in the shape of a Grecian urn. Outside your room is the roof of the carport. One day when you buy this place your mother wants to fix up the rotting beams and install some garden furniture up there so you can have sun downers.

One night you slide out of your window and onto the roof of the carport because you want to do something that proves you're brave, and there is a pole sticking up at the end of it. You inch across the drooping slats and when you reach the pole, everything seems possible. Of course you could own this house. Of course you could learn to be stable. You just navigated your way across a dangerous roof.

Real estate agents filter in and out with prospective buyers. Your mom gets discouraged. You pray with her and tell her not to worry; the money will come from somewhere. Within a week they give you notice. The new buyer will be moving in at the end of the month.

A year later your mom drives past the house with you in the passenger seat. The car port is gone and the garden is bald. She keeps driving. You tell her about something funny that happened at work. She keeps driving. You ask her what she feels like for lunch.

☐ Pack light.

You go for coffee with a fellow writer in your course and she looks at you in the way that only a writer can. You don't fit together, she says. Every day you look like a different, mismatched person. Today you're wearing camouflage pants and sneakers and bright pink eye shadow and dangly feather earrings. You tell her she is the first person to notice. You ask her to let you know if she finds you in there.



☐ There are downsides to forgetting.

Hello, South African Revenue Services, how can I assist?

Hello, I wonder if you could help me? I can't remember my tax number.

Okay. Can you give me your name and ID number?

It's—

Can you tell me what year you registered for tax?

2011.

And what is your address?

It's—

No, I meant your address in 2011. The one that's on the forms.

Uh, I'm sorry I can't remember. I've moved a few times since then.

Oh. Can you give me your cell phone number?

The one from 2011?

Yes.

I'm sorry; I don't have that number anymore.

What happened to your phone?

Excuse me?

What happened to that phone number?

I don't... look it's changed a number of times. Is there any other information I can give you to prove I am who I say I am?

You're going to have to come into a branch with the documen—

*Call disconnected.*

☐ If you pack it right, you can fit as much in two handbags as you can in a box.

Your family is your only constant. People want to know how they can have such a close bond with their mothers. You tell them: you have to go through a lot together.

☐

Swan Lane. At 4am a man pulls a shard out of the cracked window pane in the dining room and opens the window. He wakes your mother, who is sleeping on the couch with a 'Hey!' He holds a knife to her throat and rapes her. He tells her he is just doing what her white forefathers did to his black ancestors. He leads her through the house so she can point out what there is for him to steal. He tells her she doesn't have much, so he will have to rape her again.

You're eighteen and staying over at your boyfriend's house when your stepmother calls your cell phone. You want to sleep in late, but by the tenth call you answer. Your world is sucked through the earpiece of the cell phone. You tell her you're on your way. You thank her for being there. And then you thank her again. You can't stop thanking her for being there.

☐ Pack what you need.

Your family has a stack of mantras they use whenever someone is going through a tough situation: Strong like lion. Hide like buffalo. You're not a jellyfish. It's you and me against the world. They sound silly to other ears, but like fine china, they have been brought out for every needful occasion in the past fifteen years. They are a reminder that you have been through worse; that you survived.

- ☐ People trust superstitions. They need to have control over at least one aspect of their existence.

9.11 is a bad day all round. Apart from the World Trade Centre, it is the day your mother married your stepfather (1993) and the day the divorce was finalised (2003). You have been evicted on 9.11 (2009) and it is the day your foster brother died after a prolonged coma in hospital (2017). You end your word count at 911 and immediately write another sentence. This is how superstitions begin.



- ☐ When they come back, they will find nothing of you there.

You've considered stuffing loose pilchards in the vents. Injecting milk into the mattresses. Supergluing the toilet seat lids down. Supergluing the cupboard doors closed. Filling the house with beach sand. Locking the house and tossing the keys in through a crack in the window. Tossing the keys onto the roof. Tossing the keys in the toilet. Ripping the furniture with a knife. Stuffing the keys into the ripped furniture and supergluing them upside down on the ceiling.

In the end you just leave.

□ People are just houses for souls.

He stuck the match hard and held it up to his face. The wind killed it. Another. And another. You watched the moon waxing, the lights on the chokka boats.

You were twenty-three and the summer was alive with stars.

You cupped your hands around his until the tobacco caught, leant over the railing, swung back and watched it glitter in the half light. The river led out through the twin piers, like sentinels guarding the gates to the earth. You watched the waves and felt it there in your chest. Felt that deep and abiding serenity that comes with gazing off the edge of the world. But that was months ago and now it's winter in the city. And the street lamps burn your fingers if you hold on too long. It's cold and dry and there is no water here, but they assure you there is still green in that skeletal and flaking bough.

And your socks are rolled with R100 notes. Two left, one taped where it split. And your shirt is starched with your own promises, spoken often and loud so you won't hear the barrels surging off the rocks, the tide coming in.



☐ Strong like lion.

24 High Street: You are singing along to a song on the radio and putting on makeup when you feel thirsty. You go into the kitchen and there is a man standing at the fridge. He is holding one of the wooden bars pried off the window. You stare at each other through the gap in infinity. Suddenly he turns and runs, scrabbling back through the window. You grab a brass candlestick and run after him shouting the first thing that comes to mind:

*Who are you?*

*Who are you?*

☐ It takes time to pack memories, to sort the wheat from the chaff.

You sort your closet into black bags. One to take with you and one to give to charity. You wonder if anyone at the charity shop will want your shirts, transparent from the many washings. The vests and tights with the holes. Do they know how to dress so that the frays are hidden by the twist of a scarf or the cuff of a boot? Do they know to ruche the skirt on one side so the sewn parts look like a fashion statement? You tie the bag. If nothing else, they can cut them up and wipe spills with them.

☐ Hide like buffalo.

You come outside to find your car resting on bricks because someone has stolen your tyres. Your mother just laughs.

☐ Do you abandon the house, or does the house abandon you?

Park Road: You are there for a weekend before the complex is sold. You have just moved in and are coming to sign your lease when the estate agent breaks the news. The only thing you remember is that you didn't bother with loading electricity for two days. And that the carpets smelled like they used to line a kennel.

- ☐ You save ants from the bathtub and bees from cool drink cans. Their lives are no less important than yours, and you need all the good karma you can rack up.

You sell your car for R7k because you need to make rent. Besides, the starter motor isn't working, the CV joints clack and the brake pads have deteriorated. You've been walking everywhere for months.

A week later you see the person you sold it to driving it around. It is in perfect working order. You think: it took a week to bring that car back from the dead. One week and money you never had.

- ☐ You take a drive past all the places you've lived. You're pleased to note that the places in which the landlords have been assholes are still empty of tenants.

**112 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue**, Bez Valley, Johannesburg **175 Cumberland Road**, Kensington, Johannesburg **9 Mersey Street**, Kensington, Johannesburg **6 Mersey Street**, Kensington, Johannesburg *back to* **9 Mersey Street**, Kensington, Johannesburg **4 Little Beach Road**, Port Alfred **Renfrew House**, Victoria Girls Boarding School, Grahamstown **8C Sandawana Complex**, Port Alfred, *back to* **4 Little Beach Road**, Port Alfred **24 High Street**, Port Alfred **23 Heron Street**, Port Alfred **21 Heron Street**, Port Alfred **Unit 6 Park Road**, Port Alfred **Unit 36 Shangri-La Complex**, Port Alfred **24 Saringa Square**, Port Alfred *back to* **24 High Street**, Port Alfred **8 Miles Street**, Port Alfred **22 Robinson Road**, Port Alfred **4 Durban Road**, Grahamstown **4 Swan Lane**, Port Alfred *back to* **24 High Street**, Port Alfred **26 High Street**, Port Alfred **55 Fairlie Lane**, Port Alfred **83 George Street**, Port Alfred **29 Campbell Street**, Port Alfred **5 Forest Hill Road**, Port Alfred **86 Mackay Street**, Blairgowrie, Johannesburg **28 Hoylake Street**, Greenside, Johannesburg **1 Chester Road**, Rondebosch, Cape Town *back to* **28 Hoylake Street**, Greenside, Johannesburg *back to* **5 Forest Hill Road**, Port Alfred **10 Beaufort Heights**, Beaufort Street, Grahamstown *back to back to back to....*

- ☐ Keep your roots so short it takes less than two hours to unearth them.

At twenty-four you have moved twenty-four times. You wonder if when you're ninety you will have ninety ways to pack a box.

- ☐ You spend your life trying to succeed. To make a difference. To find a job you love. To love your life. Common sense would tell you that these are simple goals. But you don't reach them.

Twenty-five. You blame everyone and everything. Except yourself.

- ☐ People tell you your twenties are about making mistakes,

but you're twenty-six and your youth feels like it's ebbing away. Is this your life now? Is it?



- The last boxes are usually kept for the cast off items. The loose toilet roll, the curtain hooks, half a bar of soap. Keys and change and empty crisp wrappers because the bin has already been moved.

At twenty-seven, your sister comes over to the house to visit you. She has just graduated her BCom honours and she has been given an extra R10, 000 scholarship. She deserves it.

You sit in the sun on the steps outside while she paces— she has a proposition for you. She tells you about a dinner party she went to with one of her supervisors, how she had mentioned her sister was looking for writing work but that it was difficult to come by without a degree, and this friend told her about the Masters in Creative Writing programme at Rhodes. They can accept you based on your portfolio, your sister tells you. You don't need a degree to get in. She adds: we can worry about money if you get accepted.

You study your feet, think of the folder of rejections in your email inbox. The fifteen tailored copies of your CV. You have nothing to lose. Okay, you tell her. Okay.

- Home is where your family is.

In November you get an email while you are sitting down to breakfast with your sister. You freeze. Your sister asks you what's wrong. You pass over the phone. She starts crying. You start crying. You have been accepted into a Creative Writing MA programme. You will return to university ten years after you left.

- You and me against the world.

The fees department remembers you. They took your stepparents to court for non-payment. Your mother stepped in and has been paying back the money, but only when she can afford it. They tell you you owe them R63, 000. More money than you've made in the past ten years. They tell you to speak to the accountant and he tells you it's R40, 000; the lawyers miscalculated. Your sister calls around, trying to help from Cape Town. You bounce between offices and end up with four different totals. The lawyers refer you to the head of finances herself.



In each meeting you run a gauntlet of steel and cutting edges. The head of finances tells you she will mention your case at the committee meeting on Tuesday, but she doesn't offer much hope.

You buy two double vodkas at the bar. Your mother meets you there; you've been talking to her over the phone all day. You can tell she's been crying. Her tears dilute the lead you've been carrying in your arms. It is the strongest you've felt all day. You tell her not to worry. You'll show them. You'll be a famous author without their help. Who needs a piece of paper cluttering up their homes anyway? You crack jokes until your mom laughs. You toast: Fuck University.

- ☐ You keep out the polishing cloths and the dustpan. Whatever else they say about you, you know you left the house tidy.

Your family doesn't give up on you. Your mother's boss tells her he will loan her the money you owe the university. Because it is a lump sum, the lawyers discount it. Now there is only R22, 000 to pay off. You tell him: I don't know how to thank you. He coughs and says: Now, now. No need to make a scene.

When your mother tries to pay him the first instalment of the money, he tells her he doesn't want it back. It was a gift.

- ☐ You are not a jellyfish.

Your mom and her boss have covered your outstanding fees. Your sister has paid for your Master's. Your boyfriend has paid for your rent.

Your debts have racked up. The insecurities prick your scalp and you remember every time this has happened before, you have left. You have run. Now you need to write a book in three months. You have to be consistent. You have to be dedicated because it has to be good. You have to walk across the stage and collect the paper that will prove to everyone that you can think. That will prove to the ones who care about you that they were right. That will prove to yourself that you are not worthless. That there is something to be found in the heap of boxes that is your life.

- ☐ You keep aside the last box. This will be the one into which you place your manuscript.

## Glossary

*Alcohols:*

*Black Label/ Hansa/ Castle/ Windhoek Draught: Southern African beers*

*Klipdrift: brandy*

*Scottish Leader: whiskey*

*Smirnoff Spin: lemon and vodka cider*

*Apartheid: A system of laws of racial segregation. Black people were subjugated by white people. Liberation occurred in 1994 with the election of Nelson Mandela, which led to a period of great hope for reconciliation and harmony: the Rainbow Dream. In recent years, lack of improvement and mounting racial tensions have led many to abandon the idea of the Rainbow Dream.*

*Bakkie: pick-up truck*

*Bez Valley: a poorer area of Johannesburg*

*Big Hole of Kimberley: Once an open cast diamond mine, now a museum and tourist attraction*

*Bonk: slang for the act of sex, or a person who has sex: e.g. A good bonk*

*Braai: barbecue. Traditionally a variety of meats are cooked over the fire: steak, lamb chops and chicken kebabs among the most popular.*

*Brooke Logan: a character on the soap opera: The Bold and the Beautiful, who has had multiple sexual relationships with the other characters. A much loved American soapie in many South African homes.*

*Cheasnaks: cheap, cheese-flavoured corn chips*

*Checkers: A grocery store chain*

*Chokka boats: squid catching boats. A large industry in the Eastern Cape; the boats are fitted with high powered lights to attract squid to the surface.*

*Cymbidiums/ Cattleyas/ Paphiopedilums: varieties of orchid*

*DP: Duly Performed certificate, a certification that the student has met the minimum attendance and work requirements of a university.*

*Doobie/ Ganja: slang terms for marijuana*

*Duiker: a small, very skittish antelope*

*Impindulu Bird: Indigenous folkloric vampire bird said to control lightning*

*Jik: a strong bleaching agent, used for laundry and cleaning purposes*

*Joburg: abbreviation for the city of Johannesburg*

*Jukskei River: a river in Joburg known for its flash floods*

*Kongamato: Indigenous folkloric dragon, said to live in the mountains of Kwazulu Natal*

*Madiba: Affectionate national term for ex-president Nelson Mandela*

*Mislik: miserable*

*Naartjies: a small citrus fruit with a loose, easy to peel skin.*

*Oros Man: an animated fat and orange mascot for an orange cordial*

*Oupa: Afrikaans term for grandfather*

*Ouma: Afrikaans term for grandmother*

*Pilchards: small oily fish, fillets are usually sold tinned in tomato sauce.*

*Skyfies: segments of citrus fruit*

*Supersport: television broadcast house specializing in sport*

*Tokoloshe: Indigenous folkloric creature believed to be a witch's familiar; people would set their beds on bricks so that the Tokoloshe wouldn't climb up onto them.*

## References

Rogers, Geoff et al. 1978. *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Trees: Timbers and Forests of the World*. Harmony Books. New York.

Murrell, Deborah, 2008. *Superstitions: 1,013 of the Wackiest Myths, Fables and Old Wives' Tales*. The Reader's Digest Association Inc. in arrangement with Amber Books. London.

Palutan, Edmondo, 1982. *Timber Monographs: First Volume with 40 Samples of Real Wood Veneer*. Palutan Publishing Corporation. New York.

New World Encyclopaedia: <http://newworldencyclopaedia.org/entry/Acorn>

Tree Risk SA: [www.treerisksa.co.za/why.htm](http://www.treerisksa.co.za/why.htm)

Online Etymology Dictionary: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/acorn>

Moowon: <https://www.moowon.com/stories/acorn-maidens>

*Excerpted text from John P. Harrington's Karuk Indian Myths, Harrington, J. Peabody (1932)*

Wikipedia: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acorn>

## Photography

**Original photographs by James Harrison.** Edited by James Harrison.

Pg. 6,	The greenhouse
Pg. 9:	Sunday oaks
Pg. 14:	Oak hands
Pg. 16:	A place too sad for heaven or hell
Pg. 28:	Corn husks float in water
Pg. 56:	People who build their houses in the sea
Pg. 71:	Black skies, white stables
Pg. 112:	Ribs
Pg. 107:	Roots and graffiti
Pg. 117:	The kitchen

Pg. 132: Christians make the worst landlords  
Pg. 134: Just walls  
Pg. 141: Nothing of you here

**Original photographs by Paul Hammond, Jarryd Pauls and Danica Kukard.** Edited by James Harrison

Pg. 13: Watch with us  
Pg. 18: The nightclub  
Pg. 23: The house wants to look its best  
Pg. 31: The toilet  
Pg. 35: The boot  
Pg. 41: Hotel and keg  
Pg. 42: Hospital sign  
Pg. 66: They come to gawk at grief  
Pg. 96: Bones at sunrise  
Pg. 113: The doorway  
Pg. 122: The gates of death  
Pg. 125: Victory over bones  
Pg. 127: Flight  
Pg. 128: The box  
Pg. 137: When you leave the house  
Pg. 142: You survived  
Pg. 145: Reflection of a tree

**Photographer: Maurice Nimmo**

Pg. 24: Cross Section of Common Oak

Originally printed in: Rogers, Geoff et al. 1978. *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Trees: Timbers and Forests of the World*. Harmony Books. New York.

**Photographer: Eric Crichton:**

Pg. 70: Spangle galls on an Oak Leaf

Originally printed in: Rogers, Geoff et al. 1978. *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Trees: Timbers and Forests of the World*. Harmony Books. New York.