

# Counting Planes

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Isabel Rawlins

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## **Abstract**

This collection of prose-poems and flash fiction, together with a few short stories, shows how romantic relationships colour our perspectives on the world. The collection has echoes throughout of speakers' voices, theme, imagery and tone. There is a narrative logic too, but working on a subtle level of echo and resonance.

*Because of Tom*

*That perhaps is your task – to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; to re-think human life into poetry and so give us tragedy again and comedy by means of characters not spun out at length in the novelist's way, but condensed and synthesised in the poet's way – that is what we look to you to do now.*

- Virginia Woolf "A letter to a young poet written in 1932"



## **Exposition**





## **Washing Dishes**

Every day she washes the dishes. She makes the water scalding so it burns her knuckles. The same three plates, the same dirty coffee mugs. Over and over they are washed clean, placed back in the cupboard to be used again, to be washed again. Today she breaks a glass and has to empty the sink, picks up the pieces from the stainless steel; she slices her finger, bleeds onto the silver metal. Red islands drop onto the tarnished surface. She runs the tap and the islands stream to rivers.

## **Blue Eyes**

Her eyes are blue, like a tinted photograph or the story of a china plate. Not ocean blue or sky blue or bluebells in a field blue. Sometimes they're the pale flaking paint of a 1970's Ford Escort. And sometimes they're the dull pools of dishwater left to sit. Next to the red of her sunburnt skin, they're the blue heat of a naked flame.

## **Kitchen Pictures**

She wanders round the complex peering into people's houses. It's supper time and she sees the people in their well-lit kitchens, separated by veins of connecting walls. But they don't see each other, they don't see her either.

### **Tetris'ed Impressions**

She packs her sandwiches like a Tetris game, cutting some into tiny squares to fit them into the box around the bigger ones. Not that she likes Tetris, she always loses because the pieces fall too quickly. There's not enough time to decide where they should go. So they end up piling on top of each other with blocks stuck out at odd angles. And the beeps and blaps of the music put her on edge, frantic thumbs searching for the right keys. But at lunchtime, she wins with Tetris'ed sandwiches when they are neither squashed nor soggy.

### **High Ceilings**

Why do they make ceilings so high they have to hang the lights from metre long chords? All that space and I bet no one ever looks up, no one breathes in it or farts in it. It's just vacant, up there above our heads. Vacuuming whatever heat the tired heater can muster. If I had a toy aeroplane I'd fly it up and around, loop de loop and dive bomb the men sitting at their office desks. I'd make them look up, marvel at the white world where the yellow paint ends, where the pictures never reach.

### **Boys and Toys**

Sometimes he is an impish child in a man's body, she thinks. He comes home drunk, he's lost his phone. 'I have to shoot something!' he shouts and blows holes in an old butternut with his new toy gun. The remnants of yesterday's hole ridden cardboard box are yet to be thrown out. The pellets went right through it and lodged in the bathroom door. He sat crouched on his haunches picking them out with tweezers.

### **Sliced Tomatoes**

She's making her sandwiches for lunch again. And slicing the tomatoes, she is frustrated by the knowledge that they'll only make the bread soggy, like someone sneezed on it.

## A Fall

He climbs carefully up the rock. Within seconds he is high above us, his tall frame suspended against the cliff face. His back muscles stretch taut as he looks for hand and footholds. We stand beneath him, feet dipped in shallow water. I don't like to watch, one slip and he'll fall onto the sharp rocks below. He tries to pick a red flower, one for his collection and he tosses it down to us but it lands in the water. He tries again and again, each time the flower flies over our heads and splashes behind us.

Then it happens. He pulls too hard and cries out as he loses his grip, falling back. He lands with his arse on the rock and his body crumples when his shoulder makes a second impact. He rolls down and lies on his back, his head in muddy water. He is gasping, clutching his chest. He can't breathe. I fear his lungs have been damaged, bones broken. I back away not knowing what to do. After a few moments he has calmed down and manages to take a few deep breaths. We bend over him and ask questions, "Can you move? Where are you hurt?"

The afternoon is over; we won't eat our picnic here. He needs to get to the hospital. His shoulder is dislocated and he struggles to stand without falling. We drive the twenty minutes back to Grahamstown and get him to the hospital. I have to call his father. "Hello David, I'm a friend of your son's. He fell while climbing and we are at the hospital now. I need the medial aid number." My hands shake as I speak to him. "Yes, he can walk," I try to answer his questions with a steady voice. "He's in a lot of pain. He hurt his shoulder and his coccyx, he fell about five metres. We're waiting for the doctor now." We wait a good hour before a doctor can see him. They give him painkillers but they don't seem to help much.

When the doctor comes we go outside and eat our picnic in the car park. I make sandwiches on the back shelf of the car. The sky has turned pink all around and the gardens are actually quite beautiful and green. We share stories of this hospital and others. Shocking each other with what we've seen or experienced. We drive home as the sky is getting dark and all the pink has diluted to light blue with the black silhouettes of trees around us.

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## Half-smile

“If it weren’t for your boyfriend, I’d be trying really hard...” he shouted over the music, but it came out a whisper in her ear. Her hair caught the light in waves, as she let it swing across her face. He grabbed her hands, dancing with her. She danced with him, his thin frame, and his swept hair. Earlier she’d felt like one of the guys, hanging with him and his friends but here, in a haze of alcohol, he wanted more. She let herself be tempted, drew close to the idea, but she always knew she’d pull away. When he whispered, “Come outside”, she didn’t. When he kissed her cheek, she looked away. He stayed for a while, shared his beer with her, but his dancing grew slower, heavier. Until he left with a half-smile goodbye.

## Shirt

Today I am wearing my mother’s shirt. It’s been worn and washed so many times the cotton is like silk. Its colours are the seventies, purple and orange and lines of olive green. I wonder what my mother thought picking it off the rail at the now closed down *Scotts*. What she thought when she picked it out of her chest of drawers? The sleeves have shrunk and stop short at my wrists or maybe my arms are just longer than hers.

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## Two Dialogues

### 1. What she forgot

*He said:* - It's not the same anymore...

*She said:* What do you mean, nothing's changed?

- No, something has, you just don't notice it.

Don't notice it?! There's nothing noticeable... What then?

- Look over there, by the lake – that tree's been struck by lightning. The tree that used to have a swing, we swung off it, into the lake that December.

Oh, now I see. It's all black and charred. When was that even? How did you remember?

- It was a few years ago. We were on our way to Knysna visiting your parents and we stopped here to have lunch. We had a picnic under that tree. After lunch, the sun came out and we had our swimming costumes drying on the back shelf. I wanted a swim but *you* said it was too cold. Then we saw the swing. It was wrapped around the higher branches but we untangled it. You were wary but I convinced you, remember?

For once you braved the cold? That's surprising...

- I remembered when we were on the highway. I saw the sign for Hilda's Guesthouse and we took that turning because we wanted to stop for lunch –

How do you remember these things? So much has happened where it's just been the two of us. So much that I don't even remember...

- There's a lot I don't remember too. And surely there are things you remember that I don't –

Hmm, surely...

- Did you remember that you'd been to this place before?

Well, no, not until you told me the story. Then it felt familiar. But the details are still lost.

- There've been a lot of details between us...

Some better lost... But I'm glad you remembered this place.

## 2. Dovetail

*She says:* I stood outside staring up at a bird the other day; perched on the TV aerial. All its feathers were fluffed up to keep out the cold breeze. A butcher bird apparently, black and white. They catch insects and stick them in wire fences – a territorial thing.

*He says:* - Why were you looking at a bird, what was so special about this one?

I don't know... I just found myself looking up at it and I suddenly realised that birds can't put any clothes on. They can't wrap up in scarves and hats as we can.

- Hmm...

They must have all they need to weather the fiercest cold. And the only parts of them which are exposed are their leathery legs and hard beak.

- I had a parrot once, as a boy. His name was Alfred, an African grey. He would mimic the telephone...

Do you know a bird's circulatory system turns around before the legs? The blood pathways that would extend down are rerouted at the base of their breast. Only the smallest amount of blood necessary travels down to the unfeathered bare legs.

- We had his wings clipped so he wouldn't fly away. But one day he got out into the garden. The window was left open and he must've jumped up. I searched for him all afternoon, but couldn't find him...

Birds' legs are a relic of their reptilian ancestors. Reptiles, with their tough leathery skin, keep blood circulation to a minimum as they rely on heat to be able to move around.

- For days I left food out on the veranda for him, just in case you know?

Their legs are barely circulated in order to prevent energy loss. But I'm not so sure that birds would gain energy, through their legs, when it's sunny. That would be kind of strange...

- We never got another bird after Alfred. My father said I wasn't responsible enough to have a pet-

I don't think birds should be kept as pets. Look at them – they live outside in the skies. And people want to cage them, clip their wings, and keep them from doing what they are perfectly designed to do.

- No, I won't own another bird again.

## **To Have You Here**

To have you here lying along my body, brings security. I feel the slow presence of your every breath. I long for dreams but lately they've been long, drawn out, complicated. I wake surprised to have your body lying along mine, quietly soothed by contours of waist to hip. In dreams you are not mine. It is lost, over and ended. I know that time may come and I fear it like death.

## **Sleep Bodies**

His body knows mine, even in sleep. His arms reach for me and hold me tighter when I shift away. He mumbles words that don't make sense. Sleep talkers never repeat themselves. Sometimes I'll lie awake just to be with his body – a remarkable thing. He moves an arm to pull me close to his chest or else turns his back and settles into my body, drawing me close I fit my knees in behind his knees. I press the tops of my feet into the soles of his, run a toenail along and he shivers. Our bodies know each other; I think they will always know each other.

## **Marionette**

I had never done the tango before. But he insisted. He had my hand, roughly and his other on my waist turned me like it was part of him. My body his vehicle; desiring corners. We were driving mountain roads. The tyres struck a moment on the tar. I don't have to tell you the car was red. He moved his hand from the gear stick to my knee, lifting my dress, lifting my leg to wrap his body; I swung pendulous on five toes. Sweat drawing between palms pushed together. He spoke to my bones, whispered his next move. He drew lines across my skin, puppeteer strings wielding the marionette.

## Gypsy Rose

And you're a gypsy rose, springtime bloom on a bare branch. Transient but touchable. Piercing eyes, showered smell. Makes me tea, wants to know me or just perhaps you are a redness, a desire.

And I move from metaphors to stable ordinary details and the tension drawn between the two is where the poetry abides; in your smile, in your tea-warmed hands, in images of gypsy roses.

## Glassy Smoke Blowing Eyes

to Rodriguez's song Crucify Your Mind

*I light my cigarette by his*

*run naked to the water*

*his glassy eyes they watch me go.*

*Lipstick's finished, teacup empty*

*He offers me a smoke, then lights his own by mine.*

*Our glassy smoke blowing eyes.*

*Crucify your mind, he whispers.*

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## **Take a Bullet**

He was walking. Walking down the street where his brother was shot. He came here sometimes when he felt complacent. When too much got in the way. He would walk the whole length of the street. And as he walked his anger would grow, until he reached the midpoint, at a black and white pedestrian crossing. There he stood. Standing on the very spot where his brother had fallen; where he had knelt to his knees with him in his arms. Where his brother had bled all over his pressed suit. The memory crushed his complacency.

It was not just anger, but something else, that welled up, raw inside him. Entering his feet, as if residing in the grey concrete, it travelled up his legs, through his bones, wrenching his nerves alive. It fired his hands and flushed his cheeks. Till he felt he had to shake it free from his shoulders. Then, and only then, would he continue walking. He would nod his hat at the barber, with his candy cane pillars on the street. Sometimes he might even smile at the old lady who walked her dog.

But today was different. Today he knew it would have to be the last time he walked. They were coming for him. But he wouldn't hide. He would wait for them, on this street. On the same street his brother jumped in front and took his bullet.

## **Jazz Smoke**

He walked inside the jazz club. He took a table below the haze of smoke and lit up his own. A waitress appeared and he ordered a whisky. He'd been doing this for days now. Sleeping all day till dark then surfacing and finding his way to the jazz club, drinking whisky after whisky till the music stopped. He didn't have to think about anything, listening to jazz, it did all the thinking for you. It was the low bass of his dissatisfaction with life. It was the rolling drums, the startling trumpet. He no longer listened to his bodily desires; jazz smothered them, no hunger, no lust. He slept and drank and jazzed, mournful for the life he'd lost, the life he'd thrown away. And on what? He couldn't even add up the money he'd spent, the time wasted. All he had now was jazz and he didn't think it even wanted him.

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## Sylvia

It was raining. It had been for three days now. That slow rain that promises to clear then doesn't. It was starting to get humid too, all this unabated moisture getting trapped under heavy rainclouds. The walls inside Sylvia's flat were perspiring. She made her way between the puddles to the English department, there was a book reading by an Oxford scholar turned author. She filled a glass of wine and took a seat near the back.

The author came in, dressed in a blue suit that didn't quite fit. He spoke animatedly to the lecturer who showed him his seat at the front of the room. Behind him, Sylvia could see a piece of sky through the window. She could tell the sun was setting by the way it lit up a corner of the Chemistry building turning the beige concrete orange.

An old lecturer of hers took a seat beside her. His leather jacket creaked with indifference as he tilted his head at the author in front of them.

"Hi Sylvia," he said looking sideways at her.

"Hi George, how's things these days?"

"Ah, not much changes," he answered, looking into her wineglass. In his hand was a glass of coke. "You left English?"

"Yes, I'm doing my honours in Geography."

"Wise," was all he said.

Then she saw Michael he was moving chairs around, making sure everyone had a seat. She had been in class with him the year before. He'd chosen honours in English where she hadn't. She watched his back as he bent to pick up a chair, thin frame encased in a dark jacket. He turned and caught her staring; she didn't know whether to smile.

The author began to read and his audience dulled to silence. Sylvia was glad to be in a room of people, forced to sit still, to listen.

*You stood on the shoulder of the highway and held out your thumb when you saw a truck approach. You ran after it as its red brake lights leered out in the dark. Jumped in when it pulled over. The driver shared his sandwich with you and you dozed to the country music from his tape player. He asked where you were going and all you said was away. Away from a time and a place from which I never managed to escape.*

The Chemistry building was glowing sharply now against the fading sky. She felt Michael trying to catch her eye, but she didn't look over, looked intently at her half empty glass instead. Next to her, George uncrossed his legs, his elbow nudged hers. She didn't look at him either.

During the second piece the author read, the audience grew restless, their glasses mostly empty by now. Sylvia left a few mouthfuls in hers, occasionally swirling the red liquid. She thought of Paul. He would have forgotten she'd said she was going to the book reading. Though she didn't have to check her phone to know he hadn't bothered call. Every now and then she felt Michael's eyes searching for hers; she stole glances when his head was turned away.

It was dark outside by now, she could only just make out the Chemistry building, concrete no longer alight. The author announced his third piece would be about twenty minutes long. She swallowed her last sip and snuck out behind others whose glasses were also empty. George didn't move to let her through and her arse brushed his knees. She walked quickly down the dark corridor, these short winter days. She reached for the heavy door but a hand pushed it closed. She turned around sharply, "Michael?"

"Sylvia."

For a moment they stood there, without saying anything, until Michael broke the silence. "Where are you running off to?"

She didn't know how to respond. "I'd heard enough American imaginings of this country."

He still had his hand on the door, his tall frame blocking her way. "Me too, do you want to get a drink?"

Not what she had intended but she heard herself agreeing, hastily adding, "But only one, I need to get home."

In the beer garden he offered her a cigarette and she shook her head, watching him light up and slowly exhale. "If you could be anywhere right now where would you be?" he asked. She leaned into the bench behind her. At the next table, a young couple were all hands. The guy brushed hair out of the girl's face. She turned to look at Michael, who was holding his cigarette at a distance, the smoke wafting over his shoulder. "Anywhere?" she stalled. "Anywhere," he took a long drag.

She found the words as she began speaking, "I would be in freefall, those seconds before the parachute is pulled. When the whole town is a speck and I'm plummeting right down into it but still far enough to see how small it all is."

He took in her answer with another long drag, exhaling smoke in a haze around his face.

"Where would you be?" It was her turn to wait for an answer and she gazed into her beer.

She didn't wait long, "Here," he said, meeting her eyes with a stare. She felt like she was being studied and shifted uncomfortably. Her glass was still full. "Really?" she answered lamely.

"I try and live in the present, I've done enough wishing, you know?" She did, but felt as if she'd been set up and he was now trying to somehow excuse his intensity.

“Did you hear about the Austrian, Felix Baumgartner, who did a freefall from space?” he asked.

“Yeah I saw the video clip today, that moment where he’s standing at the top of a ladder, looking down at Earth, and without hesitation, he just lets go. God, there must be nothing like that.” He nodded, ashing his cigarette, sitting up straight to reveal his height. The couple at the next table were now feeding each other oily slices of pizza, grease dripped down the girl’s chin and the guy dabbed at it carefully with a crumpled serviette.

Michael caught her checking her phone, Paul still hadn’t called, “Somewhere you need to be?” he asked. “No,” she replied finally. He shrugged and reached for another cigarette then changed his mind, closing the box and putting them out of reach. Commonplace questions ran through Sylvia’s mind, but she dismissed each one. She didn’t know how to do this, whatever this was. In her nervousness her beer was nearly empty and she found herself accepting his offer of another drink. Michael steered the conversation towards books and soon they were talking easily about Sam Shepherd, she was describing a story where two cowboys gentlemanly lusted after the same waitress. Michael confessed he was a cowboy at heart, wishing he’d lived in that time. He asked what era she would most liked to have lived in and she replied, “A chivalrous one, but without the sexism.” He chuckled at that, at how sternly she answered.

Before long her phone was ringing and for a moment she thought to ignore it but Michael paused the conversation by lighting another cigarette, so she could answer. She left the table and found herself making excuses for her absence, assuring Paul she would be on her way soon. After that, Sylvia was elsewhere and nothing Michael said could bring her back. The couple at the next table finally left, walking awkwardly with hands in each other’s back pockets. She hadn’t eaten and her head was floating in a haze of beer. Through it, Michael was smiling at her and she knew she had to leave.

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Coffee burned her throat and she gasped. Outside, the rain continued, sheets of it hitting the window. They’d run out of gas that morning so she couldn’t even have a shower but she was late anyway. She pulled her long hair up on top of her head to hide its lankness.

Later that morning she couldn’t concentrate, contour lines swam before her until she was staring blankly at the computer screen, wondering how she was ever going to finish this map. She opened Michael’s email and read it again.

*Sylvia,*

*A long time ago I was walking in a forest. It was raining and if I looked up I could see the drops falling against the white sky. Most would hit leaves high above and drip down to lower leaves and down to more, and eventually to the ground. But in between the canopy, there were small gaps where light came through and from these, a drop would fall all the way to the ground, unencumbered. Fallen leaves covered the floor, and underneath, the ground was*

*hot and damp. I remained dry walking through the forest that day, but when I reached the clearing where my car was parked; I stood for an hour, and let the rain soak me through.*

*Michael*

Paul had been up first that morning. She woke to the sound of angry dishwashing in their one roomed place. She watched him for a moment, he stood in his boxers without a shirt, and the muscles in his back clenched each time he reached to place a dish on the drying rack. He turned around and she closed her eyes. She heard him open the door and go outside, soon after she smelt the cigarette smoke wafting through the open window. She got up and went to the bathroom, stepping into the shower, gasping as the cold water stung her face.

Later that day Sylvia was walking down the supermarket aisle. She stopped to take a carton of eggs. With one hand she tried to split a dozen into two, holding the basket under her other arm. She was looking over her shoulder, thinking of the next thing she needed to buy, when the box of eggs came free and fell to the ground. Yolk leaked out onto the tiled floor, soaking the grey box. She picked it up and put it on a lower shelf. Looking around her, the aisle was empty; she walked quickly to the front of the shop, left her half full basket by the magazines and walked out the wide doors. She walked home with silence in her head. Half way there she passed a hall where people were setting up for a function. A man stepped out of a car carrying a tray of cupcakes. It blocked his view and he missed a step, tripped, and three at the edge slipped off the tray. For a moment he stood looking at them. There was no one else around but the man and Sylvia. She didn't stop, kept walking past.

There were a few things of which Sylvia was sure. Peanut butter and banana tasted good together, especially on rainy days. Coming from a small town, she was terrified of skyscrapers, and probably always would be. And that she could easily make maps the rest of her life; create lines and shapes from figures, simplify reality into something two-dimensional and digestible. These certainties were a comfort. They told her, who she was, who she would be. Paul was not a certainty. He didn't know who he was or who he wanted to be, and lately he seemed frustrated being with her, as if she was somehow keeping him from something, keeping him from change perhaps.

That evening she tried to break up with him. "I had a revelation," she began and told him what had happened with the eggs and then the cupcakes. She watched his face closely as she spoke but he gave nothing away, he sat looking at her expressionless. When she had finished talking, he reached for a cigarette and lit one in the room. "But I love you," was all he said and Sylvia couldn't walk away from that.

A week later Michael sent another email,

*Sylvia,*

*A long time ago I was walking in a field. I walked right into what I thought was the middle and sat down. I sat there a long time. First looking up at the sky, at the way the clouds shifted indecipherably. Then I looked around me at the point where land met sky, traced that line for 360 degrees, turning in one spot. Then I lay down on my chest and looked through the grass,*

*picked out each blade with my eyes. After a while I fell asleep. In my dream I flew through clouds, level with the sun. Then I walked a giant circle of horizon. And finally I shrunk and slid from grass blade to grass blade. When I woke there was an ant standing still on my nose looking straight at me. I picked it up and placed it on the ground.*

*Michael*

When she got home the flat was empty, Paul not there. And it was clean, the bed made, dishes drying in the rack. She sat down on the bed; she sat a long time looking around her. First she looked at the ceiling: studying the cracks, the mildew stains. Then she looked at the surfaces: ordered clutter on the desk, tired naartjies in the fruit bowl, books standing upright on the shelf. Then she looked at the carpet: forgotten crumbs, a long hair caught in the fibre, an earring she'd thought she'd lost. Then she lay back and closed her eyes, but she didn't sleep.

She thought back to her first memories of Paul, the ones she'd gone over time and again when they first got together, and she would fall asleep thinking of him. When he'd first laid his head in her lap, one hand holding her calf as they watched a movie. When with a group of friends, under one blanket, his toes had found hers and they'd stolen glances at each other. She tried to remember exactly how she felt.

Next she thought of a fight they'd had, where they had walked home from a night out still arguing, Sylvia insisting on a socialist perspective, where people needed to consider the needs of others alongside their own. Paul called her naïve. Arguing that people were innately self-centred and could never put others first, that altruism extended from a selfish desire for a harmonious environment. They didn't fight like that anymore, Sylvia realised. But she couldn't work out whether they had reached a place of acceptance and compromise in the way they saw the world or whether they'd just given up fighting, settling into complacency.

At this point Paul arrived home. Sylvia sat up, the room was dark now.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" he asked.

"I was thinking."

He came and sat beside her, held her face in his hands and kissed her with his smoky breath.

The next day Sylvia replied to Michael's email.

*Michael,*

*A long time ago I was walking on a beach. It was raining, but not hard. I walked a far way. Eventually I came to a log of driftwood. I sat down on it and placed my hands on either side. At one end of the tree the roots had been ripped and were exposed to the salty air, bleached white. At the other end, the log tapered off into smaller branches that must have once had leaves. Under my hands the log was damp from the rain and the sea. Its bark was smooth and worn. I sat for a long time that way, looking first into the ocean, watching the waves, and then I turned around and faced the dunes, listening to the waves behind my back.*

*When I got back to the parking lot, my car window had been smashed and my handbag stolen. I cut my hand brushing glass from the seat. When I got home, Paul bandaged my hand and wiped the blood from the steering wheel. He picked out every shard of glass from the upholstery. And the next time I went to the beach he came with me and we walked together along the water.*

*Sylvia.*

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## Sunlight

I like how the sun peaks from behind the building. Its light slants. I sit in the shadow of a pillar. At its base the shadow is maybe a metre wide. Here, where I sit, its shadow envelops the bench. It extends, elongates its light. I move to the far corner of the bench and sit in the warm sunlight.

Today was almost a winter day. It is a chill morning; one where you have to be either determined or late to leave the covers. The night will be chill too. I know this from the clear blue skies, the stillness. I remember Park Road in winter: the cold draughty wooden floored house, but the warmth of the friendship there. We shared beds to keep warm and hair-dried our bed sheets.

I have an incredible longing for times past today. It must be the end of term nostalgia. The absence of people evolves into the absences of those who have long left. This transient place tires, it is difficult saying so many goodbyes. I want to be the goodbyer.

I feel his absence strongest. As if my body can feel he is not within the town's vicinity, measures his distance with lonely muscles. But despite the loneliness of his absence, I enjoyed my day. I walked home in sunshine, read some Dr Seuss over lunch, walked in the botanical gardens, met a little black and white tomcat. The weather today has been too beautiful for loneliness. I can't believe how incredibly still it has remained. Now there is an almost breeze, light on my neck. But the sunshine warms it away. When I get home I will read in the garden, take in the last of the evening light.



## **Bus Stop**

The taxi dropped her off at the bus stop. She only had a fifty and he only had a twenty so she paid thirty instead of forty for the lift. Laden with bags and food for the long bus trip, she joined the others waiting on the island of concrete in the middle of the road. There was no bus station, nor shelter, for the people to wait. The sky was clear though, there wouldn't be any rain, but the air was crisp and chill. Miles of black space loomed above, perforated by stars. Two women stood, talking. One had her young daughter on her back. The girl was not a baby, maybe three or four and her mother had to use a large towel to hold her in place. The little girl grew restless and her mother undid the towel and let her down. She stood holding her mother's hand.

She had been waiting to leave since he left two days ago. She found so many hours unfilled that she had taken to walking instead of cycling just to spend a little more time getting places. Two days had not passed quickly. He had left for a field trip and was gathering leaves at the Kei Mouth. Leaves with mite domatia; little houses on the surface of leaves for mites and other leaf-dwelling creatures, too small for anyone to see. The little girl was watching her now, and playing with the towel her mother held, which hung down like a curtain. The girl began to hide her face and then peep out from behind the towel with big eyes. In response, she twisted her face into silly expressions every time the girl saw her and soon muffled giggles crept out from behind the towel.

She'd enjoyed being alone, waking up by herself, undisturbed. Enjoyed taking walks when no one in the world knew where she was. The girl was growing tired and her mother sat down on her suitcase and pulled her up onto her lap. She buried her face in her mother's and immediately burst into happy bubbles of laughter. The bus was late, almost an hour now and who knew when it would arrive. She thought about the twelve hours she would spend contained in a metal box with wheels and found herself happier to be standing in the cold street. Across the road was a bar with a neon sign, Deuces, it read, with two pink hands held up in peace signs. The little girl whispered in her mother's ear and her mother sighed and got up and they walked across the road to the bar to use the bathroom. Other passengers began to arrive but they came in cars and waited on warm back seats.

Two weeks without him would be a long time. The mother and daughter returned and the girl was lifted up onto her back once more. The girl was quiet now and closed her eyes with one side of her face pressed warm against her mother's back. A few minutes later the bus arrived and she stowed her luggage and took her seat. She looked out from the bus onto the cold street, where there were still people waiting for their busses to arrive and those who were just waiting.

### **This Song**

This song pulls at me. When you came home at six and told me you were leaving but couldn't say why – there were no words, you said. You just needed to leave. Come with me, you said. But I couldn't do it. I didn't feel it. I didn't want to feel it.

So I stay in your bed, buried under your covers, breathing in the smell of skin left on those sheets. And you send me this song; listen to these words, you say.

And even now hearing it, I am there in your bed, breathing in the last traces of you, as you drive further from me.

### **Grey Day**

It's a grey day that starts out with "So what's going to happen with us?" Not only outside with the grey clouds and grey skies threatening rain. Just let it rain I think, pour down and drench everything. Let it come. "I don't know" I reply. But what I want to say is "What do you want to happen with us?" I don't want your apathy. I'm tired of the way you give up and then look to me to pick up the pieces, and then resent me for it. I won't do it anymore. I won't stand in the way of your self-destruction. Let me out before I too am blown away. But I don't say these things. I smile and let you kiss me.

## **An Empty Pocket**

Anna reached into her pocket for her phone unconsciously. She fumbled around in her loose trousers before realising it wasn't there. She had been thinking about a film she had watched but couldn't remember the lead actor's name, he had played an artist. But Jess would know; Jess always knew these things. She knew if she described him, with his curly brown hair and blue eyes Jess would be able to tell her. Anna wasn't really sure what had made her think of the film. It had just popped into her head. She kept her hand in her empty pocket, feeling the cool fabric between her fingers.

Anna was more distracted than usual today. Walking down High Street, she kept eyeing out people who didn't seem to be doing anything; people who stood around, leaning on street corners, watching pedestrians. It had been one of them who had fallen in step behind her yesterday – she was sure of it. And even though it was down a side street, without anyone around, being out on any street today made her shiver and look over her shoulder, while feeling around the vacant space of her pocket.

She had felt his intentions as if they could travel through the air, ghostly tangled energy that stung her from behind. He had matched her step foot for foot; treading in the sound of her own footsteps until he was right behind her. Anna saw the flash of his knife before her face and felt his arm tighten around her neck. All in one moment they had stopped, caught in a close embrace, his feet standing firm in her last footsteps. "Don't scream. I'll cut your face." The cool blade brushed her cheek. She nodded. With his free arm he reached down into her pocket. "Shhh" was all he said, releasing his grip and disappearing down a side alley. Anna stood, still like the woman who had posed for the artist in the film she had seen.

## Hitchhike

Dawn. Alone. No ride. My thumb outstretched. A jeep pulls over, stops. “Where are you going?” asks a man with glasses. “Anywhere,” I reply, “I was heading south, Cape Town, I got ditched here. “Okay, get in,” the man has sunglasses on but it’s barely light, he’s wearing leather driving gloves and looks about forty. The man eyes my backpack warily; I wonder why he bothered stop. “Where are you heading anyhow,” I ask, he hesitates, leather clenches the steering wheel, “Visiting my brother” is all he will offer, I shrug and slump back, the seats are leather too, dark brown, they smell new, there’s nothing in the car that might give this man away, he drives fast.

I realise I fell asleep when he wakes me, we’re at a petrol station, “You want anything?” he lights a smoke, waiting for my answer, “Coffee?” he nods, taking the keys out the ignition. He’s gone awhile so I watch the cars pulling up to and away from the petrol pumps, count all the red cars. “Here,” he gives me a coffee, lights another smoke, gets in the car. “I had nothing ... like you”. A thin smile. Leather clenches. Ash. Smoke.

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## **Development**



### **Alone on the Beach**

The sand ripples with black grains. Fishermen stand quietly supported by their rods; they've been here every day. There are no clouds, only thin smudges of brown on the far edges from too many sugarcane fires. It is late in the morning but the moon is up, no longer smiling like it was a week ago. Now perhaps it is a sadly tilting top hat you would find on a lofty gentleman.

### **Desert Place**

I'm washed up like this log of driftwood behind my back, limbs smooth and gnarled. In the dunes, hot breath blows the sand to whip and sting. On the shoreline, fogged salt tears clean everything, bleaching gently. In the water, coughed surf spray mists behind every wave. In this desert place, plants don't grow, hiding in dunes farther back. Desert dune clouds back on the horizon. They will bring rain that runs down to the sea in thirsty rivers.

### **This Naked Beach**

This naked beach lies unclothed. The greys of sand and logs are tired against the blue of sea and sky. One beach towel flutters on the sand. There are no fishermen today, usually they stand scattered in two's or three's or alone.

Five kilometres south, there is another beach where two trees grow on the first dunes. Their bark breathes the air of sea stories. Their pine needles fall to the sand undisturbed and giant crabs scurry unaware of footsteps.

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## **The Boat Goes to the Bottom**

The boat goes to the bottom. Submerges, slowly, the sea bathes its deck. Water fills behind the glass, windows show – half full. The crew watch, floating in rotating rings, red and white. They turn like slow tops. Captain rests his hand in a salute, elbow on the water. The boat goes to the bottom. Now they wait, legless, lined up, holding onto each other, to drift together. They can talk to their left or right but for a long while no one does. Lapping water floods their ears. Some lie back to unhunch their shoulders. Blame waits in all their minds, twitching on its haunches.

It gets dark and one man speaks to quiet his fear. He tells a story, “I drove a road train once; it can take a full minute to stop...” Until they hear the dull sound of the boat hitting the bottom. They all know what it is: they have all been waiting, wondering if they’d hear it, how long it would take. The man clears his throat, “It was in Australia. I took a four day job. Four days of driving straight and I was turning corners in my sleep. On the third day a kangaroo lay half dead in the road, I could see it was still alive, but I had less than a minute. I couldn’t swerve, not with 115 tonnes behind me and a couple of trailers. Rode straight over its neck, it was dead then. Thought I’d be better off on the sea after that. Now I’m not so sure.”

No one knows how the morning comes, it just does. The men look from left to right at the drawn faces beside them. Objects had floated up from the boat, plastic plates and knives and forks, drifting alone, no way to cling together. After that the men make a circle and become one giant ring; turning like a slow top.



## **The sky wins out over the book, but not over the sands that conceal it in every grain**

He lets the sand run through his fingers some grains are caught there in the sticky sweatiness of his skin. They reveal the lines that run down his palm, the creases that even babies are born with, clenching their fists in the womb, their knees drawn up to their chests and their eyes closed.

He buries his toes deeper until he can no longer see them, his legs ending at the ankles, He lies back on the sand and lets it bury into his hair. He rubs his head back till the sand fills his ears blocking out all sound. Until he can only hear his breathing, his heavy breath muffled like underwater sounds.

The sand is him now and he is every grain. He slips below unthinkingly and it caves around him filling his nose. He doesn't need to breathe; he doesn't need to speak, for the sand speaks around him, a voice in every grain. Their whisperings grow louder until they are deafening. They are all voices competing for his ear, for their space between his fingers, to cling to some piece of skin that soon will flake off and no longer be him, but still will be him until it disintegrates and disappears.

He stands now and shakes the voices from his ears; he blows the grains from his nose and breathes the air again. He walks upon the sand and squashes it with every step, but a few grains creep in between his toes and walk with him, step for step; he cannot leave them behind entirely.

A voice lies in every grain and they are silent, usually, but let them into your ears and they will whisper secrets from their past as rocks, from life under water, from millennia when they were part of something solid and whole. But now they are just one grain each, detached from each other, though they long to cling together, to cling to him, and me, and you.

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## Warm Up

Warm up, wake up, walk up to something you've never seen, never met. Shut out the dog barks, the monkey scrabbles in the tree outside. They say when stuck write about your childhood. Okay so I'll write about the playground in the nature reserve, the monkey bars, the trampolines that slowly disintegrated until they were gaping holes with lost springs. Once they were black islands where children used to jump and dream of flying. A little girl would jump from a tree holding an umbrella and tell her mother that she flew. The dogs are done barking at the monkeys, they've moved on it seems. I wish that I could too.

## **Julia Julie**

‘Okay Julia. Now I see you’ve already filled in the pre-operative check. When was the last time you ate or drank something Julia?’

‘I had a glass of water at about five this morning.’ *And it’s Julie not Julia.* ‘Okay Julia.’

*Julie*

‘They didn’t tell you not to eat or drink before the operation, Julia?’

*Julie*

‘The information sheet said I could drink water up to four hours before.’

‘Right, okay Julia.’

*Julie*

‘Now I’m going to attach this bracelet so the surgeon knows he’s got the right patient,’ the nurse joked.

Julie didn’t laugh.

‘Is this your first operation Julia?’

*Julie*

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t worry, it’ll be a breeze,’ her heels clicked and clacked down the ward.

Julie opened a book and tried to read, her mother crocheting aimlessly beside her. A book of short stories, she’d read all but three of them. She finished them quickly and began to re-read the other stories. One part of the book was a group of four stories about one family, each from a different family member’s perspective. She read them over and then again in a different order. She began to see the links between, began to use the characters to see into other characters, began building their family history and dynamic in her head. These people began to move, to live and breathe. And then the nurse came and then she went into the operating theatre. And when she woke, those characters were clearer in her mind than anything else. Those living, fighting, loving people.

## Blue Hospital Curtains

They must make hospital curtains blue on purpose. White would be too clinical, green, nauseating, red ... well that's a little ominous, though easy to clean I suppose. This blue is trying to be like the sky, pale, though not washed out. But it's a bit solid; I wouldn't mind some fluffy clouds. Then I guess it would be too childish. In the ward I am the only one crying, trying to stifle sobs through my gauze-filled mouth. It's a shock to be so suddenly brought back to everything. For the first few seconds after waking I was still somewhat there, still in that disembodied place.

But then it all comes back, everything all at once. And it's too much. We never notice how all life's contradictions amass quietly together, but when you are removed and then returned, it's frightening. Those first few minutes you feel like you've been given another chance. And now, if ever, is the time to change whatever it is you've been too afraid to.

When people change their life after near death experiences, all the changes, all the decisions must happen in that first hour of consciousness. After that the shock at the state of your life begins to fade. And the old habits and patterns and routines of thinking return, until that feeling is barely a memory. All I remember from the anaesthetic is a feeling of complete disembodiment. If ever a mind could just be free from any form of physicality, it could achieve infinity. That's why I am crying now; the weight of my numbed body is dragging my mind down.

Finally I manage to calm down enough and stop crying. I can't talk but I mime to my mother for a pen. She gives me a newspaper and I write, 'tell me a story of when I was five and had my tooth out'. This might seem a strange request but of all my experiences in life that is the closest to how I feel right now. But I can't really remember, I was too young, so I ask my mother for her memory. She hesitates then begins, "I remember they gave you a balloon to hold and they wheeled you away. You were smiling and so trusting. They wouldn't let me come with you. We heard you had woken before we even saw you. You yelled out through the entire hospital, crying loudly. We came to you quickly. I don't really remember much after that." I nod, my eyes are still closed. I know how it felt for that five year old.

Sometimes I wish you could be there for yourself more physically; if you could call on a younger or older version of yourself for comfort. Only *you* really know how it felt for you. My mother gently rubs my forehead and it's uncomfortable but I let her continue. The ice around my face feels good. I'm glad that it's all numb but at the same time it's really odd not to know if my mouth is open or closed, I feel for my mouth, run a finger over my lips and they feel like a giant version of someone else's face.

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## Battleships and Barbies

My sister and I played battleships. I was sure she always cheated and lied when I hit her ships. I grew tired of losing games, though I the younger, she never let me win.

*“B7?” I ask.*

*“Nope.”*

*“B5?”*

*“It’s my turn now, D4?”*

*I try to be quiet but she always reads my face, “I got one didn’t I? Didn’t I?”*

*“Yes,” my solemn response.*

*“What was it?”*

*“Battleship.”*

*“Ah yeah!” she’s dancing round the room in victory. A sore loser, I tear my paper and storm off, slam my bedroom door. I start playing Barbies instead. Not five minutes and my sister is knocking at the door.*

*“Sorry, I can’t help it I’m a genius,” she calls. “Can I play Barbies too? We can give mine a haircut.”*

*I consider, “If you let me cut some too okay?”*

*“Okay.”*

At least I couldn’t lose at Barbies.

## **Toy Soldiers**

We are flimsy soldiers at a child's bedpost. Our hands in plastic salutes, our hollow rifles ready. Our heads have melted to our helmets, we were made that way. In the evenings, he will line us up, march us over carpets, leave us scattered where we fall. His mother comes and picks us up, dusts us off, in lines we return to the shelf. So we can stand and watch the day outside the window, dreaming of the wars we'll never fight.

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## **Spineless**

She is searching for something. Feeling her way, she stumbles, falls, crumples. She cannot stand; her body, boneless. She flaps her flimsy arms and legs, rolls her flimsy neck. And so she lies there, alone and untrusting.

She is searching for a spine. She fumbles in the dark, with nerveless fingers. She finds it, coiled, and decides to swallow. It lodges in her throat and chokes. Mouthful of vertebrae, she has no teeth to chew. She grasps her throat and raspy sounds come out.

The spine knows it will kill her if it doesn't act. So it inches down and in her stomach, ponders, how to get where it should be. Tear through the muscle walls? Dissolve bone to blood and reform in place? Some coughing reflex brings it up and so it makes a tiny hole to dart into her back. The spine settles; the woman stands and walks.

## **She Sits In Her Anger**

She sits in her anger. It is a warm bath with poisoned bubbles. It is the ringing silence. She lies back and her face submerges, leaving her lips to the air. Her tongue traces his last bitter kiss. With her toe she pulls the plug and the water drains. She lies there until the crickets tell her it is night.

## Sabina

Sabina got in her car and turned the ignition. She pulled out slowly onto the road. Her hands shook but she held tightly to the steering wheel. She drove without really knowing her destination. She braked, made turns, stopped at stop streets, all the while staring through the windscreen and holding the steering wheel, with knuckles turned white.

Dark clouds were moving fast and she opened her window to smell the approach of rain. The car stopped and she was sitting parked in a parking lot. Before her was the sea. She picked up the silk scarf which lay thrown over the backseat and got out of the car. The waves had made a steep bank down to the water and she turned and began to walk towards the south. The silk scarf was in her hands and its greens and sometimes blues smoothed over her fingers and again.

At times the words she'd read on his phone flashed into her mind and she felt their power in her stomach. "Meet me at my place, 5pm, Sabina is working late tonight. We won't be disturbed..." And from her, "Come over once she falls asleep, I'll wait up for you..." But somehow the batter of the waves and the sand and the wind were enough to draw her back to the walk. She wanted to walk as far from him as possible. Far ahead were the cliffs and she walked with their shelter in mind. The strong currents had dumped driftwood at her feet and she moved to avoid the worn trunks, ripped from riverbanks.

After some time, she saw a figure in the distance. It was moving towards her and as the space between them became smaller, she could see the figure wasn't walking but skipping lightly across the sand. It was a young girl. Now, Sabina could see her green dress, flapping in the wind. The girl wore nothing else, with bare arms and knees. She skipped into the wind towards Sabina. "Hello," the girl said, a smile on her lips but not in her eyes.

"Hello there," she replied. She watched the girl twirl the material of her dress in her right hand; she spun around once and giggled as her bare feet almost lost their footing.

"Where are you going?" Sabina asked her. She looked around but there was no one else in sight, no mother or father. The girl looked serious for a moment and then relaxed her expression.

"I am going where you are going," she said.

"But we were walking in opposite directions?" said Sabina.

"Yes and now we will walk together," the little girl answered, taking Sabina's hand.

Sabina felt the girl's cool hand slip into her own and with this gesture her questions dissolved. She closed her eyes and let the rhythm of the girl's step smooth into her own. Strangely, they began to increase their speed, their feet no longer connecting with the surface of the sand. Sabina tried to look around and in the blur she could no longer make out the cliffs she was heading towards, or the dunes behind her. The landscape shifted out of focus



and became a fury of colours sharpening and hazing. Then they were still.

They were on the beach but it was a different day. The sun was out and around them there were families with children, digging holes, building sandcastles.

“Where are we?” Sabina asked the little girl who was quiet at her side.

“We are in your past, come I’ll show you.” The girl began to venture off towards the river mouth where there were children jumping off a log into the water.

Sabina followed her; she felt calmly accepting of all that was happening. She didn’t know if she was dreaming, if she had finally lost it, been pushed over the edge at the discovery of Richard’s cheating. She didn’t care.

“Look, across the river,” the girl pointed her finger at two girls in black school costumes.

Sabina gasped, there, maybe five metres away were two girls that she remembered all too well. They looked about ten years old. They were taking turns to run out along the log and throw themselves into the water, each judging the other’s splash. Sabina ran her fingers through her short, ruffled hair. Across the bank a ten year old Sabina, swung her hip-length dark hair behind her and clapped as the ten year old Lisa launched herself through the air into the water, grasping her knees to make a bomb. For a few minutes, Sabina stood watching the two girls play. They were always laughing, giggling, smiling.

Sabina sat down, hugging her knees to her chest. Tears began to form and she dropped her head down to hide her face. The little girl sat down next to her and took her hand once more. Her tiny, pale fingers crept into her own and Sabina felt her chest open and relax.

“Why did you bring me here?” she asked her.

The little girl remained quiet. But her face was serious, drawn beyond her youthful appearance. “Come, it is time to move on.” She gestured for Sabina to stand up.

Sabina stood and looked once more across the river. There the two girls were wrapped warm in beach towels. Lisa had begun to drip wet sand through her fingers, into a tower. The young Sabina joined her and together they dripped little drops of mud one at a time over and again. Their tower grew quickly in lines and bobbles, a rough but solid structure.

Sabina turned to follow the little girl down the beach towards the waves. The girl bent down and reached into the shallow, fast receding water. She picked up a smooth black stone and handed it to Sabina. Sabina looked into the matt blackness of the wet stone. The stone began to melt into her hand, its edges blurring in her palm. She felt herself drawn into its quiet darkness, her own boundaries growing fluid. As if someone had spilled water on a painting, the landscape dissolved into itself, its colours running in all directions. And once more she was lost in time and space, with the girl’s hand as her only reference.

Sabina opened her eyes. She was at the horse riding stables, where she used to spend all her time as a teenager. She was standing at the fence of the arena where a jumping lesson was taking place. She saw herself riding Geronimo, the grey appaloosa with black spots on his bum. There were a couple of other girls also in the lesson; a thirteen year old Lisa riding Giselle, Jessica was on Butterscotch and Lizette on Little Lady. They were taking turns to jump a course. Gill, the instructor, stood in the middle of the arena with her two dogs resting at her feet. She was a short, strong woman with curly, straw coloured hair.

It was Sabina's turn and she trotted Geronimo around to the bottom of the arena. Her face was white and she was gripping the reins with her elbows at tense angles. Just as she turned the corner to approach the first jump, something rustled in the raphia palm trees behind her. Geronimo pricked his ears back and took off at the sound, launching himself forward in a gallop towards where the other horses were waiting. Sabina lost her balance, and was flung from the saddle. She landed hard on her back in the grey sand and rolled over, coughing. Her face was streaked with muddy tears and she gasped to catch her breath. Gill ran over to her and bent down. But instead of consoling her, began to give her a stern talking to.

"How did you think you were going to manage a whole course with that kind of approach hey? Gerry could feel how nervous you were before you even turned the corner! He took a chance and spooked and got you off without even trying." Gill gave her a hand up and dusted the sand off her back. Sabina nodded and wiped her face. She was clearly still shaken but Gill's lack of sympathy didn't seem to be making it worse.

"Come on, time to get back on and try again. First thing to do after falling off is get back on." Gill marched over to Gerry who was happily munching grass and grabbed his reins. She gave Sabina a strong leg up and smacked Gerry on his rump as he walked past. "Now this time I want to see the confidence," she shouted. "Back straight, looking forward, heels down, arms firm but relaxed. Don't let him duck out this time."

The teenage Sabina walked down and around and this time when she trotted towards Sabina, her body was strong and confident on top of the naughty pony. She rode him towards the first jump, a set of painted oil barrels on their side. She kept her frame as Gerry broke into a canter, gaining momentum until he launched himself over the middle, landing cleanly on the other side. Sabina turned her body towards the next jump, gathering herself and the pony for the next one. She rode him well through the corner and her line coming into the next jump was a good one. She made it round the next five jumps without any hassle. Gerry kept a steady rhythm and after the last jump Sabina let her reins go slack and Gerry swung his head and gave a celebratory buck and snort before joining the other horses. Her face was flush but her body was relaxed. She rubbed Gerry's neck and let him graze as the next girl made her way through the course.

The adult Sabina, standing at the fence, couldn't help but feel proud. She remembered how stern Gill had been; always insisting they get back on straight away after a fall. There really was no other way of getting over the fear of falling, but to keep riding.

She looked around for the little girl and saw her chasing the chickens behind the stables, underneath the guava trees. She looked up mischievously ran over to Sabina. She looked up at the giant raphia palm trees silhouetted by the late afternoon sun. The teenage Sabina had the glow of courage on her face and the older Sabina knew it was time to move on. Once again she took the little girl's hand and closed her eyes.

This time when Sabina opened her eyes, she didn't recognise the place they had come to. They were on a path that ran along the edge of a coastline, with the ocean maybe fifty metres below. Behind them was a line of flamboyant trees, the ground beneath them littered with red flowers. It was a walkway with benches every twenty metres or so. The little girl pulled Sabina's hand. They walked until they came to a bench where an old woman was sitting quietly on her own, looking out at the ocean.

The old woman looked up and smiled. "Hello Sabina, I've been waiting a long time to meet you," she said.

Sabina looked for the little girl, but she had disappeared. "I'm sorry, how do you know who I am? Have we met before?"

The old woman laughed, "I suppose I should explain."

"Please," was all Sabina could manage.

"Well, as incredible as it might sound, I am you, Sabina and you will be me one day. I know you have had an interesting afternoon, travelling with a little girl in a green dress to memories from your past. This is a memory from the future, one you are only just encountering but one I have had for almost a lifetime. But now I experience it from the other side."

Sabina sat back on the bench and looked out at the water. Looking at it from above was a different view than from the water's edge. She could almost see how large a body of water it was, the way it stretched into the horizon. It looked so solid from up here, a blue mass hardly moving on this calm day.

She looked at the woman's face more carefully now. Hidden among the delicate crow's feet, her own eyes looked back at her; blue with rings of green around the irises. The old woman had a warm smile and somehow it made Sabina feel at ease; a smile from a future self. Suddenly Sabina had a hundred questions.

The woman held up her hand, "Before you ask, I can't tell you and really, you wouldn't want to know. I wouldn't want to ruin all the surprises for you."

"Okay," but then Sabina sighed, "What can you tell me though? You must have had a long time to think about this."

The old woman looked grave, her hand reached up to her forehead where she ran a finger along a fine scar near her hairline. "There isn't anything I can say Sabina." But she took Sabina's hand in her own and drew her into an embrace. She smelled the familiar smell of aloe conditioner on her white hair. Sabina nodded and closed her eyes, warm in the arms of

her wise self. She felt the little girl's hand slide into her own once more and she knew the world around was dissolving but she kept her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes she was once more on the beach she had driven to earlier that afternoon. The sun had nearly set. It cast its orange glow catching the water like a net of ripples. She sat down on the sand and ran her fingers through her silk scarf; she watched it catch her tears, the drops darkening the blues into deeper colours. She looked down the beach and there was the little girl in the green dress, skipping. She waved to Sabina and Sabina waved back. And then in a turn of her dress, she was gone.

Sabina returned to her car. The steering wheel was warm from the late afternoon sun. The rain that had threatened earlier seemed to have passed over but a host of muddled clouds still hung there in the distance. As she drove, she let her mind lean back into quiet emptiness. She concentrated on the road, on the way the tyres held its tarred surface, if only for a moment, as they turned around and again.

Her phone began to ring and she was jarred back to the present moment. She knew it was him and without looking she wound down her window and launched the phone outside. She drove until she reached the edge of town, stopped to fill her tank with petrol and took the exit to the highway. It was dark now. She held the steering wheel a little more tightly and kept driving.

Outside, the moon was almost full and it shone down onto the road ahead of her. There were only a few clouds but the moonlight caught them out; grey streaks on a black sky. The radio announced it was 2 am and she realised she couldn't drive all night but she didn't want to pull over onto the shoulder and sleep there. She tried to remember what day it was, what her old life had meant to her. But she couldn't think of any reason to be at home in a home that wasn't one anymore.

Sabina had been looking out of her side window and when she glanced back through the windscreen a silver glint caught her eye in the middle of the road. As she approached she realised it was the eyes of some kind of animal standing, frozen in her headlights. She leaned on her hooter, but she was going too fast to slow down in time. She swerved off the road and felt the car lose control. She heard a scream escape her lungs with what felt like her last breath and let go, holding her arms up to protect her face.

The animal, a large male Kudu, watched the car leave the road; it crashed into a ditch and flipped over onto its side, rolled a couple of times and then was still. Once the car had stopped the animal's frozen reverie was broken and it leapt away into the bushes on the other side of the road. The car's wheels continued to spin silently in the air. The radio played a mournful song to the dark hours of the morning.

Sabina felt herself slowly returning to consciousness. Her mind began to inhabit her body once again. She held onto the traces of a dream where she had been swimming far out in the ocean, waves surging around her with no land in sight. She heard sirens and managed to open her eyes. A man in blue overalls was standing over her, his face lined with concern. She tried to turn her head to look for her car but pain ripped through her neck.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you,” she heard the man say, “the ambulance is on its way.” She closed her eyes and breathed as deeply as her chest would allow. She remembered the way the animal’s eyes had reflected off her headlights, how she had swerved to avoid hitting it. She knew she had almost died, her limbs carrying the residue of adrenalin.

As she lay there on the hard ground, she lifted her hand to her face. Her hair was damp with blood and she could feel a cut running along the side of her forehead, almost to her temple. It was warm with blood and stung when she touched her fingers to it. She lay back, looking at the sky which still held the almost full moon. There were no clouds now, just the blue of a clear, open sky.

## **Sleep Resists**

It is dark and quiet. But thoughts run loud in her head. 'Shh' she tells them. She imagines an empty clearing, sunlit; surrounded by low bushes and birds in the branches. She sits in the middle. For a while there is silence, the image holds strong. She focuses on it, reaches for its edges, and paints in the colours. Without warning it is shattered and all that is left is anger welling from her feet, drawing her back into her body.

She tries again, imagines a static pulse, the line of a failed heartbeat. She stays close to the line, watching it run forever to the right. The line is black and everything else is white. It is dead straight, then it jumps, jumps again. She tries to keep it still, one long fluid line but it resists, it fights until the line is broken into a million jabs of uncontainable lines, until there is no line anymore and just noise.

This time she is aggressive, imagining a fierce snapping creature. It waits in the dark and when any thought threatens, it leaps and devours. It will leave nothing behind. And then there is quiet and then she sleeps.

## **Mad with Colour**

In amongst all this I want to create giant art, lines of colour, of paint, roll my body in it, press my palms into it, let it cake in my hair, clot my eyelashes, get stuck in my teeth till I am mad with colour, body clothed in reds and oranges, scarlets, golden yellows, blue hands and green feet.

## **Gaia**

I want to run off into fields. Have thorns rip open my bare feet, pick grass seeds from my hair. Have the sun burn my arms and shoulders red. Run into the forest and sit and listen to the rain, dripping, falling around me. Bury toes in damp leaf smells. Unearth hidden puff adders and earthworms. Look up at towering trees. Watch raindrops fall and let them land in my eyes, stinging. Shiver with cold and chills. Watch spiders spin their webs and catch and wrap their prey. Lie back and sleep in fallen leaves. Be a falling leaf.

## One Day

I could take this pen and write these blue words upon my skin etch them there and leave the ink to dry.

•

There is a place where people are green and blue and red, showing their emotions on their skin, and when two are in love their colours synchronise, blend to the same hue, and when one betrays it is written on the skin; the shame, guilt, and forgiveness, until their colours can be the same again.

•

Yellowed nails from naartjie skin, haven't read the news in weeks. Long curls across the pillow, still white sheets. Boxes and suitcases on top of the cupboard. Two more months.

•

Shape-shifting clouds, reddened clay gravel, rippled water, hill-blown wind. Come back sun. I could cycle through these farms, growing thinner and fitter; drink from mud puddles, eat grass, make fire to stay warm, discard my shoes when they fall apart. I think it may rain here, best to move on.



## **Empty Room**

There's no space for anything anymore, she thinks, in this uncluttered, empty room. She picks up the last box, the last suitcase and then comes back just to stand in the middle. It's the fights that echo loudest. The walls throw down the bitterness they held for months. She's forgotten to take down the pale curtains and wants to leave them there. She has to use a spoon to unclip the rails and sees his hands clipping them in, their laughter. With the curtains down the sun glares in. She makes a final turn and sits in the middle of this room's emptiness.

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## **Finale**



### **Tea Leaves**

Let me read your still tea leaves, the dregs that lie at the bottom of your mug. I see a circle and a line down the middle, two halves, two lungs, two beans nestled together in a pod. But one half is bruised at the edge and it is smaller, squashed into its corner. I swirl them round again and let them settle. A music note, silenced. A chrysalis slowly turning.

You are a verse I never heard. A whisper lost on distracted ears.

### **From the Outside**

Fields of cows gather, some sit, stand, chew cud, and so days go, from the outside.

### **Sunglass Scratch**

Scratch on my sunglasses, blurred patch, bottom left corner on the right side. Fibre scratches, obliqued in the lens, like heads of grass seed, brushing white the grass green.

## **Seasonal**

After months I step outside and my eyes are at last open to the world around. I know the blossoms will emerge soon and bare grey branches will be dressed. The first are on their way. I don't think I saw the leaves fall, somewhere I missed out on autumn. We were having our own autumn and the trees didn't matter. In summer I was outside with you. Our love was an outside love, the kloofs, the mountains, the beaches. In winter our love crept indoors and huddled in a corner. And it seemed to die there, for it didn't help us make it to the spring. We needed a spring, but we'd forgotten the world outside, so when it finally came it was too late for us.

## **Trumpets Talk**

Trumpets talk to tell their stories, with the deep bass – it's a conversation between many, but it flows fluid, the way they fill the gaps, the way they talk among themselves, singing to each other. And the way they take turns, each asking politely, lovingly for attention. All the sounds are in the right place, sitting next to the right sounds – such that every sound is smiling.

And for me to hear it? My own ears smile.

It ends so suddenly, taken over by the lawnmower growl which reminds me of the grey cloudy day, no sun, no company like yesterday. Where we were the beach. We were summer. We were love. We were each other.

And today, this grey day, I celebrate alone.

## Reading a Picture

In this snaking sideways sea of land mortals dance and take your hand. Through the water, green and blue, call them all to follow you. Twisted orange tree of man, down centre line it splits the sand. To the left its gnarled hand leans to draw the sun.

And there are some days where it is the blood red heart of roots, buried below everything, muscle, fibre, bone, down to the finest network of cells grown together to transport blood, to bring the outside world, the oxygen all around us, to the very smallest cell.

And other days where it is the darkened hills on the right horizon, just two forms, dark brown but somehow green and red, that rest upon the blue river of water, the waves of stormier days.

And still others, where the symmetry of leaves, reflects back on others, tessellating into unspoken corners of infinity.

## **Sunrise and Sunset**

Alone again, but I have a banana which is surprisingly tasty. I spent all day sleeping. So now I am having my morning in the afternoon which has a similar low-angled light but cooling down instead of warming up; both phases of the day where change is most noticeable.

I'm even sitting with a cup of coffee, ready to begin my 'awake' period – not really a 'day'. I guess people who work night shifts feel this every day but then probably get used to it and don't notice anymore how a breeze often picks up just as the sun is setting, now in springtime. Or how the birds begin to quieten down, it's almost bedtime for them. How that breeze rustles the bamboo. How the traffic sounds quieten, with no more learner vehicles from Mike's Driving School.



## Coffee World

Black coffee, black smile, worn down brown caffeinated teeth. Dark and strong and sweet. Coffee breath, coffee'd tongue, wide coffee eyes still crusty from sleep. Coffee hands hold coffee mug on coffee step with coffee shrug. Morning coffee sunlight, early coffee wave. All the coffee'd men and women driving coffee cars. Going to coffee work to do their coffee'd jobs.

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## **Sharing House Again**

It is strange having another person share my house. We move to different rhythms, routines but we try to synchronise. I do the dishes before bed and he is already asleep. He is up early cleaning before I even get up. It is a comfortable companionship. I like to make tea for him, no milk, two sugars.

## **This Man**

I listen to this man tell jokes, poke fun, making others laugh with his dry wit. I try and join in, tell a story of my own – he interrupts. I let it go. Later, I try again; he interrupts again – his story, their laughter. I don't mind. It is good to laugh and he is good at making people laugh. But his ego is too large, a hunkering immovable boulder. He buys us drinks and we stay; now indebted, now obliged to listen, laugh and pay attention. But *his* ears are closed, his voice the only one to be heard and listened to. He'll allow comments in agreement but not discussion, not other stories. Every time he gets up to get another loose cigarette, the three of us contemplate, converse in three way dialogue. When he returns, once more we are the listeners, the laughers, passive admirers. He does this by looking you deep in the eyes, making you feel he's talking only to you, sharing an inside joke, but by the end of the story, come punch line, the whole table is laughing and you realise he'll happily divide his gaze.

## **Psychedelics and the Radio**

*for Dan and Tarryn*

We realise, the three of us, in talking about how we'll raise our children, how we'll let them do psychedelics, but not listen to the radio, that we were all outsiders for a long time. We were the kids in school who hung out in the art room, made friends with the Asian and the fat kid, became a clown to the popular kids, dabbling in the inner circles but never quite belonging, never quite managing to take it seriously. And look now how we are drawn to each other – the kids who lived in books and still do.

It is said that we must value enemies because they are the ones who challenge the self; they are the ones who ask us to learn patience. We have been practicing patience for many years. Through our inconcealable difference we have dealt with people unwilling to accept change.

We talk about the seventies, the music that was playing on the radio then.

“They were more evolved.”

“They reached a higher level of being.”

“They would never stand for the drivel on the radio these days; the brainworm music.”

We are listening to a Christian band from the seventies. It is a religious experience, a spiritual experience. The music occupies that space between right and wrong, good and bad; it grapples with the very nature of morality. Yet it does not invoke fear. It does not leave you in a negative state of being such that your only option, your only way out is to believe. It inspires joy, it celebrates life and existence, in the way that we can grapple with morality, in the way that there are no rules to right or wrong.

We all agree, we will let our children do psychedelics, encourage them even, but not listen to the radio.

## **Black Swan**

Black swan drop-falling into here and there in moments and reflections of past and future.  
Black feathers, swan-necked man, let's enjoy our black swan moments; the way I measure time.

And when the love is quietly gone, where does the poet go to play? To feel? To empty spaces in the mind, vacant fields, abandoned towns; places where he won't be, where he mustn't even be imagined to exist.

sweet  
**Bathroom stall   love affair**  
^

Open world like open skies, there are many kinds of open; open eyes and open flies, her world is open wider than your eyes. Fingers clasp that metal zip, pulling down, her panties slip. Hand behind unclasps that bra, shoulders free – breasts allowed to be heavy, in your hands, your mouth, they sit, how comfortably you fit together. Skirt in folds around her waist; you bend down to have a taste.

sweet

Words that you won't dare to say – but we all think – her bathroom stall love affair.

^

**Objects of Desire**

He's over thirty but he makes her feel like a kid again. At first he seems to hide shyly in his comedy. Then he begins to dance in it, dances in their laughter. Throughout the day she chooses to sit opposite him. Three bars and she just wants to see his green eyes, his smooth hands. Beside her sits last week's object of desire. He never seemed beautiful to her. She likes his words, his ideas, but prefers to listen to them with her head turned away, giving him an ear but not her smile. She is drawn to this new man's beauty and how unassumingly it sits there before her.

## Naming Game

They play a game. The category is anatomy and they must each come up with a ‘body part’ for every letter of the alphabet.

*Armpit, arm, alveoli, arse.*

*Breast, bile, boob, back.*

They stumble, help each other out, and taunt each other when they know more than one, hiding names. Many words mean the same thing, slang words are allowed, the alphabet is long. They skip *q* and *z*.

*Instep, iris, intestine, infection.*

The game veers into the abstract and there is much debate.

*Medulla oblongata, mammary gland, muscle, mucous membrane.*

How do they know these words? They are all arts students. None of them studied science. But somewhere they’ve learnt the names for things, learnt the names for these parts of their bodies. Anatomically correcting each other. They manage to avoid the more obvious words. It’s a challenge not to say *penis* or *vagina*.

*Pelvis, pinky, pituitary gland, pulmonary artery.*

*Renal vein, rectum, rib, ring finger.*

Before they know it they are driving back into town. It’s very nearly dark, they left with the last light. The four of them in a rickety blue car, making a Sunday escape.

*Wrist, wrinkle, wang, wisdom teeth.*

## Selfishness

When someone tells you, you are selfish or have behaved selfishly; it means that you have not considered *their* feelings in the way *they* expected you to. You have not lived up to what *they* believe you to be. Neither hero, nor saint, you fail to satisfy the idea of yourself which exists in *their* head. To them you are an incomplete picture, a cat missing its tail, a bird without a beak. In this way they demand more from you in order to satisfy themselves, you must be the cat that comes when called, the wild bird that rests upon their shoulder. Such that calling another person selfish is, in itself, an act of selfishness

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## To Lydia Davis

I knew many months ago that I must read Lydia Davis' collected short stories. It jumped at me from the new books shelf and I quietly snuck it away to a corner and lost myself for an entire afternoon. There was an urgency in the way I read that day. I had to read as much of her as I could. When I went back, the book had gone. You can't take new books out in their first week at the library. But by the time the week was done, the book was lost to the abyss of nameless library users. I went to the desk to make a reservation for when next it would be available. I must wait until mid-July and now it is April. The book had been speaking to others it seems. But its voice, or what I'd heard of it, stayed in my mind. And when July finally came, I had to leave for three weeks to get my wisdom teeth taken out at home, and so I made provisions for the boyfriend to collect the book.

I had to remind him every day for a week, but eventually the book was safely collected. When I returned, after the initial joy of seeing him had subsided somewhat, the book was my first thought.

So I asked him about it.

He recalled having collected it but couldn't tell me its location. Three weeks of missing him quickly fizzled away. I'd been waiting three months for this book. I seethed quietly.

The next day I mentioned it again. He offered some vague potential locations but wouldn't get out of bed to help me look. I tore his place up looking for it. It was so close but still so far.

Eventually he joined me in the search. He found it in his work folder, nestled between bits of science articles.

It was not how I remembered it, but smaller and fluorescent orange, not pink as I had thought. We had plans to see friends that afternoon but I wanted to cancel and hide in my room with Lydia Davis. But I was living with him, sharing a one-room flat. I considered the bathroom.

It was not until Tuesday morning that I got to sit down with the book. By that time the boyfriend was no longer. Clearly the book was waiting for the exact moment.

I lost myself again that morning. I laughed, was enthralled, confounded and I kept reading.

Over the next few weeks I carried it with me. I dipped into it here and there. Read bits of it aloud to other people. It became overdue and still I held on, letting the fine build up. Many of the stories were very short, some only a line or two perhaps. Some were longer, detailed, almost scientifically observant, but about humans and our inescapable humanness. Some I could sit and chew over for minutes on end, without really knowing why. Take this one:



### They take turns using a word they like

"It's *extraordinary*," says one woman.

"It *is* extraordinary," says the other.

Or this one:

### Collaboration with fly

I put that word on the page,  
but he added the apostrophe.

And this one kept me enthralled long after reading:

### Getting to know your body

If your eyeballs move, this means that you are thinking, or about to start thinking. If you don't want to be thinking at this particular moment, try to keep your eyeballs still.

After reading it I find it impossible to think of anything if I am staring at one spot. And I wonder if this is real or if the story is affecting my belief in the relation between thinking and eyeball movement. I still can't tell.

I could easily go on. But what I really wanted to say in sitting down to write about this book is that it became available to me at the time when I truly might not have survived without it.



Today is the 31<sup>st</sup> of August. For the month of August the library has been having a fines amnesty. If I return it today I can clear my debt, which by now is considerable. I don't know that I have been as kind to the book as I should have been. It has bits of dried chocolate on the edges of some of its pages that somehow got stuck to the inside of my bag. Its bottom corners are also dirty from too much carting around and its once new cover is scratched in a few places. This book has *lived* with me. And I will be brave and return it today. Though it is *this book*, the one I am pressing on now to write this by hand, that I have grown attached to. And though I never steal library books, this one has seriously made me consider it. I didn't read it cover to cover. I never kept track of my place. I just read what I could, when I could. Deliberately skipping some of the longer stories, to save them for later you know. And when it reappears in my life there will still be new things to read in its covers, and there will be familiar stories that nestled a place in my mind to which I can return.

Thank you Lydia Davis, more than you could know, but I'm sure not more than you could imagine.

## **Living in One Room**

Living in one room, people come and go. One makes coffee, one makes breakfast, one cleans, and one sits and does nothing. But we are all one or the other at some point. It works surprisingly well, probably all the joints enable us to ease around each other in a haze of weed smoke and cigarettes. Though I don't smoke cigarettes I may as well. Everywhere in this town young people crawl for vacant spaces to light up. To keep their hands busy, to head-rush themselves while drinking, gasping for inhalations of escape. The smoke trails round all their faces; all partake.

## **Lip-Stick Kissed Dunhill Lights**

*for Lina*

The walk to work can only be described as perfect. There's the right amount of green plants and trees to remind you, you are part of the world. Never mind the concrete or brick; it's the trees in between that I see.

Lighting up a cigarette, I see another of those lip-stick kissed Dunhill lights stubbed out on the tar. Fifth one this week, and it's only Wednesday. Past the church and there are dog-walkers and baby-walkers enjoying the sunshine. For a minute, I too smile in the sun. But those lip-sticked ciggies are still on my mind.

At work the owner of the knife shop is on my case again. He leans against the Pikachu machine, using a hand to support his belly. I could swear I saw that black and blue striped shirt on the beach yesterday, that same lean. Just can't be sure though, who can these days.

Greek Anthony next door has a new perfume in his store and I can smell it wafting through, these walls are just not as thick as they seem.

At lunchtime I smoke a joint in the parking lot, on the far side and wave to the patrons in the King's Court Hotel. They're no bigger than beetles on their balconies, sipping cocktails on a cloudy Wednesday afternoon, don't they know it's not the weekend.

Another shop closed yesterday, there are only a handful of us left and the coffee shop moved upstairs to join the butchery, (rumours are the butcher's left his wife). Too bad the man from House of Carpets didn't get in there, poor guy, ditched by House of Curries for the manager at Spec Savers, something about a discount on frames.

The coffee shop's stopped giving a trader discount. Well to those not on the 'list' and I didn't make the list, or maybe it's the shop, no one around here liked Mel. Well except maybe Richard from the Biltong Shop, but he doesn't greet me anymore.

I can hear the couple at the earring shop bickering again, something about losing the smokes. They're a regular old Jack Sprat and missus, except she chain smokes. And at work there just aren't enough cigarette breaks to get through the day for some. She spends the rest of the day making angry signs to scare off customers.

"Look with your eyes not your fingers!"

"You break you buy!"

Everything is marked down.

The radio on the PA system is blaring brainworm music, you know the kind that worms its way into your subconscious and gets stuck there wriggling and writhing and repeating on itself.

I turn the reggae louder and nod at the one or two customers who venture into the shop. They ask for advice and I am only too happy to oblige. There are never rude customers in Lil' Jamaica.

It's already three and Anthony says he's going home. He's heard it's raining outside, though in here you'd never know. *Tima for soma heavy lifting?* he says, and I help him carry the perfume table into his shop. I wonder who helps him bring it out; he's always here before me. *How do I send thisa picture with the blacketeberry?* he wants to know.

I get some popcorn from the ice-cream shop and laugh a little when I remember how Sam and I asked unthinkingly to use their microwave to pop our own popcorn. The woman said she was offended we'd even asked. She did it anyway but she burned it.

It's quieter without the coffee shop downstairs and the man from the knife shop is gaining territory. I saw him over by the blind man's fish and chip shop, watching Jessica count out the change.

The earring shop couple argue past on their way out and she already has a cigarette tight between her lip-stick stained lips. Her husband follows behind; she's telling him off again something about losing the smokes. His hand reaches into his back pocket and he pulls out a pack of Dunhill lights, throws them in the bin, the man from the knife shop's eyes bulge.

I pull down the aluminium door and lock it closed. If I take it easy I'll be home by 4.20. In the parking lot I see another lip-sticked stub of a cigarette. It was raining, but it's stopped now. I take the short cut behind the Builder's Warehouse and the woman from the earring shop is getting into the knife-shop man's car. The earring man is sitting alone on the pavement, he doesn't protest anymore. He watches them leave together, then he lights up a Marlborough. He'll walk home alone today and I won't see any more lip-stick kissed Dunhill lights.

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## **In The Tearoom**

In the tearoom, chairs line the walls on either side. Some face the window, some the wall. It is the same people who sit with window views of clouds and sky and ancient red-bricked buildings. Usually they are quieter, listeners, observers, and always, between the heads across the room, they watch the sky.

Those who face the walls have more to say. Projecting outwards their anxieties, their fears: housebreaking, emigration. We look back, nod in empathy or quietly disagree, and always, between their heads, our tea-break is the sky.

## **‘keep off the wall’**

‘keep off the wall’ the wall says. But it is a man who placed a sign upon the wall. Staving off any who might just want to keep a wall company, however briefly.

‘keep off the wall’ in lowercase, it’s not a shout.

Advice? Suggestion? Meditation?

The wall confined to loneliness, no people on it. Only those keeping off it. Forced to watch us walking by.

I’ll stay and look a while, wall. Keeping off of you, but near you.

## **Lines**

I have this view: a line of roofing and a line of doorsteps, they stretch far to the left of me. My eyes warp the two lines together to tell me how far away their end point is. Then a line stretches out perpendicularly from their meeting point, a line of hills – and at this juncture the sun has set. Then another line from far away to close by, of small bare grey trees, and a line of washing lines, spotted with clothes. And then there are more perpendicular lines of hedges but also they are one above each other as they get closer. A picture drawn by lines, intersecting and emerging from each other, and no one else will see this picture from the exact point where I sit.

## **Elephants**

I wait for stories to come and I see elephants, white ones on my black scarf, red ones on my black bag. Little marching elephants saddled on top of each other, trunks raised; ready.

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## **Dream Fight**

And it's 3 in the morning and I wake up still rationalising and explaining a fight with my sister, a dream fight about adjusting the TV so we can all be comfortable and all I'm wondering is why it offends her that I'd also like to be comfortable? And I just really miss you. Because at times like these I could just bury my head in you and it would all be okay. But I'm getting used to the aloneness and the self-consoling. And I give myself these words to help me sleep.

## **Sandwich**

Yes, I think I will make a sandwich at 4.51 in the morning. And even if you were here I wouldn't make you one, heavy sleeper through life that you are. Did you ever really see me? But I knew you didn't see everything and I hid myself in that. I know now that I hid that part in order to preserve it. Locked away from your eyes, something sacred; for if you were to know it, in a finger snap I would cease to exist.

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## **It's Raining...**

It's raining. Light rain that keeps your face damp but clean, makes you blink more often than usual. But it's not cold. This here is summer rain. Sprinkler rain that lasts all day and into the next, and the next day, and the one after that. Rain you can sit and watch from the window, knowing it won't disappear. Rain where you can read a book for hours and not worry that you should be outside in the sun. Rain that people without homes could weather, keeping it out with black plastic bags draped over them. Rain that makes me think back to two years ago when I was just discovering what it was to fall in love.

I remember going for a jog in the rain, on a grey day, but everything – the houses, streets, cars – had this light about it. A light like one just switched on in a dark room such that your eyes take time to adjust. And in those weeks, my eyes took time to re-adjust to this feeling of truly being seen by another. I would sit for hours alone, studying for my exams. But more often I was drawing, writing, anything to try and capture this new colour of the world.

In the beginning I had no idea what was happening. I wouldn't have known that I was being taken over. Now that I know, I want it again and perhaps too much and my object, the one I choose to fall with, well, I think I am pushing it too much.

I got home yesterday sodden from riding my bicycle through the drizzle. Standing in my kitchen I noticed something on the floor, slipped under the front door. I picked it up and at once was overwhelmed with delight. It was a drawing he and I had done the day before, sitting together on the backseat driving home from Cape Town. For hours we took turns with the pen, the other watching intently where the lines would go, what images might emerge. It started as rough scribbles, hasty lines, then houses, villages, people, skyscrapers, thunderstorms, planets, stars, flying pigs, an octopus. But then something else happened. In those lines he started to find faces just by adding eyes here or a curve of a mouth. Figures began to emerge. The first one was a solemn face at side view that grew a fish's body. In all these lines expressions found a place, until there were characters interacting, responding to each other. He drew a face and an empty speech bubble, then a while later a figure near-by grew a pointing arm. I gave the pointing arm a speech bubble and put '!' inside it and in the first figure's bubble '?' A storm cloud became a grimace of huge contorted eyebrows as a rocket collided with its cheek. Some grew arms, legs, flying floating bodies.

When I found it under my door, he had worked on it some more. He had added darker shading, stronger lines to bring objects out. It was just as it should have been. He probably had no idea how I felt when I saw that picture – the surprise in my smile for the next hour. How I was immediately off into my fantasy world in which he would then ask me for dinner and we'd talk for hours and laugh and, looking into his green eyes, we'd kiss... And then we would be looking out of plane windows far below, adventuring together and sharing our childhoods and planning a future.



And all from his driving across town: standing under the enclave of my front door, out of the rain, knocking to find no one home, looking in through the kitchen window and seeing the lights off, the house empty, then bending to slip the picture carefully under the door. Then turning to leave down the steps, into his car and out into the rest of his day.

## **On a Blue Bus**

On a blue bus seat – bottles of travel water. People sit ergonomically designed, reclined in upright position, bags squashed in lines above heads. White seat covers, Grey-back-netting-pouches hold mostly rubbish.. It's all blue in here: carpets, curtains, and grey: ceilings, luggage racks. People with their petrol station food. 'HAVE A NICE TRIP', red capitals run along the front, right to left, slowly, right to left. Circle lamp light on this page. I drive away, further, but I'm still there, you're still in my head. Can't step out of love like old, too-small clothes, torn scarf or talking shoes. Tattered love. I'm not smiling. Driving further, I'll leave an article of you at every stop, every petrol station, bus stop, people drop. And when I get there – I'll wear no clothes. Just skin, my own skin, gone be any trace of you. Air light, chest tight, one shadow walking, to its own strange sound.

## Blue Bus Home

This world where busses park sideways against the kerb, of mumbling deaf people, of blaring gospel music, unairconditioned bus air, hot feet in brown boots, bus hands – can't wash clean from burps and junk food, crinkle packets, chocolate bars, potato chips. I'm still full from expensive raw fish, two glasses sauvignon blanc.

This bus is blue too, blue striped ceiling, like my new blue and white bikini that I bought today and wore today, on white sand, cold water, surfboards and wetsuits, an ocean before a mountain. In here I sit with hot already breathed breath of other passengers, not like the blue air of Cape Point, buffeting, and far below the cliffs, where whales swim and sun-warmed rocks where dassies sleep.

Drive round Chapman's peak, mountain curves, ocean shimmers, a view of peace and quiet ruined by rescue radios, spotter men with binocs, searching distant water for signs to detail the capsized charter boat – whale watchers – foreign tourists – there were children and elderly on board – one man later confirmed dead by the seven o' clock news that we watch, sighing, sitting back on leather couches waiting for our dinner reservation.

This weekend meditation in Cape Town sun, my cheeks still warm, red from this morning on the beach, playing bat and ball, expert leaps and falls between the half-pebbled sand, Frisbee kids, kite flyers, weathered surfers, beach-front diners.

Waiting for the bus I checked my phone, online, photos of him with another girl, leaning into his cap-tilted chin, knees resting between his, she's young. That image and my ears flood, they're asking questions, I nod, vague response, unblinked eyes, out the window, maybe I can hide.

Roll up the windows, ignore the bergie taps, shake your head, shrug your shoulders, mouth 'got no change', they shuffle on, hustlers or parasites to some.

Without sound, this deaf girl waves her hands, frantic face expression-full, mouth wide and open, like her eyes. She taps an arm, points a finger to her soundless world, then she's quiet for a while, in her stillness, still hands.

If I close my eyes I can see that green-eyed, freckled man, the gestures of *his* hands, rising, falling speech. Reaching for me with his fingertips, with his lips. They'll switch off the lights soon, blue bus in darkness and I'll get lost in thoughts of him.

## **The Way There – The Way Back**

On my bike ride the other day I rode the whole way out without my glasses on. The road went high along a ridge of hills and I could look down into sloping valleys either side and beyond them over other ridges of hills and even the sky beyond that. And everything was kind of blurred at the edges and that was fine. But often the haziness of shapes frightens me.

But not then.

Riding back was different. It started with a long hill too steep and gravelly to ride up. With Felix La Band in my ears, I made my way steadily upwards; with silky electronic sounds that shook and quivered and swam.

But I needed my glasses then.

I wanted the valleys sharp and the green hills contrasted. I wanted to see the brown ridges of cliffs and the sheen of sun, reflecting off the three dams down the valley.

And I did.

On the way there I didn't stop. I glanced around briefly but my eyes were on the road, cataloguing the uphill and corners, picturing the road backwards, trying to work out how tired I'd be coming back, how I would have to pace myself.

There was only one uphill on the way back, the rest of the way smooth, sloping downhill and I was all delight, the sun in my face, wind behind propelling me forward, feet pedalling harder to gain momentum until I was cruising.

The way back was easy and clear.

## **Four Horses Walk**

Four horses walk. The sun on their left, their shadows stretch down the empty cane field. First their legs are stilts, then their bellies round and full as moons. Head to tail their manes bob, following one behind the other. Four horses walk.

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**This is how our conversation goes:**

Him: Hello.

Me: Hi.

Him: How are you?

Me: Yeah, good ... and you?

Him: [He shrugs] I got back yesterday.

Me: How are your family?

Him: Crazy, intense, good. How's your work going?

Me: It's going well. I have about a week left for the first draft.

Him: And how far are you?

Me: Um, about three quarters probably, maybe more?

Him: Okay, that's cool.

Me: Yeah getting there.

[We look at each other in silence]

Him: I'm fixing my car. It stopped working while I was away. I think it's the battery.

Me: Oh okay. Hope you fix it. [I begin to walk away]

Him: See ya then. [He calls after me]

### **He still makes my heart race**

I somehow knew I'd see him, leaving the house to check if the washing machine was free. I somehow knew, unlocking the door. It was on the way back and there we were suddenly, in our matching white slippers. And what little inconsequential words we exchanged are ringing in my head.

I knew when I chose not to wash my face, chose to leave my wild hair down, chose to leave the house as I am that he would see me like that, as I am.

\*\*\*

## Counting Planes

She opens the fridge to find some leftover pizza, a tired lettuce, no milk. Oh well black coffee it is then. The cat is quiet this morning, sauntering over from the neighbour's. Usually he is all miaow but today he is content to just sit nearby, watching the world with her. She strokes him twice and he acknowledges but doesn't ask for more. She no longer gets hangovers and thinks cynically that maybe she's finally become an alcoholic. She used to get them; trapped in bed for hours unable to lift her head. Now she could get up at six if she wanted to, not that she does and not that she's ever drunk in the mornings.

Black coffee is pretty nice she thinks. There's something clean about it, sweet darkened water. It's been almost two months since she left him and she is finally living for herself. No one else's dishes, no one else to cook for, only her dirty clothes that might get washed once a month.

A plane flies overhead, one of those small propeller ones. She's surprised how quickly its sound is gone, leaving only the hum of the empty fridge, the highway over the hill, disgruntled hadedas. She gets the feeling, sitting out here that the world, this world, has been up for hours already, though it's only 7.30.

The plane sounds like its returning.

A couple lives across the path, about ten metres down the way. She sees them coming and going. The woman is tall and striking, the man is still enamoured with her.

No it's a second plane perhaps? It's flying in the same direction and she didn't see it circle back. It disappears faster the first.

She never sees the couple fight. Though the woman always walks in front and the man follows behind, carrying his guitar.

The cat has gone now, wandered off for the day and she wishes she could do the same. Walk in and out of people's gardens; sit in a patch of sun or up a tree, unseen.

A third plane? It must be only one, a farm plane, circling round, only one stretch of its circuit coming into her line of vision.

She likes to sit out here on weekday mornings. People going past with a sense of purpose, all have somewhere to be. She almost misses that feeling, then doesn't, knowing one day she'll be just the same.

Another black coffee – she could get used to this.

The plane is coming round again and this time she's waiting for it, expectant. How many times will it go round?



Last night she dreamt of a crying man. She remembers asking him what the matter was. He replied telling her that he was deeply unhappy with his life; he felt that he had no way of expressing himself. She can't recall what she said to him.

The plane flies over again – the fifth time now.

A young man leaves his house with a headband keeping his long hair back. He walks past intently. She sees him running hard up the hill on the other side of the fence. He returns in less than ten minutes, running easily back to his house. Looking awake now, having shaken off his dreams.

She's waiting for the plane again. To see it fly overhead maybe one last time today compelled to sit and keep count. This time she sees it circling round, far to the left, to come over her head again, flying straight towards the sun. She wishes she was up there, flying round intently. Instead she sits, intently doing nothing: smoking, drinking coffee, watching.

It's warm already for this time of day. Later it will probably get much hotter. People will sweat and seek out shade or hide indoors. These days always seem long, but they go by quickly. Before she knows it, it's night time and she's getting gratefully into bed. Some days she sees many people, other days none, no day the same anymore.

The plane is coming round again, one giant circle, seems the pilot too is getting his exercise, shaking off dreams with his routine.

She doesn't remember the words she said to the crying man in her dream but her tone, her attitude is still clear. She was matter of fact, firm, she did not indulge him his tears. She can't remember if he stopped crying or if she only made it worse.

It's been a long time since the plane last flew over. It won't fly past again this morning.

## **Last Sip**

At the bottom of a cup of coffee a few fine grounds that got through lie there in the last muddied sip. By now the coffee cold – that last sip a far cry from the first.

I leave it lying there at the bottom, its cloudy memory of milk, grains that would bite my tongue. The smell lingers, on my coffee breath, in the sticky almost brown walls of the mug.

Sometimes I leave these last sips too long by the sink – me the only dishwasher, too often absent – letting the last sips pile up.

Today I imagine I'll do the dishes – clear out oily oven trays, corners of toast now gone soft.

But not just yet, I'll sit a while longer on my garden step, my hedged square of grass, my single washing line, the sun now filling every corner. Quiet sleeping neighbours, Sunday morning bees.

But first, I think I'll have another cup and let this last sip become a first one again.

*And the rest of the journey was performed in the delicious society of my own body.*

- Virginia Woolf “Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car”



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