

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

**Part A: Thesis**

**Part B: Portfolio**

Part A: Thesis

*& salt the earth behind you*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

My thesis is a collection of prose pieces in the form of short stories, flash fiction and prose poetry drawing on memory and lived experiences to explore the trauma of death, grief and displacement, solace and the paroxysms of home. As a young woman from an Indian South Africa community, Hindu superstitions and folktales are my second skin, and shape both my worldview and my writing. I am inspired by Lidia Yuknavitch's observation that, "all artists see things that are not there", and by Dambudzo Marechera's belief that, "Beneath reality, there is always fantasy: the writer's task is to reveal it, to open it out, to feel it, to experience it." In my stories about trauma and grief, I often distort the line between seen and unseen worlds, where, for example, hauntings are taken seriously as lived experiences. I have also been influenced by Han Kang's *The White Book*, Kali Fajardo-Anstine's *Sabrina & Corina*, and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. Read together, Kang's stand-alone short stories form part of a greater collective 'memory' or 'life'; Fajardo-Anstine's collection illustrates how to write about a specific female Latina community while still telling individual stories; and Cisneros' fragments of memories tell the story of a person's life in narratives which are as long or short as they need to be.

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## **A collection of broken things**

The first time Sadira stole a child, she walked up to the little boy's bedroom window. He peered at her through the navy wooden bars of his crib and held his arms out for her. She slipped through the window, picking up the boy, his blanket and stuffed monkey. She whispered something to him, he put his little hand to her face, and in that moment, she clicked her fingers and they disappeared.

The second time, Sadira was at a park. She sat on a dark green bench, reading a book, with a white stuffed unicorn sitting next to her. She blended in. She sat there, watching the other mothers and nannies come and go with their children, waiting for one child in particular. When the girl waddled over to her and sat on Sadira's feet, she gave her the stuffed animal, and clicked her fingers again.

After that, Sadira stopped counting. She wandered around the city. She stopped at a family counselling centre. The receptionist was taking her smoke break at the back of the building. Sadira walked into the waiting room, she saw the child huddled over a dollhouse, making a barbie lie down on the bed. The child looked up and smiled, as Sadira tapped her on the shoulder, as though she had been waiting for her for a long time. She put her hand on Sadira's cheek, and they vanished.

Outside the gates of a school, Sadira waited. She sat on the low wall, eating red grapes from a bag. When the bell rang, she looked up and saw a set of twins making their way toward her among the hundreds of other children. The girl's face broke into a grin, revealing her crooked front teeth, and the boy pulled his sister's hand in a hurry to run into Sadira's arms.

She walked straight into the nursery for new-borns at the local hospital. She went to the bassinet of a tiny girl with long and silky eyelashes. She bent down to kiss her on the forehead, tucking the hospital blanket tighter around her. The baby's honey eyes met Sadira's, then blinked as she clicked, and they disappeared.

She knocked on the red door of a large grey house. An old man invited her in, offering her a cup of tea and ginger biscuits. He complained loudly about the mess of Lego blocks, action figures and toy cars that his grandson left all over the house. Sadira asked for the way to bathroom and stopping at an open door, she saw the little boy sitting in the middle of an octopus-shaped carpet clutching a worn purple fleece. "You came," he whispered. Sadira picked up the boy, who wrapped his arms around her neck, and when he clicked his fingers from beneath her hair, the room shifted.

## **Falling down the stairs**

My grandfather died when I was seven. I cannot recall too much about that time. Only that he died at night, five minutes past nine. It was the fifth of November. I remember wearing a white punjabi, the pants were too long, and I kept tripping over my feet, and that my hair was tied up. I remember falling down the stairs as I was carrying a tray of fruit upstairs, ripping my pants across the knee. And that we had to walk behind the hearse, chanting the final mantra before the burial. *Aum Namah Shivaya. Aum Namah Shivaya. Aum Namah Shivaya.* I remember wondering why my grandfather was going to be buried, most people were cremated, but I didn't question it. I remember being given a red rose; they were for the immediate family only. For us to lay into the coffin, before my grandfather was laid to rest for forever. I remember that my grandmother folded her wedding sari into the coffin, she said that my grandfather could keep it with him if he got too cold. She put his trumpet in too, because it was his first instrument, and he loved to play it. But other than that, I don't remember too much.

Then, my grandmother died when I was seventeen. I felt different, like death was visiting for the first time. Everything was cold and dark, and unwelcoming. I remember leaving home the same time she did that morning, but she was in an ambulance, and I was going to school. I thought that it was okay, that she would go to hospital and be treated, then return home as bright and cheerful as those sunflowers she loved. I remember coming home; my parents were not there. They were at the hospital. But I did not know that they were saying their goodbyes. Just after one the next morning, the phone rang. She had died. It was the twenty-seventh of September.

I remember waking up, brushing my teeth and going to sit outside in the cold. In silence. Death fascinated me, but he wasn't welcome. He came anyway. A few days later, we had her funeral. I remember getting dressed in white again, a different punjabi, one that fitted better and had shells on the front. My hair was down this time. I remember pulling my pants up and touching the crescent shaped scar that I got after falling down the stairs at my grandfather's funeral. I remember going up to the third floor of our apartment block, there was a quiet corner there. I knew I wanted a moment of quiet. I knew that my grandmother had been dead for a few days, but this was the first time I was going to see her. I remember looking outside the window and seeing the hearse down below. My parents' car was following it.

We chanted the prayers for her, walking around the coffin three times. Made the offering of fruit and milk at the foot of the coffin. We lit the lamp and the camphor; the camphor filled the marquee. I remember that it smelt like the comfort of a temple and the coldness of death. *Aum Namah Shivaya. Aum Namah Shivaya. Aum Namah Shivaya.* We had done all this before, for my grandfather, but it felt like the first time. I remember her pale skin, her face looked strange, without her smile. I remember wondering what she would keep with her if she got too cold. But I didn't say anything. It all felt new, foreign.

She was cremated, not buried. My mom said that she wanted it this way. I remember going to the crematorium, it was dark, black granite everywhere. I wondered if I would watch it happen, her shiny dark brown coffin sliding across the metal grate. I knew that we had to do another prayer just before meeting the fire. Make another offering of fruit and milk. Then the small squares of camphor were lit and placed in every corner of the coffin. She was on fire.

## **Up in Smoke**

### ***The Goddess***

She was the wife of one of the most powerful Gods of Hindu belief, Shiva. Her father didn't respect the Gods. His body was filled with a boiling jealousy. It consumed him, rising to the surface of his skin. Poisoned him from the inside out, colouring his world in a dangerous fury. His blood would rise, threatening to spill its poison whenever he saw his child. Her soul, once light, now heavy with the hatred that spilled from her father. Finally, she had had enough. Her last act of redemption lay with the thick wooden logs and their deep incense vapour. The heat from the fire called out to her as she tiptoed towards its glow. Her eyes were hazy and unfocused, determination lingering on the cusp of all things lost. The flames beckoned to her, ready to caress her into their embrace. Slowly, she edged closer, feet finding strength on their own. Her body succumbed to its fate, scorched by the passion of a lover she didn't know.

### ***The Widow***

Her husband lay across their bed, one arm limp at his side, the other, still clawed at his chest. His body was taut, the chiselled body of a man dead too soon. She lifted her gaze to the body, slowly losing all its heat as the minutes dragged on. She imagined his organs shutting down one after the other, oozing their remains into his bloodstream, contaminating it, slowly causing his body to swell. She knew that she'd be there in a few hours. Her body would be elaborately adorned in her red and gold wedding sari, while the jewellery dripped from her hair, her ears, her neck, her wrists. First, she imagined her clothes catching alight, slowly and then all at once, the delicate silk vanishing before her widened eyes. Then, she imagined her hair being singed by the flames. She wondered what would happen to the jewellery, whether it would burn with her body or fall to the ground in gentle thuds silenced by the roar of the flames.

### ***The Child-bride***

Her red bangles were smashed with the thick jagged edge of a black stone. The *bindi* on her forehead removed and stamped upon. The vermilion on her head, wiped away by a coarse and calloused hand extending from an old woman draped in white. They forcibly removed the sari she was wearing, the rough hands twisting her body in all ways to tie a white sari around her. She stared at the old woman in mute appeal. Icy fingers found their way down the nape of her neck. Her dark eyes turned wide; her lower lip began to quiver. The old woman led her to one of the barbers, a scruffy man with thin lips, squatting patiently for her to arrive. He had never shaved such a young widow before. She turned her large sombre eyes on him, and he returned the gaze. He carefully wrapped her hair around his fingers,



ready to shear it away. Her father told her that this was better than being burned alive on her husband's pyre. This way she got to live. He didn't tell her that this way, her body would belong to rich and powerful men. The touch of their hands and foul breath would linger long after she washed.

## Cardamom & Honey

Papa and I live in a tiny house far from everyone and everything, except for the little temple across the river. I remember waking to the sounds of the prayer bells as people made offerings at the start of day. But now the only sound in the morning is the river crashing against the bank.

“Papa, it’s cold. And it hurts.”

“It’s not cold, Diya. And what hurts?”

“The voices, Papa. They make me feel cold. And they send shivers down my spine. It’s so cold. And it hurts because they’re so loud.”

“What voices, Diya?”

“The loud ones. The scary ones. The ones that feel like a hand pressing against my mouth in the middle of the night. They make the windows wet, and the man comes.”

“The man?”

“Yes, the one with the red eyes. He has blue skin. And he always carries a piece of rope in one hand. The other hand has a *danda*. He has lots of gold jewelry on his body too. It looks heavy. His photo is in the temple, too.”

Papa looks at me. His eyes are worried. He won’t tell me what he’s thinking, but I can tell that he’s worried. I wonder if those voices are in his head too. Whether they are just as loud and scary. I hug him. He smells like cardamom and honey. Like home.

“Diya,” he says. “Can you see who the voices belong to?”

“The shadows, papa.”

Papa pulls me closer. Sniffing at my hair, he always does that. Like he’s trying to remember the smell. Cardamom and honey.

“Papa, if they come for me, you won’t let them take me?”

“I won’t let anybody take you, *jaan*.”

“Papa, promise.”

“I promise.”

“Papa?”

“Yes, Diya?”

“You’ll keep me safe?”

“You know I will.”

“Promise papa.”

“I promise.”

Papa gets off the bed. He lights another candle and goes to add more firewood to the fire. He puts the silver water jug on it. He’s going to make tea. Tea with cardamom in it.

“*Chai bono?*” he asks.

I nod.

“Diya, you’re not afraid, are you?”

“No Papa. You’re here. I’m okay. But the man is scary. With his blue skin and red eyes. He stands by the window. You’re always sleeping when he comes. But maybe next time I’ll wake you up.”

Papa brings the tea to the bed; he tucks the blankets around me and gives me a cup of tea to hold. He smiles at me with tired eyes. He’s very tired, my papa. He takes the silver bangle from the pile of clothes next to my bed and puts it on my wrist. It was my mother’s. He said that it would always keep me safe. He takes a sip of the tea and smiles.

“Papa, why don’t we hear the temple bells anymore? Where is everyone?”

“Oh, Diya. The world isn’t what it used to be. There are very few people left.”

“What happened to the people?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

“But the man is still here. We should tell him to stay with us.”

“No, Diya. You cannot invite *Yama* inside this house; don’t you know that he will stay, and we will have to go?”

“Where?”

“Far away. Where all the people have gone.”

## Imprints

After someone dies, the household is not allowed to cook anything on the stove. This was always peculiar to me; why was it just the stove that we couldn't use? What about the kettle? The microwave? And why? Anyway, from the day of passing to sixteen days later, when a final prayer would be done, close family and friends were supposed to take food over for the grieving family. I remember this happening when it was my grandmother's time. I thought that it was such a generous act on the part of the family and friends, but I also didn't like that we had to depend on people just for the sake of tradition. I already felt that we had lost our footing with grief, I didn't think that something as simple as cooking should be taken away, too.

It was only much later, on the fifteenth night after her death that I understood the reason behind this. I was sitting with my mom, both of us with cups of chai and our feet carefully tucked beneath us on the couch. The day was finally over and all the arrangements for the big prayer the following day were in order. My mom said that the reason we were not allowed to cook was because the deceased was transitioning from body and spirit, to just spirit, and that they were vulnerable. Vulnerable to negative energy or other lost spirits who would infect the new fresh ones. And that sometimes the act of cooking; the spices mixing with each other was *tamasic*, decreasing the energy from our bodies, inviting different energy to consume all of us. She said that the house needed to be pure, and the absence of cooking would aid this. At first, it made no sense to me, but at the same time, I understood everything.

I remember sitting there and imagining my grandmother's spirit drifting in and out of the house and visiting all the places that she liked to go. I wondered whether she would go to other family homes, or if she would visit the cemetery where my grandfather was buried. I wondered if the yellow flowers we planted on his grave ever blossomed.

My mom pointed to the low table that sat in the corner of the living room. This was a new addition, as the custom was to make an altar for the deceased. On it, was a pile of my grandmother's clothes folded neatly, incense holders, a vase of St. Joseph's lilies and a lamp that had to remain lit for all sixteen days. On the floor next to the table, lay a brass tray. The tray was covered with fine sand that we had gotten from the beach, it was brushed out so smoothly that even the tiniest imprint would be seen clearly. My mom said that another reason that we had to live differently for those sixteen days was because that was how long it took for the spirit to release itself from the attachments of the physical body and be transformed into something else.

I was seven again and sitting on a blue carpet in front of a similar table, with a larger brass tray that was filled with something white, and finer than sand. My grandfather's clothes were folded in a pile at the corner of this table. There was a box of cigarettes, too. And carnations, which still remind me of the smell of death. I think it was the sixteenth night, after the prayer; I remember seeing the imprint of a dragonfly emerge, clear as anything, all at once. I remember that it looked like someone had stamped a dragonfly pattern onto the white substance, but nobody had moved. We were all sitting and waiting for this. And I was sitting closest to the tray. *Samsara*, the cycle of reincarnation. My grandfather had become a dragonfly in his next life.

I used to go to school an hour early, starting the morning off with swimming practice. And every morning since seeing the imprint, a dragonfly was waiting on my starting block, taking off a second before I dove into the icy water. It had red wings. It would fly away, only for me to see it again, hovering by my bag as I dried off with my *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* towel before taking a shower and getting into my uniform. Then it would leave until the next morning. At first, it seemed like a coincidence, a dragonfly and a swimming pool. But I kept seeing the dragonfly for as long as I was in primary school. And I knew who it was.

On the sixteenth night, when there was no imprint for my grandmother, I asked my mom whether something was wrong, whether we had done something wrong. The sand lay untouched in the tray, not a grain out of place. My mom shook her head and said no, it was not us. But rather, my grandmother's cycle of reincarnation was over. Now, she had reached enlightenment, and would remain a soul without another worldly attachment.

My grandfather represented enlightenment by becoming a dragonfly. My grandmother reached enlightenment by *being*. It was a good sign. Her karma was over.

## The old woman behind the door

Many years ago, when I was about four or five, my parents were getting ready to sell our old house. It was a simple cream coloured single-story house, with my bedroom in the middle, covered in pink floral wallpaper, a white wooden bookshelf heavily laden with books, and a maroon trunk spilling with toys. In the backyard were two broken bicycles and a metal green swing set with yellow seats. Little enamel bowls with rainbow coloured rims were placed under the trees, filled with milk for the stray cats that would visit every afternoon. There were also big mango and avocado trees – a monkey’s playground. And many pot plants with coriander, thyme, rosemary and basil.

Overnight, we woke up to a snake hole in the middle of the driveway. The driveway was the perfect mixture of sand and pebbles, and concrete. Grass grew along the edges with yellow and white flowers winking among the green. It perplexed my parents that a snake hole could emerge through such thick and heavy concrete. My dad wanted to cover the hole immediately, saying that it was too dangerous to have it open in the middle of the driveway. Especially with me, the curious little girl who would stain her dresses while making bracelets out of grass and flowers. He was also uneasy with how powerful, how large this snake seemed to be.

My grandmother refused. She believed that the snake was here because we were being blessed with the presence of God. She couldn’t say whether it was *Shiva*, the Destroyer of Evil, or *Parasakthi*, the Goddess of Power and Spiritual Fulfilment, or *Manasa*, Goddess of the Snakes. But she was adamant, the snake hole would not be covered. At any cost.

The next morning, the hole grew larger. A mound. A *puthu*. My grandmother instructed my parents to go to the temple and ask a *brahmin* to come back with them. To get milk and fruit, a new sari or two, at the rate the mound was growing. While waiting for them to come back, she told me that we had to do a prayer outside for the mound. She said that we had to offer the milk and fruit to it, light three sticks of incense and stick them into a banana next to the mound. And that we had to mix turmeric with water and sprinkle it onto the ground, to cleanse the area, and let the Gods know that we wanted them there. Then she said that we would have to pour milk into the hole, to nourish the earth. And then, the final act would be to drape the saris around the mound.

My parents followed all my grandmother’s instructions. And in the days before we moved out of the house, we prayed there every morning. On the final day, my grandmother did the last prayer, the one that would release the Gods back into the world as we moved onto our new chapter.

A few weeks later, the boxes had been discarded and we had settled into our new home which was bigger than the old house. My room was still close to my parents but separated by a room that would soon be painted blue with a rocket mobile hanging in the corner. The garden was almost as lovely as the

house before, but the flowers were potted and there were less patches of grass to play in. One day, my dad got a phone call from the new owners of our old home, wanting my dad to come over as soon as possible. To talk. They wanted to know whether anyone died in the house during the time we lived there. Or if we experienced any paranormal occurrences within the walls of that house.

There were no deaths. Nothing paranormal.

The new family had a daughter, a little younger than I was at the time. She kept telling her parents that there was an old lady in the house, shuffling from room to room. She seemed lost. And stuck. She was a grey figure who came to life in front of the little girl. The little girl said that she could see the light in the old woman's eyes when she peered out from behind the doors. She said that when the old woman wasn't there, she could hear the slithering of snakes across the floor. Thick and heavy. She told her parents that it was loud, and it felt like the snake was under her bed, waiting for a hand or a leg to be exposed. She refused to sleep alone.

The parents told my dad they thought their daughter was struggling with the move. That maybe she just couldn't adjust to a new set of walls. They removed my pink wallpaper and painted her room white. They put family photos on the desk and *Barbie* posters along the wall. They covered the white tiles with wooden floorboards. But nothing helped. The little girl would cry out and point behind the door when she saw the old woman. She would cover her ears when she heard the snakes. Her parents couldn't understand what was happening to their child.

My dad went to the house the day after the phone call. The first thing he noticed was the new driveway. The tar was smooth, showing no sign of the *puthu* that was once there. The white and yellow flowers were gone, there were rose bushes where our bougainvillea tree once stood. He said that as he walked into the house, he saw the old woman's shadow across the wall in the hallway, and that the little girl's eyes were following it.

He understood.

He told the parents that he thought that our final prayer had released the Gods. But they had undone our work by covering the mound with tar. He said that we would have to come back, and do the prayer again, and maybe it would all be over. Maybe.

My grandmother was beside herself, convinced that removing the *puthu* was a sin, and that our family would forever be cursed. But we went back, and we did the prayer. We had to do it in front of the tree in the front yard.

We never heard from the family again. But my grandmother stopped worrying. She said that it must not have been Shiva, after all. It had to have been *Parasakthi* or *Manasa*, because the snake took the form of the old woman.

## **Boy Warrior Girl Heroine**

### *Boy*

Boy, with the breath of fog consuming belief in superstition, the smell of burnt wood clinging to your skin, tell me something.

What do you want to know?

Anything.

There is light in your eyes and darkness in your soul. Burn it away.

### *Warrior*

Warrior, with iron in your veins, and swords behind your back, you defeat the earth beneath your feet, tell me a secret.

Why?

I just want to know.

When you kill your opponent, their eyes empty. The soul goes in. It goes so far inside and becomes so small that it cannot control anything anymore.

### *God*

God, with your bright gold eyes, your mischievous smirk, and your thick gold armband inscribed with a laurel wreath, tell me a story.

Okay.

Just like that?

Yes. My body burns with fire inside my blood. My back aches from the wings I once had. White wings with gold tips. Lining your body with steel is a lesson to remember.



### ***Prince***

Prince, your silver crown with the emeralds looks heavy, your staff is stained by something red, your midnight blue cape is torn, tell me what happened.

I was doing my duty.

Which was?

Protecting what is mine.

### ***Hero***

Hero, with your watery gaze, faded freckles and black ripped clothes, tell me what haunts you.

The allure.

Of?

Of walking into death's embrace.

### ***Girl***

Girl, your anklet glitters in the sun, your crown of lavender and wildflowers leaves a scented trail, there are bloodstains on your arm and bruises on your wrist, tell me what happened.

No.

I will listen, I promise.

He was protecting what was his. That's all.

### ***Warrior***

Warrior, your insides are plated with steel, your voice is icy, but your eyes are flames, tell me a story.

If I am plated with steel, nothing can harm me. Not even those who give and shear wings.

Wings?

Yes. He told me about his wings, the white ones. And how his body longs to take flight again.

### *Goddess*

Goddess, you have a glow and it lights up your body, your hands create the mountains and seas, tell me what haunts you.

The truth or a lie?

Truth.

I desire to run straight into death's embrace.

### *Princess*

Princess locked away in the tower, your hands are stained with colour, you paint the day away, tell me a secret.

A secret?

One that hasn't been said out loud before.

I have a magic paintbrush. I paint away the souls of the people he must kill in battle. I paint the souls into nothingness.

### *Heroine*

Heroine, you nurse the fire that is always lit, you save entire villages with your determination, your shoulders are always hunched, tell me something.

Anything?

Anything.

There is bravery in saving people and it brings light for them, hope. But for me, saving brings darkness. I burn my darkness at this fire.

## Death & Dubai

Role of the autopsy:

1. To establish whether death is related to cardiac disease or another process.
2. To establish the nature of the cardiac disease, if present.
3. To consider whether the cardiac disease identified in body is related to systemic disease.
4. To consider whether any cardiac disease is likely to be inherited.
5. To consider whether the cardiac disease could have been treated.
6. To consider whether the cardiac disease is related to an illicit activity (e.g. drug consumption).

The first real memory she had of him was when he almost took his eye out with the blue hanger made of wire. He was trying to re-work it, to make it into a stranger to itself. Something new and unexpected. He twisted it, and then untwisted it. Then twisted it again. He kept doing this until he gave up and opened it into a straight line. They heard his younger brothers pounding up the stairs, and the sticky mess of two three-year-old boys tumbled into the room. The smaller of the two tugged onto the wire. He pulled it away from them before one of them got hurt. Too fast. He pulled it so hard away from them that it entered the corner of his own eye socket, narrowly missing his eye. Oh, the mess.

His parents had to take him to hospital with the wire still sticking out of his eye socket. It would have been funny if there wasn't so much blood leaving a trail.

Other (not primarily cardiac) pathology to be considered during the autopsy:

1. Pulmonary embolism.
2. Pneumonia.
3. Pancreatitis.
4. Peritonitis.

He forwarded his new job opportunity to her. The email notification being the first thing she saw one morning. Dubai. He said that he was happy to go. Especially because his brothers were at that adolescent age, and kept messing around, refusing to be serious. He said that he had just bought a whole new set of ties. That he was going to wear a tie every day to the hotel, before changing into his chef's whites.

Relevant information required before the commencement of the autopsy:

- 1.Circumstances of death.
- 2.Witness statements.
- 3.Previous medical history.
- 4.Medical therapy regime.
- 5.Previous surgical operations.
- 6.Alcohol and drug usage.
- 7.Family history.

Dubai. He wrote to her of the Burj Khalifa, rising above the city, a marvel equivalent to any Western cathedral. He said that its elegance was not the thing that impressed him the most, but rather the efficient use of the land. He said that he was content, and this move was the right one. He also said he wanted to come back home soon, to visit the family for a while. He wanted to see how his brothers had changed, if they had grown up at all.

He wrote about how the hotel had allowed him to make changes to the dessert menu. That the owner enjoyed his take on *Luqaimat*, explaining that the dish was a bowl of hot dumplings that tasted and felt like doughnuts, and were served with a sticky date sauce and sesame seeds. And that his favourite street food had to be *Chebab's*, pancakes stuffed with sour cheese and then topped with a sweet date syrup, which was what inspired his *Luqaimat* recipe. He always sent her photos of his plates of food before they left the kitchen.

The autopsy procedure

- 1.A standard autopsy is required, emphasis upon the cardiac and vascular tissues.
- 2.Body mass to be compared with the heart weight.
- 3.Examination of tissues; cranial, lung, liver and kidney tissues.
- 4.Photography is required for evidence.
- 5.The position of possible equipment to be recorded (e.g. defibrillator units, tubes for ventilation etc.).

She hadn't heard from him in a while. No update on his hunt for a new apartment, or new recipes that he thought she should try out. She decided to phone his parents. His mother was confused at first, unable to

place the voice. She mentioned that she was there when the blue wire hanger landed in his eye. His mother gave a soft chuckle, followed by a deep sigh.

His landlady said something about finding him on the floor of his living room. She said that the coffee table was piled with loose pages of orders for the hotel, and recipes. And that a broken mug and a large dark brown stain lay a few centimetres from his outstretched arm.

His body wouldn't come home. The planes were grounded, the airports closed.

The hospitals were for the sick, not the deceased. There would be no autopsy.

## **In the shadows**

Before he died, my grandfather used to tell me stories of the world, of life and death. One day, he told me that I needed to protect myself in the late hours of the night and the early hours of the morning. He said that all the veils between the worlds were very thin. Too thin. It was easy for loved ones to come and visit, and unwanted guests to cause trouble in the minds of people. I didn't understand. I still didn't understand what he meant, even when my grandmother used to say that she saw him after he died. I was seven.

\*

A tap on your shoulder only gets more intense at 3am. It's 3am, and 3am, and 3am. And the tapping doesn't stop. I'm on the sofa, and I'm asleep, not asleep, dreaming, not dreaming, awake, not awake. She's dead and she's dead and she's dead.

A few days after my grandmother died, I walked through life in the shadows, in the quiet moments, in the in-betweens. I remember feeling the weight of a paradox on me, thick and heavy and compelling. *The paradox of loss; how can something that's gone, weigh you down so much.* There was a loss of the senses, a loss of time and for certain fleeting moments, the loss of consciousness. I packed away all my colourful clothes. It was not a sign of mourning, as one would have assumed. I was transfixed with living in this half-light that I found myself in. I wore black to blend in with the shadows, to not draw attention to myself, to borrow Death's uniform.

Around six days after the funeral, this new state left my body overwhelmed. Everything was new, and difficult to understand. Nothing was easy, and nothing could be explained, except that she, my grandmother, was dead. But that understanding came with a thousand questions, all of which had the same answers. A reel on repeat.

I began to see things move in the corner of my eyes. I felt presences that may or may not have been there. I began to stand in door frames, because I was told that they were a part of the in-between, a portal of sorts. I don't remember why I did it, or what I had hoped to achieve, but it gave me a sense of purpose, trying to explain the things happening to me, around me. Family and friends moved away from me with drooped shoulders, some avoided eye contact. It seemed they were adamant to not catch whatever it was that I had. Others became overbearing, wanting to feed me and brush my hair, unpacking clothes to bring some colour back into my life.

Then, the tapping on my shoulder began. Every morning at 3am. At first, I thought I imagined it, knowing that I was not getting enough sleep, barely eating and completely and utterly obsessed with

death. But it happened every morning, at the same time, until I shook off the delirium that I found myself in. The one night I decided to sleep in the living room, my mother had taken it upon herself to share my bed, just so that she could keep an eye on me. I had my green fleece wrapped around me, while drifting in and out of sleep. Then, at 3am as if on cue, there was a tap on my shoulder.

It took me a few moments to understand that it was my grandmother. She stood there, wearing a purple sari, smiling at me, trying to talk. But I couldn't hear the words. I couldn't hear anything. There was a moment when I thought that I had finally given into my grief. That I was unable to remove myself from it, so it consumed me whole. But this didn't feel like that. It made no sense but made absolute sense at the same time.

I remember that her smile was full. A smile steeped in some sense of joy and contentment. But this, this made me feel like she missed me as much as I missed her, and that was a feeling that I cannot describe. It made my body come back to me, after feeling foreign for so long. And then, I did what any person would do, I put the kettle on.

For as long as I could remember, my grandmother and I used to drink tea together. It would happen before and after school, sometimes after sport practice, when I wanted anything but a hot cup of tea. It would happen when we used to watch movies, or when I'd be up studying at 3am because it was peaceful. So, when she visited, it only made sense that I would make some tea.

That first morning, I made two cups of tea, just how we liked it. I filled hers up to the brim, because that's how we used to do it before she died. I couldn't hear anything she said, but I would see her lips moving in the light. She also never touched the cup. If she touched anything, it was either my shoulder, my hand or my face.

I couldn't understand what this was, and what it was doing to my already diminishing state of mind.

A few mornings later, my mom came to the dining room, where I was sitting with my grandmother. She rubbed the sleep away from her eyes, asking what I was doing in the dark at 3am, alone. Her mouth closed on the question, and when I traced her eyes, she was looking at my grandmother. My mom went to the kitchen and made herself a cup of tea too, coming to sit with us.

But that was the only morning she joined us, after that, I would hear her move around at 3am, but she never came back to the living or dining rooms.

This happened for nine mornings. At exactly 3am every morning, my grandmother would come wake me up with a tap on my shoulder. We would have some tea, and I would imagine her telling me stories of her life, and her giving me life lessons. On that ninth morning, something felt final about the whole thing. I knew it felt different, but I couldn't understand it. I didn't understand any of it.

On the tenth morning, when she didn't come and wake me up, I waited for the sun to come up and then I unpacked some colourful clothes.

\*

I was taught that in the beginning, the world began with a word, *Aum*, and it came with a tune. And that is how it began. It was sung into place. But I did not know that this music would have a lasting effect on my life. I also did not know that even when all the other sounds of life were too loud and consuming, this one tune would remain. It would be a bassline, something so subtle that I would not notice until it was missing. I also did not know that a person could be attached to this tune of your life. And only when they left, would you notice the absence of the music.

\*

3am rolled around, I remember seeing it on the screen of my phone. *He was supposed to be here.* Parachute's lyrics started off softly, a whisper almost. And it got louder and louder. I remember checking my phone, to see if I turned on the music player by some slip of hand, but I hadn't. My laptop lay asleep on the desk. And my university residence had the life snuffed out of it, all the girls were silent, all the lights were off. *There's no one in the driveway.* The song was playing out in my head, and with every second, every memory of us listening to it came to mind. It was colourful and alive, and this was the first time that thinking about my best friend, since he died, didn't throw me into a spiral. I thought about Cameron's smile, how it always lit up his eyes and you could see that a laugh was threatening to escape, even when the situation did not call for it.

It's curious how a little thing like choosing a song with someone could become the script for how they die. Suddenly the phone rings. *A voice says something's happened.* Two nights before that, there were two calls. One from him, which I didn't answer because I was having a movie night with my friends, and I remember my yellow socked foot pushing the phone further into the blankets as it vibrated. Later, there was another call, from a friend, the paramedic. I answered that one. I remember waking up, opening the window and sitting on my desk, letting the cold breeze take over. I also remember hearing the lyrics *Through the good and the bad and the ugly*, from the same song, and then going back to sleep.

He's dead and he's dead and he's dead.

But when 3am struck on that morning, the song lyrics pulled themselves out of the air. I remembered tea with my grandmother many years before. In that moment, I understood that he was there with me, but he did not take as long as she did. He did not wait for me to try and understand his death and lose myself in the process. He did not wait for me to travel twelve excruciating hours before seeing his



cold lifeless body. I thought that it was selflessness. The kind of selflessness that came with knowing someone, knowing how they thought before the thoughts manifested, knowing their actions before they even moved. It was because he was the mirror to the shadows I knew.

*She sits by his bedside, holds his hand too tight.*

The next morning, the music was just as loud, and I remember the room feeling too hot, and then too cold. And he was present. Sitting on my desk as the music became louder and louder in the silent bubble of my room. He was wearing that denim jacket that he always wore, with one of the buttons hanging loose. It was always loose, no matter how many times I had sewn it tightly before. *They talk about what happened. But she can barely hear them.* He tells me about the accident, and how our friend was the first one to find him, because he was on duty that morning. He tells me all the details about it. Details that I would later be told again, from my mom after she attended his funeral, taking a bouquet of pure white St. Joseph's lilies with her. This is real, I told myself, I would not have known any of these things otherwise.

He tells me that people will ask why I wasn't at his funeral. Why the person that he had spent so many years with didn't go say goodbye. He also said that I shouldn't go. That there were too many questions with answers only he could give me. So, he was here, and would keep coming, for as long as I needed him.

*Stay, stay there forever.*

On the ninth morning, he reminded me of the first time I listened to the song with him, and how I rolled my eyes and laughed at him when he started singing it. He also laughed when he recalled how I refused to wear a ring, saying something about institutions and not wanting to belong to a person. I took it anyway. I remember telling him that one of my favourite things about him was how he used to tie St. Joseph's lilies to my front gate just before leaving my house. This morning, like with my grandmother before, felt like there was something final to it. He was less animated than the mornings before, more melancholic but there was a sense of acceptance, too, like his death finally made sense to both of us. Somehow, we could try and understand why the course of our lives had turned out this way. He kept looking at me and smiling and telling me that I had to keep listening to this song, because for as long as I did, he would be around.

When he did not show up the next morning, I set the song as my phone's ringtone.

## Refuge

एक

The sound of bells echoes in the distance, faintly masked by the whir of the ceiling fan.

दो

The house is small, too small for so many women. There are only three rooms; a kitchen, a bathroom and a living room.

The kitchen is narrow, with eggshell-coloured cabinets along one wall. Pressed against the opposite wall a pale wooden table holds a worn two-plated stove, and a neat stack of pots. The lightbulb hangs low, and flickers from time to time. The window is covered with a sheer lilac curtain, the light bounces off the pots. A woman who is neither young nor old peers through the curtain. She is dressed in her red wedding sari, her arms are laden with heavy gold bangles, the red bindi on her forehead smudged, and her eyes are dark with kohl. She understands how fleeting happiness is.

Outside the kitchen, in a tiny hallway, the oldest woman in the house lies on a narrow wooden bed with her eyes closed. She is so old that the others care for her as they would a child. A white sari loosely covers her aged body.

The bathroom has a simple toilet and an unpredictable shower that sometimes runs dry. On those days, the women have to fill a grey bucket with water from the tap on the balcony off the living room.

The balcony is long and narrow. It looks onto a sea of tightly packed tall trees. The women use the balcony to wash their clothes and dry chillies. And to escape each other from time to time. One of the young women, a lawyer, is there now. She wears her court shoes and black blazer over soft pants. She shakes her head as she turns the pages of a newspaper. A box of cigarettes peeps from her pocket.

The living room is just that, a room where the women live. During the day, they stack their mattresses and blankets against one wall. Some pile their pillows on top, too. Others use their pillows throughout the day; to lean against or sit on. The furniture is pushed close together: a three-seater couch with orange cushions, a television with an old radio sitting on it, a coffee table, a table with five chairs. The walls are white, the curtains jade. Framed prints of the Gods, *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, *Ram*, *Sita*, *Lakshmi*, *Parvathi* hang above the wooden table holding a brass lamp, some candles and a metal incense holder. A red and gold tapestry of the *Hamsa Hand* protects the home.

## तीन

There are four old women in the corner of the living room. One sits on a navy footstool just behind the rest. She unravels her long grey hair from a bun and massages it with large amount of amla oil. She doesn't remember very much, just that she used to massage her daughter's hair with the same oil, as her mother did for her.

Another old woman sits on two pillows on the floor, squinting into the light as she tries to sew a button back onto her orange housecoat. She used to wear glasses but has long since lost them. Her world is blurry.

The third and fourth old women sit on the floor, legs straight, with their backs to each other. One holds a large white dish in her lap as she pulls methi herbs away from their stalks. Her hair slips out from underneath the pallu of her sari, but it doesn't distract her from her task. The others know her as the bitter old woman, and she does little to challenge this. The fourth woman sits with a kitchen towel on her lap, peeling potatoes into dishes of water. She does this quietly, the only noise is the scraping of the potato and the soft thud as she drops another potato into the dish.

There are more younger women. They are strewn around the room.

One sits on the couch in a pair of washed-out blue jeans and a white cotton shirt. A purple sock on one foot, a pink sock on the other. She looks bored as she waves the black tv remote in the air, allowing the sounds of the world to enter through the screen.

Beside her, a young artist sits drawing. She is skittish. Her eyes nervously scan the room as she sketches the women in front of her. She wears a long grey dress, flecked with paint and worn thin from trying to scrub away old stains. She is usually quiet.

A third young woman has covered the table with her textbooks and study notes. She wears a pair of checked winter pyjamas; a long yellow pencil is threaded through the twist of hair at the nape of her neck. She sits at the table with her earphones in, trying to study for an exam she will never take.

A fourth is hunched on the floor, painting her nails a deep blood red. She wears a flimsy dress that she tucks beneath her thighs. She loves the dramatic flair that the red offers, but she is as modest as can be. One of the children sits with her, a little girl with brown glasses and sleepy eyes, trying to learn things she will never need to know.

A loud young woman sits on the coffee table. She is not afraid to speak her mind and does just that. She likes to sit there, watching everyone, calling out when she disagrees with someone, or with what they are doing. She wears a short denim skirt which rises as she moves, and a pink strappy vest. When the strap slides down her right shoulder, her bruises are revealed.

The lawyer is still on the balcony, reading her newspaper, shaking her head as she smokes.

A young teacher sits cross-legged in the furthest corner of the room, leaning against the stack of mattresses. She is dressed for a school day. Hair in a neat bun, a pale-yellow punjabi kurta, a mustard shawl draped around her shoulders and white leggings.

The last young woman moves from room to room, restless. She wears her long hair in a single plait that guides her spine, and a white punjabi, loose at her shoulders. She is the one who holds everything together. She is light, and hope. She always kisses the children goodnight.

Then, there are the in-between women. Neither old nor young.

One is tall and hidden by a black burka, only her bright brown eyes can be seen. She sits with her back to the bathroom door as she applies complicated henna designs to her left palm.

The other is still in the kitchen, peering out the window from behind the lilac curtains.

Finally, there are the children.

Apart from the girl with glasses, who is eleven, all are attached to the teacher. They sit in the corner with her, as she reads to them. Two wear uniforms from different schools. The ten-year-old has a white button-down shirt tucked into her navy skirt, her hair escapes from her low ponytail. The nine-year-old has short matted hair, unevenly cut, the colour of a chestnut. She wears a white school dress with a thick green belt at the waist.

A seven-year-old sits with them, in a pink punjabi, her hair in two plaits that are tied with ribbons, she is the most excitable of the group. Laughter bubbles under her skin.

A five-year-old with long curly hair skips past in a gold princess outfit complete with a plastic gold tiara. She is compassionate, always helping the older women to set their beds up for the night. The women think that she was at her birthday party.

## चार

“Can you hear the bells? We have to make room for someone else,” says the young woman with the long plait.

“And where will she sleep?” asks the loud young woman. “As it is, we don’t have enough space for ourselves.”

“Then someone must leave,” says one of the old women. The bitter old lady who stopped believing in charity when she was left lying at the riverbank.

The woman with the plait lights the lamp on the table, puts her palms together and silently asks for guidance.

“Why are you praying?” the loud woman asks her. “Is God here?”

“While you’re there, light some incense, *didi*, this room smells like the methi herbs,” says the artist.

“The same herbs you’ll eat for supper, girl,” retorts the bitter old woman.

पाँच

The bells ring louder in the distance, the new arrival is coming soon.

छः

The old women start talking louder, each adamant that there is no more space in the house.

“All we have is this one room and the kitchen.”

“Look how many of us are here.”

“Where will she sleep?”

“There is no space for us, these children can’t even play or learn how to take care of a home already.”

“You can’t let her in.”

“Send her away. It’s the only resolution to make us all happy.”

“And where will she go?” asks the lawyer from the balcony’s doorway. “Where would you have gone if this place didn’t exist?”

The bitter old woman looks at her, rolling her eyes as she re-covers her head with the pallu of her sari.

“Maybe the young ones should leave, they have the energy and can find somewhere else.”

“And where will they go?” the lawyer repeats, and most of the women speak up.

“I don’t know. Somewhere.”

“You heard the news on the radio, there are new women every day. The numbers are increasing all the time.”

“Send all of them away. They can find a new house themselves, like we did.”

“They are nothing to us, really. So, we shouldn’t worry about them. Keep that door closed, *didi*.”

“If they are nothing to us, then who or what are we to each other? Strangers? Women who could not be protected before but will be protected now?” asks the woman with the plait.

“Then you stand outside and wait for them. Then go find another place to live with them. Leave us in peace,” the bitter old woman snaps.

The woman painting her nails looks up and says, “Maybe this isn’t our fault, maybe none of it was. Let’s just wait until someone knocks on the door before we start fighting over nothing.”

“But some of you must go,” insists the bitter old woman.

“And how do we decide that? We are all victims here.”

सात

The bells ring louder still. Three times. She will be coming soon.

आठ

The artist puts her pencils down and looks around at all the faces in front of her. “If it was done by a father, or brother, or uncle, or husband, or boyfriend ...”

“Then we’re safe!” a few of the old women clasp one another’s hands in relief.

“I don’t know who mine was,” says the studious young woman. “I was walking home from the library. It wasn’t even dark yet.”

“I don’t know either,” the teacher adds quietly, holding all the little girls close to her. “Maybe it was the new male teacher at the school or even a parent, I don’t know. I hadn’t seen him before.”

The princess pulls off her crown and says, “Papa’s brother.”

“It was my boyfriend,” says the young woman with the denim skirt.

“A policeman, in an alley, two blocks from my house. I was out buying vegetables,” says the old woman who is peeling the potatoes.

“Both husbands. The first tried when I was thirteen, but the second succeeded at thirty,” says the woman with the plait.

नौ

The bells ring twice.

दस

“There’s still too many of us. How else can we decide who should stay? By age?” mutters the bitter old woman.

“And have the youngest leave to fend for themselves?” the lawyer throws her newspaper to the floor.

The bitter old woman shrugs.

“Maybe the way we *ended*?” suggests the woman with the denim skirt.

“Strangled.”

“Burnt.”

“Buried alive.”

“Hanged.”

“Smothered.”

“Thrown from the car into traffic.”

“Stabbed.”

“I was put into papa’s brother’s car until the windows misted and I fell asleep,” says the princess.

The bitter old woman bows her head. No one has spoken about this before.

ग्यारह

Now, the bells ring once, the sound is deafening.

बारह

“Nobody is going anywhere, we’ll manage,” says the woman with the plait. “And we’re not turning her away when she comes to the door. It will be cramped, but we’ll be safe.”

“I’m leaving,” says the bitter old woman. But she doesn’t move.

तेरह

The bells stop ringing. There is a soft knock on the door.

## चौदह

“When we first came here, we were afraid, we didn’t know what this place was. So, please. When she comes, remember to give her kindness,” the woman with the plait says, and with that she squeezes past the oldest woman on the bed in the hallway and opens the door.

She returns with a three-year-old in a green dress and pigtails. The little girl clutches her hand and half-hides behind her, slowly taking in her surroundings. She sees the old women in the corner and runs towards them, throwing her arms around the woman sewing on the button who looks just like her grandmother.

The bitter old woman stands up slowly, her joints clicking as she moves, and walks past the lawyer to the balcony. She stares at the trees.

She returns a few minutes later. “*Beti*, you’ll be safe here,” she says lifting the little girl into her arms, kissing her forehead. And she sits down in her usual place, the three-year-old in her lap, and resumes cleaning the methi, showing the little girl how to do it.



## **Kaleidoscope**

### Black

That Halloween I wore my hair down, hiding my pomegranate earrings. I longed to be Persephone, even for just one night.

A starless sky, holding secrets we could not possibly imagine.

Comfort in the silence.

### Blue

A teddy bear I knitted and named Mateo.

Vivid forget-me-nots. A mix between bold and delicate and optimism.

What it would feel like to fall into a lake, the water blanketing the surface as I drop to the bottom.

### Gold

Sunset, with tea in hand, the world whispering goodnight.

The ring my grandmother gave me. A belt-buckle ring, did she mean it as a chastity symbol?

Pharaoh Tutankhamun's funeral mask.

### Green

Leaves, fresh and dripping with dew. This is what life feels like.

First Edition copy of *Wuthering Heights*. The most marked passages, "... a golden afternoon of August: every breath from the hills so full of life that it seemed whoever respired it, though dying, might revive..." and "You said I killed you. Haunt me then."

A mug of mint tea with lemon slices floating at the surface.

### Grey

The in-between. I don't belong in this world, neither do I belong in the next.

The wolf sleeping next to me, his paw beneath my shoulder. He radiates the warmth that I've been searching for all along.

Old photographs hidden in classic novels, the faces of these strangers blurring into the characters in the books.

## Pink

*The Lovers* tarot card. Disharmony and lost love, but also passion and heated looks.

That baby smell, fresh from a sleeping new-born.

My oversized pale jersey that morning, the sleeve stained with my eyeliner, my fingers stained by my purple pencil.

## Red

The way he saw me. "I think you were a Latina in your past life," he said. "With big brown eyes and long curly hair. I see you wearing a red dress and ignoring people."

His bruised knuckles. He brushed his hair out of his eyes. A story he didn't want to tell.

My fearless lipstick. I wanted to be Queen of the Underworld.

## Silver

The cutlery on the table that night, engraved with daffodils and skulls.

A pen my father bought me, fancier than anything else I owned, *La Luna*, it said on the side.

Lightning streaking through the night sky.

## White

The Angels and their wings.

Fresh linen and a steaming mug of tea, the cat asleep on my feet.

Snow, and the paleness of loss.

## Yellow

A jersey my mother passed down to me. I wear it whenever my aura needs brightening.

A long dress. I wanted to be Persephone in a different way. I wore my hair down again, threaded with baby's-breath.

The balloons that filled the house for my niece's birthday. Her eyes were brighter than anything I'd ever seen before.

## **& salt the earth behind you**

Once there was a baby with dewy skin and bright eyes, she attracted strangers and cooed at their attention. Her grandmother frowned and sat the child on her lap and placed a black dot on her forehead. “The evil eye is real, and children need to be protected from it,” she said.

When the baby grew into a little girl who could never fall asleep, her grandmother said, “Stop that tossing and turning and go to the fridge. Eat a handful of cherries and you’ll be drowsy before you even wash your hands and return to bed.”

One day her visiting uncle told a joke that was surprisingly funny, the girl’s peals of laughter turned into intense hiccups. Her grandmother took a silver teaspoon from the tea tray and dipped it into the sugar bowl. Holding the girl’s chin, she said, “Swallow this quickly, it will stop the hiccups.”

At lunch one Sunday, the girl had a coughing fit. Her parents thought that she was choking on a roasted potato, they rushed to help her. One gave her a glass of water, the other rubbed her back. Her grandmother quickly got up from the table and went into the kitchen, she returned with a bar of dark chocolate. “You’re not choking,” she told the girl. “Eat this and you’ll be fine.”

The girl learned the magic of the world at an early age. She sat up in her bed at night and spoke to the moon, asking the moon to guide her on her way. She enjoyed telling the moon about the books she read. She liked to count the stars. Her grandmother was horrified, “Don’t count the stars! Warts will appear on your fingers.” One morning, the girl awoke to two little warts on her right hand. Her grandmother sighed and wrapped her fingers in duct tape. The warts were gone within a week.

As the girl grew into a young woman and stayed out later at night. She began to experience something strange. She felt that a presence was with her. The feeling was stronger when she was with people than alone. She knew the world was more enchanting than it appeared to be. She told her grandmother about the presence looming over her shoulder. Her grandmother gave her a bottle of table salt and said, “Take it. Keep it in your bag. Or put some into a zippy bag. When you enter the house after dark, salt the earth behind you. Make a line of salt at the door. When you close the door, don’t look back.”

One day, the young woman had a date with a man who made her understand the lyrics *lightning running through my veins*. All day she felt anything but herself. Her grandmother said, “It’s just nerves.” And

made her a face mask of turmeric and yoghurt. She told her that it would help her to glow from within and distract her from how she was really feeling. “It will help for now,” her grandmother said. “But when you see him, it won’t matter. You’ll glow by yourself.”

On the date, the young woman scratched her cheek with the edge of her bracelet. It was a little thing. When she got home, her grandmother was waiting for her. Her grandmother saw the scratch on her face and marched the young woman to the kitchen. She took out a bottle of honey, squeezed a drop onto her finger and gently applied the honey to the scratch. “Now, it won’t scar. Hold out your finger,” the grandmother said. She squeezed a drop of honey onto her granddaughter’s finger and motioned for her to lick it. “There, now your dreams will be as sweet as your night.”

When the lightning struck, and the woman’s heart broke, her grandmother made chai in a pot on the stove, instead of teabags in a mug. She added extra rose water, honey and cardamom to the usual mix. “To sweeten your heart again,” she said.

As a child or adult, whenever the young woman was sick, her grandmother made rasam, a weak and spicy soup. She soaked and strained tamarind. She made a paste of cumin seeds, black pepper and garlic. She threw mustard seeds, dried chillies, curry leaves and asafetida into hot oil, adding chopped tomato when the curry leaves spluttered. Then, came the paste, tamarind pulp, salt and water. The grandmother waited for the soup to gently boil, then stirred in chopped coriander. Finally, she poured the rasam into a big green bowl, over freshly made white rice. Her grandmother took it to her bedside, and sat quietly while the food healed her, body and soul.

## Moons & Magic

### *Full Moon*

It was by accident that I found the thing that symbolized the perfect circle hanging low in the night sky. I knew the moon, of course. But it was on that one night that I *found* the moon. Happiness was here, in unexpected places. So was melancholy. Like that night, when he and I left our high school's hall, leaving the farewell. The beach was a few minutes away from the school. He lit a fire with some driftwood, the coloured sparks being a perfect ending. Until they were not. I remember putting my head against his chest, his heart beating against its cage. It was the anticipation of the unknown. Brutal and fearless. I also remember walking away in my heels. Foolish. The sand pulled at my shoes and then the fall that came with it. I remember falling and seeing the moon above me, grinning at my fall. He became my companion that night. Sometimes I can still feel the sand in my hair and down my dress, cold and grainy. Some nights I wake up to the taste of sand in my mouth and the moon winking at me through my curtains.

### *The Devil*

When I had fallen under the spell of depression, I dreamt about the *Devil*. I danced with him in a dress made of silver silk. On my head was a crown of red flowers, baby's-breath and pomegranate seeds. He made me dance with him until my feet ached. And then he whispered that if I ran fast enough, I could finally be free. I did run, kicking off my shoes and throwing the crown into the fire around me. The fire kept trying to kiss my dress, releasing little hisses when I escaped its grasp. But I lost my breath in front of his gate. The days that followed left me with blank stares and dark eyes. Then, I started dreaming about him again, night after night. Sometimes I got further than his gate. But not far enough to be free.

### *Third Quarter*

The moments between the lines. My mind is a wild tangle of inconceivable things. I told him not to feel burdened with the task of untangling them, trying to make them lay in straight lines. No. Leave them be, in the twists and curls that I run my fingers through. I do not mind the tangles, the same way that he does not mind the way my hair frames my face in the mornings.

### *The Fool*

When the *Fool's* card appeared, it was the reminder of innocence and new beginnings, of free spirits and hesitation. Of carelessness. *The Fool* came with potential going unnoticed, carefree laughter and reassuring mumbles in the dark. It was difficult to be reminded of innocence when I had just narrowly escaped the *Devil*. But the *Fool* told me to begin a new phase of life, to take a risk, or many. He told me

to discover a talent. So, I began to draw, across books and magazines, the wall in my bedroom and even behind the front door. Later, I began to write. The *Fool* would come to me, perching at the edge of my desk and braid little white flowers into my hair. Sometimes the words would spill out of me, a tumble of images and feelings that I could not translate. On those days, he would tell me to pick up the pen, curve his fingers around mine and help me.

### ***Waxing Crescent***

But there was something so electric about it. So dangerous Those little touches were everything. For a moment, I lived for them. And it turns out that you can build entire worlds around the tiniest of touches and softest whispers, in your mind. It will make your hair stand up as the current runs through your veins. The sound of static wild in the air. But after, it will leave you feeling a little less than whole.

### ***The Lovers***

He became the silky piece of ribbon that I braided into my hair in summer. But like all ribbons, I had to run the frayed ends through a dancing flame. I had to cauterize that wound before it grew, and I tried not to salt it with tears. I had to sew the edges up again, the stitches an angry red against my skin. The *Lovers* represented new love, disharmony, lost love. They represented sneaking out at night to meet strangers and heated looks shared. And difficult choices that came with harder consequences tucked beneath their arms. I still think he was right to flee, but when I look at the frayed piece of ribbon, wrapped between flimsy layers of tissue paper, I hope that next time I am left with something stronger and more dangerous than a piece of ribbon.

## **A part of me**

### *Second Light*

We didn't know that it was a girl yet, it was still much too early. But we had both dreamt that she would be. And so that afternoon, we lay in the long grass in the garden, the ladybugs already adventuring in my hair.

We spoke about how she would be born to parents who thought that this was their second chance. We spoke about the struggle that was coming our way, because other than the obvious reality of her birth, there were so many more factors to be considered. The depression, the anxiety – things that we were both trying to leave behind.

As the sun started to go home, we went inside with hope tightly wrapped in our palms. We were getting a second chance, and that was a good enough reason to believe.

Later that night, when we were standing barefoot in the kitchen eating old leftovers, the pain hit from all sides just as an ocean of red began to flow. It started off as a trickle, and then a gush.

We tried not to speak about it after that.

And then almost a year later, he died too.

### *The Collision*

When we were children, and innocence dripped from our pores, we would live in our imaginations. I would be that princess exiled to live high up on the furthest mountain, and he would be the warrior that would come to take me home. He would be the drowning boy, and I would be that creature to save him.

As the years went by, our imaginations began to lose some of their colour, the starkness of reality settling in. Instead of pretending to save each other in worlds beyond us, we chose to offer smiles and little shoulder squeezes of reassurance. He would slip his hand into mine, and I knew that I'd be okay. I wasn't alone.

Years later, my phone lay vibrating at my feet, while I was curled up with my friends, watching black and white Halloween movies, gasping at the appropriate moments and eating nachos dripping in grease. My phone kept vibrating. I kept pushing it a little further with my yellow socked foot. I'd call him when the movie was over.

Hours later, my phone vibrated again. This time, I answered. But it wasn't him. It was a paramedic telling me that he died on impact. It was a head on collision with an oak tree, there was a box in the trunk with my name on it.

## Blood Seeping

*Singh's Bookstore* is commemorating the arrival of the first Indian Indentured Labourers in South Africa, 160 years ago. There is a table piled with books, worn photographs, an old sewing machine, a pile of dusty clothes and a dark wooden rolling pin. I pick up the first book on the pile, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal 1860 – 1902*. I read that there were two ships, *The SS Truro* and *The Belvedere*. One set sail in Madras, the other from Calcutta. There were 477 deaths on board and 185 births. Professor Surendra Bhana counts that between the years 1876 and 1902, a total of 89 100 Indians arrived in Natal.

The bookstore smells of ink and incense; a candle and sandalwood incense are burning beside the till. I remember when my grandfather shouted at me for leaving a schoolbook on my bed. He carried it to the prayer room, lit the lamp and a long stick of incense and placed the book in front of them. "Books are sacred," he said. "You must treat them as they should be treated."

Mr Singh joins me at the display. He tells me that I have my grandfather's nose, his resting smile and his long musician's fingers. He tells me that he misses my grandfather. That they were good friends. He laughs about how my great grandfather drank away his claim to one of our family legacies at the local hotel bar: Naidoo Road became someone else's when he lost a drunken game of cards. I turn away and pick up a frayed photograph of a family of five.

\*

The celebration of Indentured Emigrants makes me want to trace my lineage back to India. My boyfriend, content with who he is, without any contemplation of the past, or curiosity about where he got his hazel eyes with the green flecks, tells me that this will be a long and tiring journey. He tells me that my efforts could be futile, coming to an end with a few names that I could just ask my uncles for. But I want to know where I come from, where *home* is, which soil I would have walked on if none of this ever happened. I want to inhale India as something familiar, not a fantasy or a desire; something so close but worlds away.

\*

I decide to visit relatives and the oldest members of our community. I decide to collect stories. I decide to investigate my right to Indian citizenship.

\*



A 'Persons of Indian Origin' Card (PIO) is a form of identification issued to a Person of Indian Origin who holds a passport in another country (other than Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka).

- All currently held PIO cards are treated as OCI ('Overseas Citizenship of India') cards.

I learn that a PIO card allows you to travel visa-free to and from India, provided that your passport is valid. And that a PIO card allows for only 180 days of continuous stay in India; if an extension is needed, a Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRRO) or the local police need to be informed. I also learn that a foreign spouse of the PIO cardholder is able to apply for a PIO too.

- The Ministry of Home Affairs stopped issuing new PIO cards from 2015.
- In this case, only the eligibility criteria to apply for an OCI is required.

I learn that it costs R4140 for an OCI application. And R1545 to convert a PIO card to an OCI.

The price of still belonging to *home*.

\*

A local politician's grandmother, Anusuya, is still alive. I visit her on a warm Sunday afternoon. The house is at the end of a cul-de-sac and children frame the road as they race each other along opposite pavements. Anusuya celebrated her 106<sup>th</sup> birthday two weeks ago. Her hair is long and wispy, hundreds of white threads trailing down her back like memories she wants to keep close. She is bedridden, her legs are untrustworthy and like to give in at any moment without notice. Her great-grandsons take turns carrying her to the living room to have dinner with the rest of the family. She drinks water with turmeric and honey every morning on an empty stomach. She jokes that this is the secret to living for so long.

Anu-ma, as she likes to be called, wants to tell me stories about growing up, but sometimes she trips over the memories and gets confused. Over a cup of tea, she tells me that she will try to talk about the stories that her parents told her. The moment she speaks about her father, her eyes light up and she beams. It is as if simply speaking about him breathes new life into her. She tells me how her father used castor oil to smooth his hair down before going to work in the sugarcane fields. She tells me that the oil kept his thick hair in place, so that when he tied a white piece of cloth as a turban, it stayed on for the whole day.

She tells me that her father told her about the first labourers that came to South Africa. How they would fight over the limited drinking water aboard the ship, many dying from dehydration. How some of them would wake up with blood dripping from their lips, staining their clothes, their gums on fire. Bodies giving in to weakness, sore arms and legs. Scurvy. No water. No healthy food. No citrus.

\*

When we offer food as part of a prayer, we always serve it on fresh green banana leaves at the prayer altar. It was done in India, so it would be done here, too. My grandmother always told me to be extra careful when washing and drying the leaves as they would stain clothes, especially light clothes. But white and pastel clothes are preferred during prayers.

We are doing a home prayer this afternoon. I wash the banana leaves in the outside sink. My long white dress with pale sunflower prints turning see-through as the water splashes.

I am drying the banana leaves on the table next to the sink, when I see a large red stain blossoming across my midriff. It looks like watered-down blood seeping from an invisible wound whose affliction runs deeper than my flesh.

\*

I learn that an OCI card allows for a lifetime of visa-free travel to and from India. And that an OCI cardholder can remain in India for any length of time without notifying the FRRO or the local police. However, where a foreign national is not eligible to apply for an OCI card, these privileges will not apply even if the foreign national is married to a holder of a valid OCI card. Fortunately, their children will be eligible for OCI cards.

Instructions on the website of the Consulate General of India in Johannesburg:

- Applicant has to make an online registration for OCI card ...
- Two photos. One to be pasted on Application Form and the other attached;
- Self-attested copy of Foreign Passport held;
- Self-attested copy of Unabridged Birth Certificate of applicant;
- Self-attested copy of Unabridged Birth Certificate of the parents, if parents were Indian National/s and OCI is claimed based on Indian descent;

- Proof of applicant or parents/grandparents having Indian nationality/Indian descent (e.g. Indian Passport, School Leaving Certificate, Birth Certificate, Land Holding in India etc.);
- In cases where the applicant's father/grandfather or great grandfather arrived in South Africa by Ship, then he/she may seek the help of Department of Archives in South Africa.

\*

I make my way across Main Road, dodging careless drivers, to my father's tailor. He is an old man who has altered and mended my father's formal pants and suit jackets for years. His shop is dark, the desk lamp and the light of his sewing machine are the only lights he works by. He hands me a packet with my father's pants and refuses to take any money from me. He says that he has known my father for so long that we are family now.

He tells me that my father told him about my project, and that his mother-in-law will be happy to talk to me.

I visit their home on a Saturday morning after going to the Morning Market. I take a basket of fresh guavas and oranges. The old woman has a sharp jaw and wears glasses which she keeps readjusting. She tells me about her childhood. She tells me that her grandparents travelled by ship with the other Indian nationals. That her grandmother believed she was going to work as a housekeeper, cleaning the homes of people more fortunate than her. Her grandfather believed that South Africa was going to give them a bigger, better life and that nuggets of gold could be picked up along roads and in bushes.

She tells me that she had five sisters and two brothers. They grew up in a small house right in front of a railway line. Their parents allowed them to play by the railway line in the afternoons as the trains ran in the mornings only. She said that one afternoon she tripped over a branch and fell onto the railway line. She shows me the scar along her forehead, a jagged fading scar extending from the middle of her forehead to her temple. She shudders while talking about the blood that gushed from her head, falling to her feet in loud splashes. She says that her brother picked her up and carried her in his arms; his hands losing their grip, slick with her blood.

She tells me that they went home, and her sisters pressed piece after piece of cloth to her head. That she eventually fell asleep, blind with pain and dizzy from the blood loss. That her parents returned from their jobs that night to find their children sitting quietly, their silhouettes dancing in the candle flames on the floor. She tells me that her father ran to get the doctor. That her mother was hysterical. And that the doctor saw to her wound while her father punished her siblings with a thin long reed.

\*

One of the local hoteliers asks my uncle to arrange a meeting with me after he hears that I am collecting stories. I wait for him in the foyer of his hotel, which smells like expensive perfume and floor polish. He shakes my hand and leads the way to his office. My heels click-clack on the polished wooden floor. I slip, and almost fall over, but the hotelier reaches out to steady me.

The walls of his office are lined with old portraits. He gestures to a portrait of a young and handsome man and introduces his grandfather.

He tells me that his grandfather grew up when the separation of races was at its peak. His grandfather was the songbird of the family and was constantly told that he should perform at hotels or restaurants. He tells me that one evening, his grandfather put on his best suit, polished his best formal shoes and slicked his hair in a way that was new to Indians at the time. His grandfather took a taxi to the new hotel across the town and went straight to the bar. When the hired singer had finished her set, his grandfather stepped onto the stage, took the microphone into his sweaty hands and began to sing.

He tells me that two white burly men pulled his grandfather off the stage just as he reached the second verse of his song. They kicked him out the hotel, throwing his jacket, which had come off in the scuffle, on the ground next to him. They told him never to show his face in the hotel again, that he should remember his place in the world, and this wasn't it.

The hotelier tells me that he built this hotel for his grandfather. And he imagines the ghost of his grandfather gliding through the halls in the dead of the night. He knows his grandfather won't frighten away the guests because this is what his blood had built.

\*

While looking for my grey jersey with the embroidered yellow flowers, I find my maternal grandparents' documents. My grandmother kept everything safely tucked away in a black handbag in a cupboard in my room. I hold the fragile pieces of brown paper. I hold history between my fingers. I am cautious, afraid that one wrong move will result in identity being lost forever, torn into nonexistence. I sniff the documents; they smell like time folded into dust.

I find them now, after she has died.

I wonder why she never showed me this bag when she was alive. Why I never asked her more about her past.

She was meticulous in keeping record of everything, she even had her parents' documents and unabridged birth certificates. She also had her grandfather's details from the Ship itself. I read that he came to South Africa aboard the *SS Truro*. That he worked in the sugarcane fields day in and day out.

I try not to think about the sugarcane fields. Instead, I think of the sun. I imagine it felt familiar to the labourers, the southern sun and her rays welcoming them to a new world.

\*

- Self-attested copy of Naturalisation Certificate, if applicable;
- Self-attested copy of Indian Passport Surrender Certificate and copy of cancelled passport if the same was surrendered. Note: names should be exact in all the documents, otherwise if the spelling is different, a letter has to be obtained from the concerned Home Department that the persons mentioned in the document/s are same;
- Self-attested copy of Marriage certificate of the applicant and the copy of the foreign passport of the spouse;
- Proof of Residential address in South Africa;
- Proof of Payment;
- Original passports/documents would be returned after verification.

\*

I visit Anu-ma many times. Each time I visit, she speaks of the past with such intensity that I feel I was there.

I visit her on a cloudy Friday afternoon with a biscuit tin of date-rolls, coated in extra coconut because she likes them this way. When she speaks, her eyes mist over. She lies across the couch in the living room wrapped in a green blanket. She asks me to sit in front of her, with my back towards her. She wants to play with my hair. Anu-ma's fingers slip through my hair, sometimes she twists it into a plait, other times she just lets it fall. She asks one of her great-grandsons to cut a few bright orange marigolds from the garden. He does so without hesitation. She weaves the flowers into my hair. After a few minutes of silence, she tells me that she is trying to recreate her wedding hairstyle on me.

I ask her to tell me more about her wedding; what she wore, how many people were there, what food was served. She tells me that her parents arranged her marriage to a respectable young man who served as a valet to the owner of the largest sugarcane plantation. That her parents told her that he would

take care of her, and that they would move into a room in the large house and she would tend to the lady of the house or her children. Her parents told her that this life would be better.

She tells me that she didn't want to marry him. She loved another man who was from a lower caste than her. She tells me that it didn't matter to her. That he told her that they could pretend. They could lie that he was from a higher caste, his light skin tone made it believable. She tells me that she wanted to lie, but if she did, she would condemn them both in their next lives. Anu-ma tells me that she told her mother about the man. That her mother reminded her that they were of the *Vaishyas* caste; a caste for farmers, traders and merchants. The man, however, was part of the *Dalits*, the outcasts; street sweepers and sanitation workers.

Anu-ma tells me that she wanted to run away with him. But she didn't know where they would go. And that she couldn't leave her parents behind. As uncommon as it was to have one child, she was their only one. So, she married the valet.

She slips a thin gold bangle from her wrist onto mine. She tells me that she wishes me luck, especially in love. I see a glimpse of hazel eyes flecked with green. Anu-ma says that she hopes that the caste system is not as binding as it was before. And that she prays to still be around to see my wedding.

\*

It seemed like the whole community knew that I was collecting stories. That I was trying to keep memories alive by speaking them into existence again.

A Brahmin from our local temple asked to meet me one afternoon. My boyfriend drives me along the narrow road to the temple which runs between sugarcane fields. We take an offering of fruit and milk on a silver tray, because going emptyhanded seems inauspicious. The temple is small and white and old. It was built on a piece of unplantable land when the labourers settled here.

The Brahmin is a hunched old man. We sit barefoot on the steps to the temple. I eat a banana that was offered moments before and watch my boyfriend play with the temple dogs a few feet away. The Brahmin asks me why I want to know about the past, and whether it makes me sad to dwell on it. I tell him that I just want to know more.

He tells me about a box of letters that are his most prized possessions. He says that he knows Brahmins shouldn't have prized possessions, but this is something between him and his God. I ask him who the letters are from, and what they are about. He tells me that they have been passed down through his family for generations, ending with him because he took a vow of celibacy when he became a Brahmin. They were written in Tamil by the first labourer in his family to come to South Africa, and he only recognises a few words, as a Brahmin, Sanskrit is his language. He says that while most children

went to sleep listening to fairy tales or stories about the Gods, his mother used to read him these letters. His mother understood the importance of knowing the past, she wanted him to know that the reason that he was here was because of his forefather's sacrifices.

I ask him to tell me more about the letters themselves. He says that they were addressed to a woman, but none of them were sent. Some were written neatly, while others had watermarks splashed between untidy script. He tells me that one letter stands out for him. His forefather wrote about his first Easter weekend in South Africa. The plantation owners were going to let the workers have half a day off on Good Friday and on Easter Monday. He wrote that this would be the only time the Indian workers were allowed to pray freely to their Gods. He couldn't wait to go back to the barracks where the emigrants were housed, knowing that all the women and children were preparing for prayers.

He described how his excitement had overtaken him, making him slack in his work that morning. He wrote about how a plantation owner rode over on his brown horse. How he beat him with a whip until the blood mixed with his sweat and trailed down his back. He wrote about how the man laughed at him when he cried out for God, asking for mercy. About how the plantation owner jumped off his horse and demanded that he stand upright, the man's spit flew across his face. About how he couldn't stand upright because of the pain. About how the plantation owner said his God couldn't help him now.

\*

- Fees would not be refunded in case OCI is not granted.
- For the purpose of claiming OCI, husband and wife has to claim on the strength of their own parents/grandparents.
- OCI is to be re-issued, each time a new passport is issued up to the age of 20 years of age and once after completing 50 years of age in view of biological changes in the face of the applicant.
- Re-issuance of the OCI Cardholder registration is not mandatory each time a new passport is issued between 21 and 50 years of age.
- OCI/PIO Card does not entitle cardholder to undertake any missionary work, mountaineering and research work without the permission of the Government of India and in accordance with the instructions issued from time to time.

\*

I go back to *Singh's Bookstore* with my boyfriend. This time I have my grandparent's documents in a file in my bag. I wanted to preserve the originals for as long as possible. Mr Singh turns on the photocopier and asks me about my family as we wait for it to come to life.

At the Indentured Labourers display, my boyfriend pages through *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal 1860 – 1902*. “Hey, listen to this: “*The Belvedere* departed from Calcutta with 342 passengers, 29 of whom died at sea. Later, 10 more from the 342 died. Eight years later, 18 more,” he says.

He picks up another book.



## **Death of touch and other side effects**

### ***Death of Touch***

#### *Description:*

Green and white tic-tacs.

#### *Dosage:*

20mg.

#### *Indications:*

1. Rapid heart rate, throat closure, dizziness. Also known as panic attacks. Can occur while holding your boyfriend's hand at a charity fair when you are next in line for the Ferris Wheel.
2. Elevated mood and self-esteem followed by a slump. Also known as manic behaviour. Can present as obsessively cleaning your house for three days after which you're holding a jar of flour that crashes to the floor. Like you.
3. Slitting of wrists on a bathroom floor at midnight. Can occur five minutes into your 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

#### *Side effects:*

1. Death of touch. No sexual desire.
2. Every sound, every movement, every decision fills you with terror. e.g. a knock on your front door.

### ***Borderline***

#### *Description:*

Little white mentos.

#### *Dosage:*

150mg.

*Indications:*

1. You feel like you are not living, or that you're too alive. Can occur when you're watching a movie one night; one moment it's pointless, the next you're researching whether it is based on a true story.
2. You feel the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Can present when your eyes light up while talking about your favourite book with a friend. The fall comes when the friend looks at their watch while you are speaking. The fall makes you feel unseen.
3. You are triggered by small things. e.g. peeling an apple at the sink, instead of the one long peel that you were working on, it snags and tears in two. You throw the apple into the window.

*Side effects:*

1. Agitation. Aggressively pushing your partner away as he helps you into bed.
2. Insomnia. Your eyes grow more accustomed to the dark, it feels like a warm blanket and a nightmare.
3. Confusion. Inability to recall whether you prefer being barefoot or not.

***The Voices in your Head***

*Description:*

Yellow m&ms.

*Dosage:*

200mg.

*Indications:*

1. Delusions of grandeur. Overnight you become Cleopatra. You recall the death of your father, how you became queen at eighteen, how your twelve-year-old brother exiled you. And how you went into battle to reclaim your throne.
2. The billboard advertising *American Psycho* becomes a warming just for you. You sympathise with Patrick Bateman; he is just another misunderstood person. Later in bed, you change your mind. Patrick Bateman is hiding in the bush just beneath your window.

3. Hallucinations. The peace lily plant gets up and dances on the coffee table. She says her name is “Pily”. You don’t like it. The next day you ask your parents if they could call you by that name.

*Side effects:*

1. Catatonia. Spending hours on the branch of a tree in the backyard. You are upside down; you like the rush of blood to your head as your feet run over the rough wood.
2. Perseveration. You slip “never trust a doctor who wears green socks” into every conversation you have.

## How do you take your tea?

At midnight, there was a knock on my front door. I knew it was the women. After I had seen them, music seemed to play from the air, it seemed that everything was alive. The cat picked his head up, opening an eye, even he was curious. Somewhere in the night sky the owl hooted.

I opened the door, letting them enter the house. They sat down at the kitchen table, smiling. I didn't know how to react at first, whether to immediately ask them what they wanted, or offer them some tea. Or ask whether they had a place to stay for the night.

"How do you take you tea?" spilled out of my mouth.

One woman, Aira, she said her name was, laughed with glee and opened her robes to reveal multiple vials of clear liquid. Another woman, Brina, took off her boots and placed them next to the cat, who sniffed and stalked his way to my feet. The third woman, Zuri, removed the rings on her fingers and laid them out on the table, it reminded me of how my mother would do that, just before washing her hands and kneading some dough, for the fresh bread that she made and sold at the market.

Aira removed six vials from her cloak. "Fill the pot with some water, and let's see what we should add to it, shall we?"

"What's in the vials?" I asked.

She smiled, "Fill the pot first."

Zuri walked up to me as the pot was filling, she pulled the red ribbon out of my hair. "What lovely silky hair you have. This will work well," she said as she tied my ribbon around her wrist.

Brina was investigating the owl's cage, picking up the larger white feathers and tucking them into her robe. Her eyes kept roaming around the room, like a magpie looking for something shiny to fly away with.

I put the pot of water on the table and looked at Aira, waiting for her to explain.

She picked up the first vial. "Sea water. This is for cleansing and healing. Also, for banishing and protecting. Anything you need gone?" she asked. I shook my head.

"Storm water. This is for emotional strength and confidence. And curses. But you don't need any help with that, do you?" she asked smiling coyly. I shook my head.

"River water. This is for moving on. To break old patterns and change paths. And warding energy into different directions. This could be an option." I found myself nodding my head at her words.

"Rainwater. This one is the easiest, it can be used for many purposes. Growth and rebirth spells, you know, to bring your lover back and that sort. Oh, and for gaining power over time."

"I don't think she needs that," Brina said, sitting in the armchair with her legs dangling over the armrest, brushing her face with one of the owl's feathers.

“Hmm,” said Aira.

“Snow water. Purity and endings and change. Very light magic,” she yawned.

“Finally, Dew water. For love and fertility,” Aira’s eyes sparkled.

“You choose,” I said. “Surprise me, but first, I need to take the cat outside.”

When I returned, the pot of water was boiling on the fire. The six vials stood in a row on the table, one was empty, but I couldn’t recall which one it was. I pulled mugs from a shelf and waited for the water to boil. I wanted to ask the women why they were here, where they had come from, what was the purpose of drinking tea mixed with water from strange places. But all these questions seemed insignificant. Zuri was fiddling with my ribbon on her wrist, and when she caught me looking at her, she lifted her wrist to her lips and kissed the ribbon, smiling at me. Aira was drumming a tune with her fingers on the table, her foot was tapping along with it, too. She seemed impatient, eager to get the night going. Brina was still swinging her legs up and down, levitating the feather that she was playing with.

“Will you say goodbye to your mother,” Aira asked.

“Why? Where am I going?” I asked.

“To the place with the walls covered in flowers,” said Zuri.

“You should say goodbye to your mother, or she will wait for you to help carry the bread to the market,” said Aira.

“Maybe her mother can visit. She can make bread for us,” said Brina.

The sound of the water boiling grew louder. I took the pot from the fire and began to make the tea. Zuri took her tea with six spoonfuls of sugar. Aira took hers with extra milk. Brina said she didn’t want any tea but would take some of the honey whiskey that she knew I had in the cupboard next to the fireplace. I took my tea with a spoonful of honey and the normal amount of milk, remembering to pour milk into the cat’s bowl for when he returned.

“Drink up,” said Aira with a twinkle in her eyes.

\*

The next morning, I felt heavier than I had ever felt before. There was an ache low in my back, and I had the urge to bite into fat juicy peaches. The cat was resting on my stomach, he was purring, eager for attention. The owl was asleep with her head tucked beneath her wing. I couldn’t recall when she flew back into her cage. For a moment, I had completely forgotten about the women from the night before. It

was only when I saw the mugs sitting on the table and the feather near the cat's blankets that I remembered.

The cat purred his way up to my face, licking me and demanding kisses. Then, I felt the first kick. I moved the cat slowly onto my pillow as I tried to push the covers back.

\*

“My goodness. But I saw you only yesterday!” cried mother when she saw me. Her green eyes were wider than the owl's eyes when she spied a mouse outside the window at night. Mother put the basket of fresh bread down on the table, breaking a piece from one of the loaves. She found a table knife, and the pot of butter, and began buttering piece after piece of fresh bread. She helped me sit down on the armchair and gave me some fresh bread to nibble on.

“Speak child!” she exclaimed as she eyed the rings on my fingers, Zuri had given me three rings before they left.

I ran my hands over my stomach as another kick ran through my body.

“Well?” asked mother.

“I drank some tea with dew water,” I said.

Mother closed her eyes and sighed.

## Inconsolable

“You loved him.” It isn’t a question. Nate knows better. He knows me better.

Wind tugs across the endless sky, mauve into lilac. Lilac into orange, and orange into dusty red clouds. The leaves on the trees are golden now, and brown, and some red. Autumn. My favourite time of the year. Or it used to be. I peer over the edge of the cliff, a dangerous death if one had to jump. I wonder whether it would be instantaneous, or whether you would reach the bottom paralyzed with pain as the blood slowly trickles from your open wounds. A salvation of sorts.

\*

Mikhail would watch me. Me, shuffling through the piles of fallen leaves in the park. Him, smiling at the childish delight oozing from my pores. Contagious. He would laugh with me, fall onto the heap next to me. Wait for me to say something, and when I didn’t, he would just grab my hand and squeeze gently. A reminder.

\*

“I did,” I tell him eventually.

“What happened?” Why does it haunt you so much?”

I shrug. My lips linger at the rim of the white coffee cup, just on the edge of another sip. Steaming coffee into a frozen body. “We were just stupid kids.”

\*

Stupid kids. Nervous kids. Awkward moments that folded into wonderful moments. Mikhail’s puppy, and the beach past midnight, and fireworks, surrounded by a warm haze of feelings. A place where we’d remind ourselves that we were young, alive and freedom was still a willing and open offer.

\*

Nate is quiet for a moment. Waiting for more, I suppose. I wonder if he knows that I don’t open like a flower to the sun. I wonder if he thinks about me like that: flowers and sunshine and summertime happiness, and anything more than a girl who wears nostalgia like boots in the dead heat of summer. He

knows. He definitely knows, he wouldn't get under my skin without knowing that. And he is under my skin.

"Is that all I get?" he asks.

\*

Mikhail held my hand on the fourth floor of the hospital. He didn't attempt to tell me that everything would turn out okay. He didn't pretend to know any of the answers that I so badly wanted to hear. He didn't ask about my sister, and why she hadn't opened her eyes in three weeks. Neither did he say anything about how fragile she looked, pale on the hospital sheets, her blue veins beating a silent tune against her skin. He was just there. And every time someone else's world shrank to the rapid rhythm of the hospital machines, the rise of heartbeats and then the flatline, his grip would tighten. And he would offer a small smile.

\*

I don't say any of this to Nate. Instead, I tell him, "That's all there is."

A cloud of birds fan across the sky. United. Under his breath he says, "Right." The hood of his car is suddenly too cold and my body aches for a long induced sleep. Nate slides off. His jaw is clenched, but I'm not worried. He hands out forgiveness like a priest. I tip the coffee cup until every bitter drop rests inside me, churning. "Maybe you'll tell me one day," he says. He holds out a hand to me, "Come on, let's go home."

"Yeah," I say. I take his hand. "Maybe." But I think we both know better. You cannot really get anything from a person who has her secrets wrapped tightly around her heart.

When we get home, Nate silently walks around the flat. Picking things up and putting them back in the exact place he removed them from. He makes a cup of coffee. He walks in and out of the bathroom. He goes to the balcony and looks down at the life happening to everyone in the busy street. He comes into the bedroom and smiles at me. He sits down on the bed, running his hands over the blanket at my feet. "How alone do you actually want to be?" he asks. "Just so I can get some clarity."

\*

Mikhail asked me that too, after the funeral when he found me sitting at the top of the stairs avoiding the guests and their condolences. He held the limp pink roses in one hand, the roses that were supposed to go



with my sister, as she was lowered into the ground. He had my black coat in his other hand. “Tell me, how alone is alone?” he asked. “Does sitting here quietly count?”

“No. It means alone-alone. Existing quietly. By myself.”

“Well, too bad,” he said as he sat on the step lower than mine, curving his hand around my ankle and resting his head on my knee.

\*

Nate smiles. The glimmer of his smile, once so bright when he looked at me, has dimmed a little. I’m losing him.

I open my mouth so I can tell him that I don’t want to be alone. I want to tell him that he has helped heal my heart. He filled the cracks left in my soul and made me feel when I thought I would never feel again. I want to admit that I fear I might disintegrate without him. And that he tipped my jar of loss out, so it’s not as suffocating as before. My mouth formed the words, but no sound came out.

He nods, accepting my silence as something it’s not. I watch him get up and walk towards the door. He pauses. “I get that you’re trying to protect yourself. I do. I really do. Just be careful that you don’t extinguish your flame instead. You’ll end up in the dark, and you have too much light in you to be in darkness. Take some time.”

When I called at 4 a.m. he picked up immediately and asked what I needed.

“Nothing,” I said.

He said my name once. A soft reprimand. And that was all it took.

“You.”

“I’m coming.”

\*

“I need you,” I said quietly into the phone.

“Where are you?”

“Home.”

“I’m coming,” Mikhail said and hung up.

\*

“Tell me everything,” Nate says.

“But it hurts you, so maybe not?”

“What hurts me is when you keep things away from me. Especially this.”

“It’s okay, I promise. We don’t need to do this,” I say, pulling the blanket higher.

Nate smiles at me. Genuine. He sits back against the pillows. “It doesn’t hurt me so much as makes me feel as though I should have been the first of everything for you, with you. But I know that it ... Well, I know that you’ve had this life before me. And I know how it creeps up on you from time to time. Suffocating you like it has been doing these past few weeks. So, I’d rather live them with you. I think that this is a healing process. You speak, I’ll listen.”

“But last time you walked away.”

“Then you called, and I came right back. Tell me.”

“Fine. What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

\*

“So, tell me everything, Kail. What makes you, you?”

He laughs. And it lights his face up. “Well,” he says as he props himself up on his arms. “As predictable as it may be, I like books and jazz music. Dogs. Thai food. Leather. Sunrises. The beach, but sitting on the sand, not the water so much. Family. Family makes me, me. And you. What about you?”

“There’s more to you. Tell me more,” I insist.

“Everything to do with souls. Cold nights with misty air. Flames. Old letters tucked into journals. Finding old sketches that have stories I’ve completely forgotten about. Your smile. The cold side of the pillow in a warm bed. Hope. But also knowing that Death is around the corner. And not being afraid of him either.”

\*

“He was my best friend. Above all else. He kept trying to save me from this darkness, a darkness that I didn’t know existed, and I think it grew after my sister died. But I guess he recognised it, or his soul did. He loved souls, and the general idea about their immortality. So, whenever I lost a piece of myself, or it was just hidden for a little bit, he would try to fix it. He kept on trying to fix everything. Like he was trying to make this world perfect because he knew how horrible it could be.”

Nate's eyes dart across the dimly lit room. His left hand runs up and down my back. Comfort, encouragement, and maybe even love.

"I met him at a relative's home. They went to school together. I remember walking into the living room and my eyes found his. It was instant. And probably sounds like the lamest thing in the world right now. But that connection. I'm not sure what it was like for him, but for me it was magnetic. Like everything in the universe was pushing me toward this. And even though we hadn't even been introduced at that time, I didn't even know his name, there was ... well, there was something."

I watch my reflection in Nate's eyes, the candle flames dancing behind me. I look alive. It was simply the fact that speaking his name ignited the flame of life in me. For as long as Mikhail was remembered, I'd be just like a flame, a long sliver of light giving the illusion of life.

\*

"You know, if it weren't for Jarred, we would never have met," Mikhail says, poking my shoulder.

"I know. Who would have thought that my cousin would change everything for me?"

"No. Well. Yes. But a part of me believes that I would have found you, irrespective of him. I would have. I know it, it's a feeling stronger than anything."

"And what makes you so sure? Our life paths could have been so different."

"I'm pretty sure one half of a soul knows where to find the other. Do you think you'd be content without me?"

"I'd like to think that I would forever feel like there was something missing. That's what it was like before, and I'd like to know that there wouldn't be any other way of life. So, keep your fingers crossed. And don't piss the Gods off. Okay?"

"Like something's missing. I like that."

\*

"And I saw the world in his eyes. Not perfect. Far from it, actually. But I saw everything. I also saw myself."

"He sounds so special," Nate says. He's not hurt, not in the profound sense. But his voice is wounded. There's pain somewhere. "Do you think you'll ever be okay? I mean, I'm here for you. Completely. But there's a lot of this that has to be accepted by you first."

"Oh, I hope so. It's just that it comes in waves. And some are bigger than others. I think it's more the fact that I'm here trying to figure out who I am without him. It's not that I was dependent on him in

that way. It's just that, in terms of my identity ...because I was always my best self around him. Still dark, but not as twisted."

"You want to tell me what happened that night?" Nate's eyes are searching for something. He is allowing me to give myself to him, completely. And I want to. But the guilt usually stops me from saying anything else. Nate knows this, too. He wants me to continue speaking, but he won't push it. He knows better. He knows me better.

"The night he died you mean?"

"Yes."

## **Things to remember**

### *When taking a walk in the forest*

Don't look over your shoulder. Don't do it. But if you do, nothing will be there. Nobody will be there. And then you'll start doing it all the time. A prophetic feeling will follow you everywhere, it won't stop, not even when you go back to your home and rush to close the windows and lock the doors. It will follow you to bed. You won't be able to sleep properly again.

Be silent, listen to the sounds around you. You'll hear the whispers between the green leaves, the sunlight dancing across the freckles on your face. They will call out for you; maybe by your name, or what you're called in the middle of the night by your lover, maybe even what your grandmother used to call you in your childhood. Don't try to understand it, they always know. They know everything. But don't answer the calls. Never ever answer their calls.

Watch what you step on. If you step on a spider in the forest, it will follow you home. Spiders will cover the wallpaper in your living room, fill your bathtub to the brim, and you'll wake up covered in a thick web unable to breathe.

When you reach a forked path, listen to your instincts. If you sense something ominous at the end of a route, don't take it. This way, you will be safe from what's sitting against a charred tree trunk, whittling a Viking chess piece. This way, you won't be stabbed with their whittling knife, or the chess piece.

Don't pick any wildflowers, it doesn't matter how beautiful they are. That's where the fairies are. Next to the wildflowers, you'll find a circle of mushrooms. They may be white, or brown, or even red. Stay away from the circle, this is a fairy circle. This is power. Something will happen to you if you cross it.

Keep walking as the sun sets. You'll hear things following your steps. They will be hidden by trees around you, again, don't be fearful. They are curious, just checking to see who is in their home. Let them see that you have nothing to hide.

Don't forget to name the pocketknife that's hidden in your denim jacket pocket. Did you know that an unnamed blade will turn on you if you try to use it in the forest? Maybe even add an Algiz rune to the keyring part of it. The rune is for divine protection. And in a forest, that's required.

Be grateful with every step you take, that you don't wake up whatever is beneath your feet. Remember that the forest holds many secrets, in its leaves and beneath its soil. Don't speak out loud, it may just answer, a long bony arm with an oversized emerald ring breaking through the earth and closing around your black Doc Martens with the silver stars.

Listen for children's voices echoing against the trees, ignore them. It's the fae from the circles. They are always looking for someone to play with.

Remember your way out of the forest. This is most important. Remember the trees that you pass, and the bushes with the poisonous red berries, the yellow toadstools and the fallen bird nests. Pay attention to everything. Lost, you belong to the forest.

### ***When in a desert***

Take a sip of water from your metal flask, it will help you feel alert.

Sit down in the sand, feel the warm grains between your fingers. Take off your shoes, feel the sand between your toes. Remember that the Gods walked on this sand, too. Look closely at the grains, you'll see their blood. The blood of the Gods is not just red, but gold too. Look, look closely.

Remember to stand in the dusty shade of the temples. But if you hear a rumbling, move quickly. If you are unworthy, the God occupying the temple will gracefully nudge a block of limestone on you, it will not end well.

You will see camels everywhere, but if you see one without a tail, that is not a camel. It's a shapeshifter, watching your every move. Shapeshifters are mischievous, they will follow you, pull at your hair, take things out of your navy backpack, leave a trail of your belongings in the sand. One moment, you will see a camel, the next, a tour guide with a long grey beard and dishevelled hair wearing dirty khaki clothes, tossing a set of gold keys up and down. If the shapeshifter becomes a tour guide, you are going to be led to a tomb.

Watch your step when you follow the guide into the Pharaoh's tomb. Remember that the Pharaoh is still there. He sleeps soundlessly, surrounded by all his worldly possessions. Look at them, look at the life he

lived, read the hieroglyphics on the walls, see how magnificent he was... is. Look at the chariot in the corner, you can almost taste the dry air in your mouth as you imagine standing behind him as he goes into battle. If you can't imagine it, ask yourself why. Then get out, quickly.

Don't touch the walls of the tombs. That's where the curses rest. If you touch them, you're allowing the curse to escape into your skin, enter your bloodstream. You will live half a life; shadows will surround you.

Don't look at the sarcophagus for too long. The Pharaoh will think that you're challenging him. This isn't a challenge. This is a death wish.

When you leave the tombs, pay your respects. The Pharaohs must always be respected, especially in death. Remember this.

Listen for a scurrying in the darkness, it is probably a scarab. Scarabs represent rebirth and regeneration. If you are undeserving of being with the Gods, a scarab will crawl up your leg and enter your body through your back, just between your shoulders. It will multiply. Its offspring will eat away at your insides, consuming all your darkness. You will return only if there is enough light in you.

If you hear voices through the air, hum a song, maybe the song that played at a school dance, or the theme song to the *Gummy Bears*. There are very few places to hide in a desert, so spirits hide in the breeze. They will enter through your ears and take over your mind. You will not get it back.

Watch out for something winking in the corner of your eye. Close your eyes for a moment, ignore it. It's not treasure. It's an allure. A way for you to enter the underworld. This is not the proper way. But it is the quickest way to its deepest level.

Remember the *Book of the Dead*? Don't go looking for it, you'll just become trapped in another slab of gold. Did you think it was an actual book? No, it is made up of thin slabs of gold that hold souls just like yours. There are no secrets, not for mortals.

When you've had enough of the desert, and can feel the thirst deep in your throat, don't look for an oasis. They are always mirages, just like your history teacher told you, but you were not paying attention, that's why you are tempted now. They are portals, they will take you elsewhere. You may never return.

### *When visiting a peculiar little town*

Keep your ears open when you're sitting in the local pub on your first day, eating greasy fish and chips, nursing now room-temperature beer, and you hear the locals whispering about the tourist who never returned to his room at the bed-and-breakfast above the pub, leave. Leave the food behind, you can persuade the owner of your bed-and-breakfast to make you some toast later, she'll lay out some butter and tubs of different jams. Apricot, strawberry, orange marmalade, even fig (best on scones).

Try not to visit the old bookstore off the main road of the town. The legend is that the owner will welcome you inside, and give you book suggestions based on three questions that he asks: Do you like the taste of blood? If you could ask the Devil a question, what would it be? Would you rather know the date of your death or the cause of your death? Then he will make you a cup of tea. But you will never leave the store again.

When the old lady with glassy eyes and a large bronze pendant hanging from her neck pulls your elbow, say hello and keep walking. Her purple carrier bag is full of cursed objects. She'll try to sell them to you. And if you buy them, they will return to her in the dead of the night. Don't buy anything from her. Don't let her see where you live either. She'll visit at night, entering the bed-and-breakfast, painting symbols on the door of your room.

Remember that as the sun goes down, it is time for the night-folk. You'll see figures in alleyways as you make your way back to your room. Think of the room instead of paying attention to them. Think of the faded wallpaper, and the ugly curtains. The portrait of the terrifying old couple next to the stairs in the foyer.

Look out for the little diner one block away, and a waitress with dark blotches on her blouse. They look like blood. They are blood. She changes her clothes every day, and every day there are new blotches. Don't order anything, just sit at a table near the door and wait the rain out. Or don't. Run home in the rain.

If you pass an empty playground, wave to the shadows. The night children are out, you will not be able to see them, they are lighter than air, a substance not easily understood. If the swings start moving, then all is well, they have greeted you in return and have resumed playing. If not, prepare yourself to be blown in the ear, they enjoy this, the children. They will gleam with delight as you take off running down the pathway, trying to put as much distance between you and them as you can. Hopefully they won't follow you, but if



they do, invite them to spend the night in your bed. They will leave as the sun comes up again. Leave a glass of warm milk out, too.

Do not soak in a bath of hot water if you find blue bruises up and down your body and the ache is compelling. You'll find slivers of glass in the pink bath salts. They will pierce your legs when you enter the tub, leave tracks down your back. At first you will not even notice them, your body is already sore. But then the bathwater will turn pink ... red.

If your window faces a farm, don't look outside the window at night. That is when the scarecrows wake up, they dance by moonlight, with crows on their shoulders. If they see you looking, they won't be pleased. They will decide which one gets to stand over you after they bury you. The scarecrow may wear one of your scarves around his neck.

If your window faces a field, look out for a light flashing in the middle of the night. It will light up your room faintly, the shadows teasing against the curtains. Close your eyes and go back to sleep. The light belongs to a female spirit. She is lonely. She yearns for company, and then murders her companions. She seems harmless, with her long hair and white dress with the lacey sleeves, sometimes she carries a bouquet of roses. Do not be fooled.

If your window faces a graveyard, do not go into it, no matter how curious you are. Do not ask your landlady if she knows any of the names on the gravestones. She does not. The graves look fresh, a week or two old maybe. But nobody knows the occupant's names. It is unclear if the caretaker is splendid at his job, or if he buries curious tourists with names he makes up.

## **Festival of Lights**

Dhruv and I placed the little clay lamps along the driveway, on the windowsills, on the outside table, and in between the plants in the garden. We would light them all as the sun set for the night. This was the first Diwali in the new house, and we wanted to create new memories by blending our families' Diwali traditions. I had already mixed the three different types of oil: castor oil, sweet oil and sunflower oil, for the evening bath. Both our grandmothers and mothers had been strict about the three-oil bath during our childhood. We recalled our grandmothers and the vigorous rubbing of oil into our hair, behind our ears and then being given the bowl to lather the rest of the oil on us in the bathroom. We didn't know the significance of it, but we couldn't imagine not doing it.

We spent most of the previous night in the kitchen, covering the counters with the treats that defined Diwali in our childhood homes. Dhruv's mother always made a coconut cake with strawberries on top, and because we were making our own traditions, we topped ours with mango slices instead. We made my father's favourites, cardamom and pistachio burfee and pecan chana magaj, tastes that always lingered in my mouth long after Diwali was over. We washed and arranged different fruit on a silver platter, ready for the prayer in the evening. We washed the banana leaves and laid them out to dry on the dining room table. We shaped laddoos into round balls, the yellow food colouring staining our palms.

Dhruv was in the kitchen making paneer makhani for dinner, with lemon basmati rice.

"You've got a good one," mom said once. "His bookshelf is bigger than his television. He cooks and is full of respect. Marry him."

I was in the bathroom, ready to wash away the strong smell of the three-oil mix that clung to my hair, dripping down my forehead. Letting the bath fill, I closed the bathroom window to keep all the steam inside. In the corner of my eye, I saw a little girl in the backyard by the large mulberry trees. I only saw her back and her long black plait. It was probably the neighbour; the children were always coming into our yard to retrieve their toys.

Washing my hair, I remembered my parents telling the story of Diwali to my siblings and I. How Lord Rama, obeying the wishes of his father, went into exile with his wife, Sita, and brother, Lakshmana for fourteen years. How Sita was enticed by the beauty of a golden deer and abducted by the Demon King, Ravana, who pretended to be an ascetic. How Lord Ram journeyed to find her and defeated the Demon King. My parents told us that it was called the festival of lights because every home would light their clay lamps to show the power of light over darkness, and they would be a guide for Ram, Sita and Lakshman to find their way home.

Dhruv walked into the bathroom and sat at the edge of the tub.

“Dinner’s ready,” he said with a smile. His eyes were true to his name, the brightest star in the night sky. “Do you need some help?” he asked as he took my hair in his fingers and picked up the bottle of shampoo.

“There was a little girl in the backyard.”

“I know, I saw her from the kitchen. She looks like you in that photo above the fireplace,” he said.

“What’s your favourite thing about Diwali?”

“The food. But I also like the family time, I’ve always remembered it as a happy time. Yours?”

“The story. I love the *Ramayana*. But my favourite part is –”

“The Shiva Dhanush, I know,” he laughs.

In the *Ramayana*, before Lord Rama marries Princess Sita, he, and other suitors, are challenged to lift and string the Shiva Dhanush – a powerful and heavy golden bow that belonged to Lord Shiva. Many suitors had tried and failed, for nobody could lift the bow, let alone string it. Until Lord Rama. With thousands of kings and princes watching, he lifted the bow, stretching it to his ear to examine it. He strung it effortlessly. And in doing so, the bow broke, releasing a thunderous roar that echoed in the mountains surrounding Mithila. Sage Valmiki, author of the *Ramayana*, said that Lord Ram unintentionally broke the bow, but the breaking of it signified that he was the perfect match for Sita. They paralleled the consorts of the main Hindu Gods; Shiva with Parvathi, Vishnu with Lakshmi, and now, Ram with Sita.

\*

Dhruv and I lit the lamps inside the house, offered the food at our prayer place and now we were waiting for darkness to fall so that we could light the clay lamps outside.

We were in the kitchen, mixing rose syrup into cold milk to break our fast as was customary on Diwali, when we heard the first giggle in the backyard. Dhruv opened the back door, trying to find the source. The giggling continued.

“I’m sure the children are playing by the mulberry trees,” I said. I enjoyed doing that as a child, finding silkworms and keeping them in a white shoebox.

“It’s getting dark, they shouldn’t be out there alone,” Dhruv said.

We walked outside, Dhruv taking my hand, as we tried to find the child or children, as the giggles became louder and more contagious.

We saw the little girl from earlier, peeking out from behind the closest mulberry tree. She hid her face and stuck her hand out, calling us closer.

She looked exactly like me at seven years old.

“Aarya! So, I grow up to be happy!” she exclaimed.

Dhruv knelt in front of her, taking her hand, asking her where she came from. She giggled as she turned around and ran toward the fence, carefully climbing between the sturdy wooden planks.

“Stop! It’s getting dark,” I shouted.

But she continued running, and we continued after her.

She led us to a clearing behind our row of houses. She sat down on the now damp grass, with her head to the sky, a smile stretching across her face.

“This is our favourite time of the year, isn’t it, Aarya?” she asked me.

“Yes, it is,” I said, sitting down next to her. “Now, where did you come from?”

“From you,” she said. She smiled and blinked at Dhruv. “Little Dhruv is here too.”

“Where is he?”

“Waiting behind those trees. Do you want to meet him?”

“Yes,” we said together.

She led us across the clearing to a thick row of trees. There was a source of light somewhere, but the trees were so thick that it was difficult to trace.

It was almost dark now, and the trees were casting shadows everywhere.

“Dhruv!” little Aarya called out.

“I’m here,” came a muffled reply.

Dhruv and I looked at each other, unsure of what was happening.

Walking through the trees, we came to another, smaller clearing. At the centre was a large golden bow resting on a wooden platform, glowing as if it were on fire. It looked exactly as I imagined the Shiva Dhanush to be. Little Dhruv was sitting on the platform, like little Aarya before, he was looking at the sky.

Dhruv walked toward his younger self, who jumped into his arms.

“Is this the girl we dream of?” little Dhruv asked, looking at me.

“Yes,” Dhruv smiled. “Why are you here alone?”

“Aarya and I want you to string the bow, like Lord Ram did.”

“It’s too big, Dhruv, I can’t do it,” Dhruv told him.

“But you have to,” little Aarya said. “If not, we can’t go home.”

Dhruv looked at me and shrugged.

“I’ll try,” he told the children. “But I’m not making any promises.”

He took off his silver watch and gave it to me. “Wish me luck,” he winked.

I took the children’s hands and stepped back. Little Aarya was so excited that she kept hopping from one foot to the other. Her excitement crept up my arm until I felt it too. Little Dhruv’s eyes shone in the darkness, the glow emitting from the bow. The hair on his arms was standing straight up and he shivered every few seconds with excitement.

My Dhruv took a deep breath and walked up to the platform, to the middle of the bow. He turned around and smiled at me, before turning to face the bow once more. He stood with his palms together in silent prayer for a moment before trying to pick up the bow.

And he did. Slowly and then all at once. He tilted it slowly until it stood up straight. The children let go of my hands and ran toward the platform, cheering.

Dhruv pulled at the string, its tautness showing as the veins on his arms became more and more prominent.

When Dhruv strung the bow, it broke, just like in the *Ramayana*. A roar echoed through the trees and the light of a thousand stars filled the clearing followed by a fierce gust of wind that whipped my hair across my face and into my eyes.

When it died down, I was in Dhruv’s arms again.

Little Aarya tugged on my hand, looking me straight in the eye she said, “Be happy okay.”

Then she and little Dhruv hugged us before disappearing into the trees.

When we returned to our backyard, darkness had fallen and all the clay lamps that we had laid out were lit. The garden was covered in the soft hue of a hundred little flames dancing in the light breeze.

## **Dear Hades & other letters to Gods**

### ***Dear Hades,***

I think about you all the time. Too much, I think. It's unnerving. I wonder about you, and the job you have. I also wonder if thinking about you is like an invitation for you to visit. If it is, am I responsible for all the death around me? Am I responsible for the missing family members, the missing friends? I have so many questions.

Does it hurt you, every time you have to take another soul? Or does it bring joy?

Do you guide the souls? Do they talk to you?

Do you plan these deaths, or is that left up to chance?

Do you sleep at night? Do you sleep at all? I wonder what your bedroom looks like, if you have one, that is. Mine is black and green, grey filters in, too. There are candles everywhere and moonstones. And books. And cat fur. My cat is named after the moon. I sleep on the left side of the bed.

I'm also left-handed. Funny, isn't it? When I was younger, there was a boy in primary school. We used to sit at the same table during art, we shared the same jar of water to clean our paintbrushes before dipping them into another colour. I asked him to switch places with me, because I kept bumping into his right arm, ruining both our work. I thought that if I were sitting to his left, we wouldn't clash, rather, we'd be the perfect pair. Instead, he told me that his grandfather said that people who are left-handed are people who were touched by the Devil, or Death, I forget which one. Is this true?

### ***Dear Athena,***

My hunger for knowledge grows by the day. I stumble over words as I try to devour books whole. I want to know more about the world. But sometimes I'm afraid to do so. I believe in darkness, but the world seems darker than ever. Light seems further away, unattainable almost. I look at the news and see all the fearless protestors, screaming for their causes, insurmountable anger rushing through their veins. My first year at University ended with a student protest. It was the first time I was exposed to anything like this – there was no screen to separate my living room from the action. The cause was bold, free education for all, and worth all the effort put into it. But I got scared when the police entered the situation and chose to remain indoors. Does that make me a coward? I think to some extent, it does. I imagine that you would carry signs of protest with them. That you would be at the forefront encouraging them to be heard, giving them bottles of water and gleaming with the sheer delight that these fearless people are yours.

***Dear Hades,***

I remember that there was once a time when I did not know you so intimately. A time when I am sure that I could not recognise you, probably blinded by the light and innocence of my hopes and dreams. But I know you now, and we have become closer over the years, haven't we? You don't linger in the shadows anymore. I wonder if that is because I am no longer afraid of the darkness, or if it is because you're not afraid to step into my light.

I was watching a movie and I thought of you. *The Lovely Bones*. I think that there is a book too, but after watching that movie, I don't think I will ever read it. I kept looking over my shoulder. You were not referenced in it, but I felt like you were the reason that that movie was made. It made me feel uneasy. And that I should stop talking to you, that you're as bad as everyone makes you out to be. I should believe them, shouldn't I?

I think that the best and worst thing about you is that even if I stop believing in everything else, I don't think I could stop believing in you.

***Dear Poseidon,***

Does the Lost City of Atlantis exist? I've always wondered about the story behind that one, but none of us will ever know the truth, unless you tell us. What happened to it? The first time I had my palm read it was by an old man who delighted in hearing about the things I dreamt at night. His ears were pierced, a silver hoop in one ear, and a tiny bell in the other. I wanted a pair of those bell earrings. He told me that I should stay away from the sea. He said that it was clearly marked in the long brown lines on my palm. He said that I was right to be afraid of the sea, and the many things lost at it. What lies in your waters? Do you want to know something? I only became afraid of your water after he told me it would hurt me.

***Dear Hades,***

I dreamt about you. Is that my doing, or yours?

I drink hibiscus and cherry tea, bitter and strong, and remember all the people you've taken away from me. I'll make a list for you to see.

***Dear Agni,***

Every time we do a prayer at the temple, it starts with flames. I always imagine releasing all my vices into the hawan, careful not to let the ghee burst all over me as I make my offerings. I spend an hour each night meditating. It starts off with a candle flame, and I watch it grow into itself, strong and steady with no breeze to tempt it. I imagine the light and warmth taking over, filling me from my feet to the tips of my hair. But it was not always like this. My grandfather was buried. You know this is unusual for us, so I

questioned it. I was told that my grandfather *chose* to be buried because his father died in a fire. That stayed with me many nights after. I would dream of my bed catching alight in my sleep, and in the mornings, I would imagine the smell of smoke clinging to my skin. I refused to light candles, or the lamp. I did not play with matches.

But then something changed, and my fear dispelled. I'm still uneasy about fire, but I can handle a lone flame, especially when it dances on the walls. And helps me see things that are beyond me.

***Dear Hades,***

We've been dancing together for so long. Every time I turn the music off, you play another song.

***Dear Amun-Ra,***

When I think of you, I think of sunshine spilling into the air. I think of honey. I think of figs. I feel safe. When I was fifteen, I came to Egypt. It was before the riots and revolutions began to grow, making your soil dangerous for us tourists. But I felt like I had come home. My great, great grandfather was Egyptian. I only found that out recently, after I got the *Eye of Horus* and *Ankh* tattooed onto my ankles – for protection in this world and the next.

They don't warn you that tattooing your ankles stings quite a bit. I remember the tattoo artist, he asked me why I felt the need to be protected. I did not know how to explain. Maybe it had nothing to do with protection, and everything to do with a place that felt like home. Those needles stabbing into my skin over and over again were worth every burning sensation, because I knew I belonged there, even before I was told.

***Dear Hades,***

It's me again. Maybe I was right, thinking about you does seem like an invitation. Why else did you take my friend at 2:30am? Did you plan for him to wrap himself around a tree? Or was that left to him?

It's cold here. And it's your fault.

***Dear Isis,***

You're the *Mother of God*, aren't you? You're the healer and the protector of the Kings, the enchantress who resurrects. Teach me your ways. I want to learn how to resurrect those that were taken. It seems like a horrible idea. I don't know if life would go back to normal after resurrecting them. Would they be alive in all senses? Or just an awoken corpse?

But maybe that is the only way I'll let go of all the regret.



*Dear Hades,*

Are you there?

Can I visit?

Are you going to give me the pomegranate seeds too?

## Vinaigrette Vignettes

### *Lazy Girl's Recipe for Nostalgic Chai*

3 Ceylon teabags  
3 tablespoons of rose water  
2 cinnamon sticks  
3 cardamom pods  
1 teaspoon ginger powder/grated ginger  
½ teaspoon of chili powder/cayenne powder  
Half a cup of milk  
Two cups of boiling water  
Honey or sugar to taste

Allow teabags to steep in boiling water (500 ml).  
Add all other ingredients into a saucepan and allow to come to a boil.  
Add the tea into the spicy-milky saucepan mix and bring to a boil once again.

Pour into your favourite mug and wait for the memories to reveal themselves in the steam.

### *Soji*

My parents moulded me into a bookworm. It was never a chore; it was just something that they thought I would enjoy. I grew up to my parents reading the *Disney* classics to me, and other books like *Teddy bears go Shopping* and *Mrs. Armitage of Wheels*, all of which are neatly piled into an old metal burgundy trunk waiting for my children. As I grew up many things about me changed; my hair colour, my dressing, friends, most things, except this insatiable hunger to read. I remember reading with my mom, the librarian giving us confused looks when she saw us taking two copies of the same book. The same librarian who made the best carrot cake and wore soccer jerseys every day. Mom and I would read books set in India, to try and understand our culture from the perspective of someone living there. And while the minute hand on the clock would tick away, and my dad and brother would retreat to their rooms, my mom would go

into the kitchen. She would take out a packet of semolina, a tin of condensed milk or cream. Pods of cardamom, cinnamon sticks. Butter. Sugar. Saffron. She would slowly begin to create comfort in a black pot. She would add extra coconut and some rose water, because that was the only way I liked it. She would bring a bowl of hot sticky *soji* to me, to keep me company while I read well into the next morning.

### ***Cinnamon sugar donuts***

I have always been a sensitive being. Someone prone to feeling my emotions stronger than normal. They would simmer beneath the surface until a moment came where they would rise and spill. I would happily go about my day, and then something would have me curled up on my bed, trying to pull myself out of it. It is interesting that my dad understood this, even when I did not. I could never quite comprehend what was happening, just that it was. And that I was collapsing under a heavy invisible cloud of nothingness. On days like this, my dad would come home from work with a box of cinnamon sugared donuts tucked under his arm. He would go about his routine of peeking under the lids of the pots on the stove, taking a shower, making sure that he had an ironed shirt for the next day, and then he would come into my room. He would ask me to make some tea, and we would sit on my bed, sugar coating our fingers and the smell of cinnamon clinging to the air around us. He would not ask me about it, but he would sip tea with me. I remember once, as we were clearing the remnants of donuts and empty black mugs away, he told me that he thought that sadness was inherited. Those words changed the way I thought about these episodes. As painful as they were, they became special, too. It has been years, and we still do this for each other now.

### ***Toasted cheese sandwiches***

My grandmother makes the best toasted cheese sandwiches. There's nothing complicated about putting two slices of bread together, wedging some cheese, slices of tomato and freshly ground pepper in between. But I remember the satisfaction that came with getting home after hockey practice; my hair half-braided, half pulled into a ponytail, those little baby hairs flying everywhere. My grandmother would watch me wipe down my hockey stick and inspect it for any damage. She would watch me put it away into its black bag – the one with my name embroidered in silver thread. Then I'd shower, letting the sweat and smell of grass escape into the drain. When I'd walk through the kitchen, my grandmother would be turning the toasted cheese sandwich, patiently watching the other side crisp up, and the cheese oozing at the corners. It was a routine, one that she had perfected down to the final moment, where I would walk in, after hanging my towel up to dry, and she would do the final slip of the sandwich onto a white plate with blue flowers. Now, I make the toasted cheese sandwiches for my grandmother on the days when she has enough strength to eat them.

### ***Two-Minute Noodles with tuna***

I met my best friend while wrapped in a purple towel. She was wearing a green towel. We were standing at side-by-side sinks, brushing our teeth. This was the routine for two years. Later, we moved into our own flat. A little two bedroomed place, with the sliding door opening into a garden. We had a single bed in the living room, and it was where we had cup after cup of tea while chatting, or watching the other cook, or even just listening to our favourite Tim Burton playlist. I remember the one night when we were cooking dinner together; we needed to go grocery shopping, but it was also cold, and we were lazy girls who preferred pyjamas and tea and shopping at 9pm. I remember we found packets of two-minute noodles, and we saw that we had a tin of tuna. Cutting up onions, garlic and chilies for the tuna, it was a wonder where this was going to go. I remember us laughing as the mustard seeds and cumin reacted to the golden oil, while the noodles timidly cooked in another pot. That meal became a comfort in the years to come.

### ***Coffee and shortbread***

I met a boy in a coffee shop. It was one of those proper coffee shops, with the smell of Italian coffee beans becoming one with my hair and skin. Of course, they served the black cups of coffee with biscuits too. I remember the faint taste of cardamom in the thick slices of shortbread, it reminded me of my childhood. No Indian child grew up without knowing the taste of cardamom in anything and everything. I remember almost forgetting my order because I was so fascinated by a look in his eyes that I couldn't place. I just wanted to sit there and talk to him, about books and socks and wolves. He ordered more shortbread, saying that the taste was comforting and medicinal in a sense. He spoke about his family and tattoos and an unexplained love for Argentina. The taste of coffee with the sweet cardamom hints became familiar to me. The meetings almost always ended with a kiss on some part of my face. It seems I take my romances the way I take my coffee, scalding and bittersweet, laced with spices. But I don't really find myself going to that coffee shop anymore.

### ***That saucy dancing pudding***

Moving homes allowed me to make a new friend. And she became one of my closest friends at the end of it. I remember that year as being a mess of emotions, this was the first time in four years that I was not living with my best friend, her having moved back home. It was also the first time that she was living in this little town without her boyfriend, him having graduated. We spent countless hours drinking tea and sitting in the garden, my cat, ecstatic with the fact that we were sitting in her domain, would jump onto our laps for kisses. The one night, after we were left reeling by a season finale of a show we were watching, we decided to make dessert. It was straight out the box and seemed simple enough. But we got the

measurements wrong. And put the batter into a smaller oven dish than was required. How that sticky chocolatey pudding messed the oven that night. But how he danced in the process. We sat on the floor in front of the oven, watching him dance to his own silent tune, sometimes he would sway too much to the left, and some of him land at the bottom of the oven, sometimes it would be the right. After, we sat on the floor at either ends of the coffee table, eating the pudding straight from the oven dish. I remember the feelings of optimism and comfort sliding down my throat as I ate that pudding. And how we laughed at the thought of cleaning the oven. Suddenly I didn't feel so alone anymore.

## The Gallery

The building stood tall and narrow, amidst the other abandoned buildings, so tucked away that if you missed the turn, you would never know that they existed. It was grey with a black roof, a black door and long windows. There were no cars in the parking lot, nor any sign of people, but when Ara walked through the front door, it was teeming with life.

There were people lining the walls and sitting on stairs, nursing bottles of beer and other cocktails. Boxes of pizza were set upon wooden wine barrels, waiting for people to help themselves. Music was blasting from the overhead speakers, but if you listened carefully, different music came from different speakers. There were different coloured arrows pointing to different floors of the buildings.

Ara decided to follow the red arrows first, twisting her way between the people talking, she found herself being led to an entrance to the basement.

### *Broken hearts club*

It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the low lighting. It reminded her of how the lights were dimmed for the first forty days of mourning after her grandfather died. She continued down the stairs, holding the bannister tightly, careful not to fall over her own feet. As she reached the bottom, a woman passed her, sniffing into a white tissue and wiping her eyes with the oversized sleeve of her jersey, a carton of milk tucked under her arm. "There's a lot of emotion in this basement," she said as she started to climb the stairs.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, the basement came to life before her. She saw that the source of lighting were low hanging bulbs of different lengths, like one would find in a trendy café. Ara took a deep breath and looked around at the people viewing the installations around her. She saw more barrels planted in the room, covered in food and drink. Some had glass tops and sliding doors, just like the ice-cream freezers at the grocery store, and here, they served the same purpose. The barrels grabbed Ara's attention first, she wanted to see what food they held. One had large platters of multi-coloured donuts, another had a pile of French fries, the next had boxes of cookies. The barrels next to a thick rust-coloured pillar were piled high with chocolate bars and paper bowls of popcorn. A freezer-barrel displayed cartons of milk, just like the one carried by the sniffing women on the stairs. The barrel next to it held little boxes of cereal. Ara took a box of Cheerios and began to view the installations.

The first installation was simple. A white background with a torn floating lantern stuck to it. One edge of the lantern was slightly burnt. *We closed our eyes and wished to be together forever as we*

*released the lantern into the night sky. Maybe I shouldn't have picked it up and taken it home after the wind ate its flame.* Ara opened the box of Cheerios and continued on.

A line of men's ties were strung together with twine. Each tie had an event attached to it. *First date. Sister's wedding. Grandmother's 87<sup>th</sup> birthday party. Mom and Dad's anniversary dinner.* Ara touched the first tie, letting the silky material run through her fingers, she tried to picture a teenage boy wearing the dark blue tie, standing awkwardly with a bouquet of flowers at his date's front door.

Ara moved on to stare at a black board with hundreds of candy wrappers stuck to it. There was no title nor any explanation. Ara touched her favourite candy wrappers, wondering why someone would keep rubbish discarded by other people. Or if, maybe, the artist ate all the candy after a breakup. The idea seemed strange, but each to their own pain, she thought.

She stepped in front of a dead garden on a wooden pallet. It seemed that the artist had preserved every bouquet of flowers they had gotten during the relationship. Now, the dried and flimsy flowers created some kind of shrine. Like the previous installation, this one had no title, but it gave off the smell of death, and that seemed to be enough.

Ara decided to view one more piece before touring the rest of the building. The basement was now full of people helping themselves to the comfort food, trying to avoid the low hanging bulbs and tearing up at the installations in front of them, remembering their own breakup stories. Ara continued to eat from the box of Cheerios and wondered why none of the pieces affected her.

The last exhibit that she saw was a strange one. Hundreds of different coloured shoelaces had been plaited, and then attached to each other. *The web of lies.* Ara tilted her head to try and view it from different angles, but a story couldn't come to mind. A stranger caught her eye, and he grinned as he walked away.

Back on the ground floor, Ara saw that in her absence, the space had been cleared and what seemed like a candle exhibition was being put together. There were cardboard boxes all over the floor with candles of different colours, shapes and sizes. People dressed in tight black pants and thick black turtlenecks were rushing back and forth, trying to bring some vision to life before everyone.

Ara decided to take the floating stairs that were almost hidden by huge pots of plants. The gaps between the steps were wider than she was used to, and she had to pay extra attention to not let her feet fall through the gaps.

### *The portal to rediscovery*

Ara was intrigued. She was trying to discover herself, too. That was the reason she had followed the whispers of the building and found her way here. She wanted to look at something and have the sudden realisation that she had found a way to herself. She wanted to believe what her mother said was true, that Ara was just feeling slightly less than whole, and that once she found her missing puzzle pieces, everything would fit together again.

Like the installations in the basement, this floor was also covered with barrels serving as tables. Ara smelt the first exhibit before she stood before it. *Adrenaline*. There were flasks of coffee on the barrels this time, with stacks of paper cups and little wooden spoons. There were coffee beans strewn on the floor. In the centre, a white dress with a large coffee stain hung from a hook. It reminded Ara of the time she met a stranger in a bookstore. She remembered how she snuck inside to escape the rain. How she bought a coffee and a chocolate-covered pretzel. How she walked the narrow aisles between the large bookshelves. And how the stranger turned the corner the same time she did, spilling her coffee across her white sweater. A stain that never quite washed away.

When the scent of cinnamon and marshmallows hit her nose, Ara knew what was coming. *Comfort*. Here, the barrels held flasks of hot chocolate. There were small white bowls of ground cinnamon, and big pink bowls overflowing with tiny marshmallows. She helped herself to a handful of the white ones and stepped closer to inspect the installation. There were piles of blankets and a basket of thick woollen socks in different colours. A wicker table was piled high with books; *Jane Eyre* caught her eye and she recalled reading the novel during her years at University, the line “I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself...” echoed in her mind. There were boards covered in recipes for different kinds of hot chocolate. The “sinful” recipes caught her attention, especially the recipe with vanilla extract and a generous tablespoon of Grand Marnier. People were standing around the flasks, helping themselves to hot chocolate and chatting about which installations they liked best. “This seems more like a tasting event than art,” Ara heard a man say. “People are strange that way...” he continued as she walked past.

One more installation, she told herself. *Tranquillity*. More books and blankets. But this time there were ottomans with real cats lounging on them. There was a vase of sunflowers and a large stack of pillows. The barrels had pots of tea on warming plates, and fancy little teacups. There were also silver platters of biscuits and scones. Boxes of tea were lined along a table according to the colours of the rainbow. This reminded Ara of her own tea cupboard. She picked up a white teacup with little cherry blossoms and poured herself a cup of elderflower and passionfruit tea. She decided that she liked this one the best.



Ara noticed that the number of people in the room was dwindling. She glanced at her watch, thinking that maybe the gallery was going to close. 7pm. But there was one floor left, and Ara saw that you had to climb a narrow staircase at the corner of the room. If she wasn't looking for it, she would have missed it completely.

### *The Goddess Exhibit*

The smell of incense welcomed Ara as she walked into the room, she was the only one there. There were candles lit and offerings made at each exhibit. Ara was unsure whether to call them exhibits or altars of sorts. There was music playing overhead, Ara identified a flute and Tibetan drums, there was something else, but she couldn't quite pinpoint it. She looked around the room and saw nine Goddesses waiting for her. She decided to start on her left.

*Athena, Goddess of War & Wisdom.* Athena's statue was huge, her aegis larger than Ara's head, her spear longer than Ara herself. At her feet stood a silver owl and bouquets of tiger lilies, a large white bowl filled with different types of olives, with an olive branch placed across the middle. Ara imagined Athena in the modern world. She saw her striding through university campuses with bags heavy, full of books, reading glasses on the top of her head. She saw Athena at the forefront of protests, fighting for what she believed in. In that moment, Ara realised that Athena was inside her all along. She was her desire to stand her ground, to fight for her right to speak her mind. She gave her the energy to turn the pages of her textbooks.

*Persephone, Goddess of Spring & Queen of the Underworld.* The statue of Persephone was silver. She sat on a tree trunk, wearing a long dress with skulls at her feet. She held a bouquet of narcissus in one hand, and her infamous pomegranate in the other. On her head, was a wreath with deer horns delicately sticking out the top. Ara thought she looked fearsome and welcoming at the same time. Next to her statue was a large silver bowl of fresh pomegranate seeds, and yellow and white narcissus flowers.

*Aphrodite, Goddess of Love & Beauty.* Aphrodite's altar seemed incomplete. Her statue stood facing the wall, and all that could be seen was her back. There were rose petals strewn around her and Ara picked a few and put them into her pocket. There was also a little golden apple at her feet, it reminded Ara of the time Zeus refused to choose who was The Fairest between Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. The creator of the altar clearly thought that that crown belonged to Aphrodite.

As she turned around, Ara thought that the music appeared louder, the incense stronger. She had goosebumps all along her arms. She was still alone. She felt different on this floor, like there was something here for her. Her heart hammered against her chest, and her desire for more grew.

The Hindu Goddesses were next. Ara knew these goddesses as well as she knew herself, she had grown up praying to them every morning before school and on other special occasions.

*Durga, Goddess of War.* The statue of Durga always let a shiver down her back. Seated on a lion, Durga was depicted with multiple hands, each hand holding a weapon of some kind, and one holding a Demon King's head. Ara knew that she represented the death of all evil, slaying demonic figures that threatened the peace and prosperity of her people. To Ara, she remained the most powerful of all. At the foot of the statue lay a clay lamp with the wick lit, and a silver tray of fruit. This was also familiar to Ara, as her mother laid the exact scene every morning in their prayer room.

*Lakshmi, Goddess of Abundance, Wealth & Fertility.* The goddess stood in the centre of an opened pink lotus, she wore a red sari and from one of her right hands, golden coins flowed. Ara remembered the first time she was given pocket money as a child, she ran straight to the prayer room, bowed before the goddess and thanked her for the gift. Lakshmi, just like Durga, had a clay lamp and a silver tray of fruit.

*Saraswathi, Goddess of Wisdom, Music & Learning.* She sat on an opened white lotus flower, wearing a white sari with green and red, and resting on her thigh was a long golden sitar. Ara touched the thin bracelet around her wrist, made up of three loose strands of string; green, red and white. Her mother had tied it to her wrist two weeks before, after they had done a prayer to Saraswathi, to thank her for her guidance as Ara sat for her final law exam. Saraswathi, too, had the clay lamp, incense and tray of fruit at her feet.

Next, stood the magic of the Egyptian Goddesses. Ara touched the ankh pendant around her neck and walked toward the final three altars.

*Sekhmet, Goddess of War & Healing.* Sekhmet had always fascinated Ara. She was the daughter of Ra and was tasked with leading and protecting pharaohs during wars. Here, she stood long and beautiful, with the head of a lioness, an ankh in her right hand and a staff in her left. At her feet, bowls of rubies, garnets and red crystals, to appeal to her righteousness in war, and as a reminder of when she killed so many that the water of the Nile ran red. Ara bent down and touched the red crystals in front of her. She saw the gold plate of figs and little bowl of honey.

*Hathor, Goddess of Motherhood.* Hathor's bust stood on a pedestal, a sun disc above her head. In front of the pedestal, Ara saw another plate of figs and bowl of honey. She also saw babies made out of clay, offerings to the Mother. Ara wrapped her arms around her stomach, wondering whether she would need to pray to Hathor sooner than she thought.

*Isis, Goddess of Magic & the Moon.* Isis' statue was solid gold, she knelt on a platform with her arms spread wide, her wings open to the world, wearing a throne headdress. Again, a plate of figs and a bowl of honey were present. Ara remembered the year before, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, when the veil

between the worlds was at its thinnest, she lit candles in her room, with the window open and the moon in its fullest form. She remembered celebrating Isis and the permeability between life and death. She looked at Isis for a while, wondering how she gathered the strength to find all the pieces of her husband and put them together again.

Ara knew that it was time to leave. She had spent hours in the building, and she could hear the noise dying down on the floors below. She turned to leave but couldn't bring herself to. She found a mustard carpet in the corner of the room, next to a box of extra candles, and long thin boxes of incense. She picked up some candles, lighting and placing them next to the candles that were burning out. She dragged the carpet to the centre of the room. She took off her shoes. She curled into a ball on the carpet, and from behind closed eyes, she watched the Goddesses get off their statues and pedestals and wrap their arms around her.

## Trajva

### एक

“Dadi is sick,” she said as she tumbled into my house. “Ma is being too sensitive about everything. It’s not like playing music in my room is going to send the old lady to her grave, you know. You are so lucky you don’t live there anymore,” she dumped her bag next to the door and kicked off her shoes.

“I was there when you were at work today. I helped Dadi in the bath. And I cooked dinner,” I told my sister.

“Oh. Ma didn’t say, so I came straight here. Have you cooked anything, or shall we grab a takeaway?”

“I brought some food home, go help yourself.”

“Let’s go out after dinner. Let’s go to a bar. We can just sit there and forget about everything.”

### दो

We both sat on uncomfortable chairs at the bar counter, drinking Cosmopolitans. She twirled the sliver of orange peel between her fingers. She kept tapping a foot loudly against the wood. A drunk man approached us, misjudging the distance of the counter and sloshed his beer all over my lap.

“Are either of you taken?” he asked in a repulsive tone with a sneer forming on his lips.

“The only time someone is taken is when they’re dead,” she said.

### तीन

We went back to my house after that. She insisted that we blow up the air mattress and put it out on the balcony. “Let’s stargaze,” she said as she pulled the duvet off my bed.

We tried to identify some of the constellations, and when we failed, we just made up our own.

“That one can be ‘Dadi’s plait’ because there are so many stars in a row!” she pointed.

“And that one looks like a bow. Like the one the white cat has in *The Aristocats*, right?”

We fell asleep on the balcony, her hands wrapped around my arm, her hair fanning out on the pillow below her. Even in her sleep, she looked sad.

## चार

She spent a long time in the shower, talking to me through the open door. She talked about wanting to settle down with the man she met at work.

“We’ve been together for two years now, Di. It’s time, don’t you think?”

“Is it because you really want to or are you looking for a way to leave the house?”

She turned the water off and walked out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her a few minutes later.

“Would it really be so bad?”

“What?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

## पाँच

Dadi died a few days later. My sister packed a bag and came home with me after the funeral.

“There’s no point in staying there anymore.”

“Do you think you’ll miss her?”

“Not as much as you. She didn’t like me.”

“That’s a lie and you know it.”

“That’s a lie and you know it,” she repeated as she dumped the contents of her bag onto my bed.

“Fine. But she only appreciated me after I left the house, before that it was the same. We’re not like Papa’s sister’s children. They’re *special*. They’re *American*. We’re just the grandchildren that she had to put up with.”

“Yes. Oh, well. Let’s go to the bar again.”

## छः

We sat on the same chairs as before, drinking the same cocktails. Rainbow Kitten Surprise’s *Cold Love* blew through the room from the overhead speakers.

“I’ve decided to marry him,” she said.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I think some stability could do me some good, you know. Maybe it will help me grow up. That’s what everyone wants me to do.”

“Do you love him?”

“A little bit. I think it’s enough for now.”

## सात

A few months later, we were shopping for wedding saris.

“Why didn’t you tell Ma to come?” I asked.

“Because she will end up choosing the sari. And I’ll have to pretend that it was the one I wanted the entire time. Or I’ll choose what I want, and she’ll sit quietly in the corner and be upset that I chose not to listen to her.”

“She’s going to be upset either way.”

“Probably. But she’s getting what she wanted, I’m getting married.”

## आठ

One morning, three days before the wedding, she arrived at my door again.

“Let’s go on an adventure!” she said.

“It’s too early to go to the bar.”

“That’s not where we’re going, sis.”

She took me to a tattoo studio, she wanted to get *trajva* tattoos. She said that she needed something to protect her from bad energy and *nazar*. And that Dadi told her that in the olden days, *trajva* tattoos were used to strengthen marital relationships, especially if the dots and lines were arranged to symbolize the moon.

“But three days before your wedding?”

“Will there ever be a better time?”

## नौ

The night before the wedding, she phoned me.

“Do you think it would be cruel to call off the wedding?” she asked.

“It depends. Why are you calling it off?”

“I don’t feel right. I feel like something is sitting on my chest. And I just cannot seem to push it off. I don’t want to do this, Di.”

“Do you want me to come over?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to phone Ma and Papa and call it off?”

“No.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

## दस

She did not call off the wedding. She said she wanted to be brave.

“Dadi would have done it, right?” she asked me when I helped her change into her reception outfit after the wedding.

“She did do it, remember? She didn’t have a choice.”

“I suppose. I guess I did have a choice, but I also didn’t. Do you think I’ll be happy?”

“As happy as you allow yourself to be.”

“Well, the *trajva* tattoos are supposed to help with that. So, let’s see when they kick in.”

“And you believe that they will?”

“Oh, Di. I *must* believe. If not, I have nothing.”

## ग्यारह

A few months after the wedding she tumbled into my home again. She threw her phone and keys onto the table next to the door. Her eyes were swollen, and her clothes hung off her. She took off her shoes and sat on the couch.

“Don’t make me go back, please.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere.”

“Can we sleep on the balcony again?”

“If you want.”

## बारह

The power went out sometime during the night, when we were looking at the night sky. In the darkness, the stars seemed even brighter than normal.

“What happened?” I whispered to her.

“The *trajva* didn’t work.”

“Was he bad to you?”

“The *trajva* didn’t work,” she repeated.

She moved closer to me, putting her arm around my waist. She buried her face in my hair and fell asleep.

## तेरह

The next morning, she refused to be alone. She sat on the toilet while I showered. I arranged to work from home that day, and when I sat down to work, she lay on the couch nearby.

“I think of Dadi more these days,” she said.

“Really? What about her?”

“Not much. The same things. Maybe I was wrong about her.”

“Maybe. But she didn’t make it easy to live with her.”

“Yes. But maybe she tried to teach us things in her own way. To hurt so much that you detach yourself from everything and everyone.”

## चौदह

A few weeks later, we were sitting on my living room floor eating leftover fries and cold pizza. She had moved most of her things in, there was little space to move around.

“What do you keep humming?” she asked.

“*Cold Love*. I could live in those last sixty seconds forever.”

“Huh?”

“*Chained to a lie who’s to blame? Let it die. We’re the same,*” I sang.

She replied with a blank look.

“No?” I said.

“No.”

## पंद्रह

We both dressed up for my office’s Christmas party. She was eager to see my world. She wanted to meet the people that I kept talking about. When we got there, she retreated into herself. She sat on a chair facing the window.



“Come on, let’s go,” I said after an hour.

“Why? Keep talking to your friends. Have a good time, Di.”

“It’s okay, I’d rather spend time with you. We can go to the bar if you want.”

She turned away and sighed, her breath misting the window: “Don’t you see? You’re the light of this party.”

## Painting of a panic attack

In the distance, a muttering, sinister and indistinct. I know who it is; the shadow woman who stole from me before.

Here I am, immersed in a sea of books. Some worn, their spines horribly frayed, others half written. They were here and there, I only noticed them when they were here, I disregarded them when they were there.

The shadow woman continues to mutter, visiting each room.

You'll think that I'm dying, or even dead. It's difficult to walk through these worlds, deciding what is alive and what isn't. It's like waiting for something you never really had – another reason to feel less human.

Remembering this moment now, as if I'm not being swallowed by books, but rather at the top of a desolate mountain, or even further away, as if I were lying flat at the bottom of the sea, the memories come and go. When the night is at its darkest, they appear and fade away into nothing. Every time I think I have gotten a hold of something substantial, it disintegrates into dust between my fingers.

The woman continues to walk around, making my head pound. She leaves an unpleasant breeze in her wake. Muttering. Muttering.

I rip out the pages from a navy notebook. I will keep writing until the ink runs out and there is only blood left. I will write until there is nothing to write about.

There is calm, there is peace.

There is the muttering woman. The woman ever present and looming.

I tried to write about her, she did not like it. She gifted me a panic attack, left me curled in a foetal position for two days. I tried to talk about her, she did not like that either. She pushed me down the stairs, a blue bruise blossomed on my forehead.

The shadow woman does not talk to me. She shuffles around the house, muttering at everything and nothing.

The shadow woman does not let me leave the house, she stands at all the doors, crosses her arms at the windows, stopping me from leaving whenever I think about it.

But the house is beautifully grey and welcoming on most days.

I don't think I mind it.

Part B: Portfolio

**Portfolio**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
**Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

of

Rhodes University

by

**Prenesa Naidoo**

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## **Introduction**

This portfolio records my writing journey indicating the stories I wrote, the books I read and highlights how I found my place in the writing community. As a full-time MACW student, the portfolio includes entries from my Reflective Journals organised chronologically according to the weeks of the year, from Week 5 to Week 48, as well as my Poetics Essay and Book Reviews.

## **Part One:**

### **Reflective Journals: Weeks 5 to 14**

#### **Week 5:**

Contact Week felt a little strange, as I was getting used to shedding my English Literature Honours skin and learning how to be a writer instead of analyzing everything I was reading.

I was exposed to new writers and different ways of writing. From the readers that were handed out, I was particularly taken by Taban Lo Liyong's "The Old Man of Usumbura and his Misery". Packed into four pages of incredible imagery and lyrical writing, the short story had quite an impact with the repetition and just the sound of the words out loud. The short story is also dark, brother killing brother, which is intriguing as there is no justification, just the mere spread of misery, which is exactly what was asked for.

We discussed our holiday assignments and I realised that the themes which stick out the most to me are; magical realism, gothic elements, meaning and loss of meaning, the self and what is beyond the self, the liminality of life and death and just anything with a dark tone. Therefore, I want to explore this in greater detail and see whether my own writing reflects this, or if this is something that I prefer to read rather than write. So far, my own writing has been incredibly different, as I am still trying to pinpoint my writer voice and carve out my own little niche.

#### **Week 6:**

Our first seminar was on "Fierce Writing". I struggled to get my writing as deep as it needed to be to fulfil the brief. It took many tries before I was able to write a piece that the reader could both see and feel.

We read "Newborn gown" from Han Kang's *The White Book*. I found this piece extremely powerful as Kang was able to tell the story of an expectant mother giving birth to a premature baby alone on the kitchen floor. She had made a white gown for her child while being gripped by contractions on the floor. Kang has the mother mutter to her child, "for god sake don't die" which still haunts me even though I read the excerpt almost a week ago. The story is so simply written, but the trauma and emotions are felt long after the words have been read. Upon reflection, I have realised that writing which holds the themes of death and loss resonates clearer for me, and almost always has a lingering effect.

I am reading *40 Likely to Die Before 40*, a collection of short stories written in "Alt Lit". I think that "Alt Lit" is a clever way of writing because it is experimental, and it doesn't seem as though the writers know which direction they are going until they are there.

**Week 7:****“Writing the Body”**

I remember writing a paper on this topic back in English Honours, but I can say that the differentiation between academic and creative writing really stood out for me this week.

I realized that the reason that I struggled so much, is due to having grown up in a typical Indian household. Other than the general female conversations relating to puberty, we didn't really speak about the body. It wasn't exactly taboo; it was just something that we didn't do. Therefore, this seminar was interesting, yet very intimidating at the same time. I knew that I had to look deeper and find a way to connect with my body so that I could write about the intricate things that make up a body. Again, this wasn't as easy as I thought it would be and after many scrapped pieces of writing, I *finally* wrote something worthy of being read.

I decided to stick with the theme of being 'Indian' and somehow the words began to furiously fly across the page and make up a three-part short story about three generations of Indian females, “Up in Smoke”.

Mangaliso said that he liked that I could produce a piece that is the child of mythology and fairytales. I found Manga's observation interesting, as the violence I described is very much based on the reality that females still face in India.

**Week 8:****“Writing silence – the weirdness and poetics of trees and oceans”**

Mxolisi Nyezwa said that he enjoyed my simple writing but would like me to allow my more 'emotional' pieces to be a little longer as they are heavy, or they should be broken down into two/three shorter pieces. And that, he would prefer more concrete images (in retrospect, this sounds a little confusing – but oddly enough, I think I understood what he was saying). He also said that he can see that I am drawing from something personal, and that because of this, it seems like I dissociate myself from time to time. I have flagged this as something that I need to work through, especially as I am interested in working with memory and as a result, will be working from my own truth, so if I continue to dissociate myself from my writing – it will be flat and ineffective.

Upon reflection, I realized that even though I may potentially want to write a collection of short stories, I have never really sat down and read through many, having preferred novels that are long enough to let me enter another world and linger there for a while. However, the skill that goes into writing short



stories has overwhelmed me. I realized that short stories can punch you in the gut and leave you marveling at the pain. And I absolutely love this!

This week I have learnt that it is okay to dig into one's personal space of memory and experience, and in doing so, I have been taught to remain present when doing this – dissociating, even unintentionally, will harm the piece. I have also discovered a new awe at the art of writing emotion into short stories, especially due to the length of these pieces.

### **Week 9:**

“The only writing is rewriting”

I realised that all stories have already been told, just not by our voices. Therefore, Nathan Trantraal's seminar helped me realize that while this is true; as writers we can still 'borrow' work from another writer and make it our own.

Growing up, my grandparents used to tell me a lot of stories that were passed down the generations. One of them was about how when a person passed away and if it rained, the rain was simply washing away their sins. Steven Watson's *Rain In A Dead Man's Footsteps* was an echo to the above story that was told to me. His second poem, *The Powers of the Dead*, was another echo of a story that I was told. I remember being told that we should not talk or even think about those who had been murdered or committed suicide. This was because, due to their violent deaths, we would be 'haunted' by their spirits. I was surprised that this poem said a very similar thing, even though it was across the world from where my grandparents would have originally picked up the story. Therefore, I found myself wanting to read more of these poems and seeing if there were any other overlaps in terms of such stories.

### **Week 10:**

“Writing with and Against Narrative Conventions”

This week, inspired by Samuel Beckett and William Faulkner, I learnt how to go against the conventional narrative form. I also learnt that as messy as stream of consciousness is to read, it is very much *real* as it is made to reflect how a person thinks, and that in itself is always messy and has unbound freedom.

Alissa Nutting's story collection *Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls* was rather interesting, there was one story that stood out in particular – “Knife Thrower”. As it was rather visually bizarre, I was left with many questions. Her collection of short stories is so absurd that they make you forget about

everything else. It becomes easy to look past all rationality; the form and emotions leave. Nutting makes you live in the moment, to live for that short story with the most unconventional premises.

### **Week 11:**

“Poems from Other Poems”

Pablo Neruda’s *Ode to the Tomato*, really fascinated me – an entire poem about something that is always in my fridge. It was interesting to see how Neruda took such a simple thing and made into a descriptive poem with very effective imagery. I also enjoyed Antjie Krog’s “arrival” for its imagery and the way such a short poem gives an entire story and evokes an array of emotions.

*30 Under 30 ...* These stories are just *so* strange. While I enjoyed the strangeness, some were just a bit much and I felt like they missed the mark with me. Beth Couture’s “Fur: An Autobiography” – this piece was just incredibly strange and had me asking more questions than there were answers, but I found this to be an effective way of writing. As the short story was written in little parts/fragments, I liked that I could see the pieces in little images in my head.

Rebecca Jean Kraft’s *Kiddie Land* – was another piece that oozed in all things weird. I liked how vivid the imagery was and how confused I felt myself getting at certain parts.

It also made me wonder if and when I’ll be able to write something just as strange as this – or if my own work is strange but I just don’t see it, being the writer. It doesn’t need to make sense. It just needs to be interesting words on paper, trying to make the reader conjure up impossible images and feel things.

### **Week 12:**

In terms of reading and writing, my interests differ very slightly – as I enjoy reading books across genres of fantasy, mystery and psychological thrillers. Recently, I have noticed that with regard to my writing, I enjoy writing pieces which explore memory and constantly shift in consciousness – therefore, I have been trying to read more books like this, so that I can really explore this kind of writing and find my own way to make it work for myself.

Mishka Hoosen’s *Call it a difficult night*. Even though the book was harrowing, and there was this sense of loss that I felt while reading it, the book was incredibly insightful in how to go about writing about psychological experiences which take you into other worlds. I am glad to have found and read it, as it helped me understand creative ways of writing about these issues. [Perhaps this laid the seed for my stories “Death of touch and other side effects” and “Painting of a panic attack”.]

I also found inspiration from the way Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code* take pieces of history and come up with a narrative which is based on these myths and legends. The idea of taking something factual and turning it into fiction is something that I find fascinating and would like to explore.

### **Week 13:**

I absolutely loved Adania Shibli's *Touch*. It was a short, yet extremely heavy read. There was a lot of detail put into the novella, yet at the same time, there were many details left out. As it was written from a Muslim perspective, there were many things that were either relatable or easy to imagine as I have a lot of Muslim family and have been exposed to some of the images that Shibli illustrated in the text. Moreover, for me, the best part of the text was definitely the emotion that was felt throughout the novella, even though it was not explicitly said. I also enjoyed the different sections, as they placed emphasis on each thing (such as colour, language and so on) in the specific section. I know that I would like to try this in my own writing as it is really effective for the reader and, sets the tone for the book, so the reader is forced to feel these emotions, whether they want to or not.

### **Week 14:**

I read Anjali Sachdeva's collection *All the Names they used for God*. The short stories were strange and almost all of them had an otherworldly element to it. You'd be reading and then you would come across something strange, but the interesting part was that it fitted into the story as though it were something natural and questioning it would be foolish. I've enjoyed playing with the ideas of fantasy and even the supernatural. I am currently thinking of how to incorporate this kind of art into my writing.

I have been thinking about the question of 'home' a lot this week. Now, I know that I am a South African Indian and I know that this is my home. However, there is always a part of me that wants to write on all things 'Indian'. But at the same time, the question of being Indian surfaces – wondering whether I am *Indian enough* to write about this, having lived in South Africa my whole life. Sometimes when I'm writing, I find that the home for me is either set here, or in India. And I've realised that 'home' is a place that we can build through fiction. Maybe it doesn't matter that I'm not *Indian enough* because I can create this place where I *belong*. I can write about the seductions of belonging, create a home where I feel welcome. As a writer, I realised that I am trying to create all these characters and places, but I also know that in some of my writing, these places may not be the *right* place, or safe places and may look incredibly different to the place I grew up in. They could even be in turbulent terrain, but my characters may seek them out because they too, just want to be *somewhere*.

## **Part Two:**

### **Poetics of The Wor(l)ds We Live**

#### **Trauma as a Muse in Writing**

Being a writer involves a person accepting that they are in for a haunting and lonely journey while they attempt to get their thoughts typed across pages. With this comes hours of painful silence and fistfuls of hair while trying to figure out how to translate thoughts into words. Yet, sometimes we fail to see that the solution is right in front of us. We have an unending limit to inspiration, from the writers before and next to us. We have voices that have echoed across the pages of books, as their writers went through the same struggles before us. That's what the *Poetics of the Wor(l)ds we live* seminars have taught me. Going through the essays that we needed to read during the week, it was a clear reminder that we are a part of a writing community, and that people have spoken about their experiences with writing; whether it's the writing itself, the form, ideas and so on.

While reading the essays and trying to find a topic or a pathway for this essay, I couldn't decide on one set topic as there were quite a few things that stood out to me. In this essay I will explore the highlights of the essays that we read as well as my own thoughts and insights regarding my own writing. Reading the essays, which are very clear in theme and tone, I wanted to try and understand if I have a theme running through my own writing. So far, it appears that the main themes are; loss, memory and trauma. Therefore, my essay will focus on these three current spheres of my writing. Firstly, I will speak about how people write from their experiences; from memory; and use this as a way to both remember and heal. Overall, the essence of my essay is to highlight that trauma is a muse, be it physical, mental or emotional; trauma remains at the center for many writers. I also find this surprising, because as writers, when we're told to write a narrative of personal experience, it is very seldom the stuff of happy recollections, but rather narratives of pain; recollections of miscarriages, suicide, abuse, car accidents, illness and so on. I think that giving these experiences an immortal voice, rooted in ink and paper actually helps the writer take their experiences and heal from them.

When writing, even if given a prompt, I've found that my writing constantly drifts to my own life, and therefore, there will be clear representation of lived experiences. However, I also take creative license at this stage and fictionalize the piece, so that most of it is rooted from experience of a kind, to birthing a piece that allows the reader to feel and understand what has made the piece come into being. From the essays, I have found that this is a norm for writers; the act of living and then taking these experiences and translating them onto paper, allowing the reader to visit lives that they normally wouldn't. A perfect example of this can be found in William Carlos Williams' essay, *The Practice*. Williams writes that as a

doctor, the daily presence of patients, and “coming to grips with the intimate conditions of their lives, when they were being born, when they were dying, watching them die, watching them get well when they were ill, has always absorbed [him]” (196) this illustrates that a great source of inspiration for Williams was his interactions and experiences with these patients, which he was then able to write about (195). Later in the essay, Williams speaks of the trauma that he is exposed to when he states “The girl who comes to me breathless, staggering into my office, in her underwear a still breathing infant, asking me to lock her mother out of the room, the man whose mind is gone – all of them finally say the same thing” (201). It is interesting that Williams uses this, now shared, trauma in his own writing. However, that simply goes back to trauma being a muse, even if it is through another’s experience.

Aside from experience, there is also the notion of writing from memory. Both as a means to preserve the memory, but sometimes it is also to just tell a story from your past. Here, I’ve always wondered what the great difference is between experience and memory. In my own writing, I have found that when it comes to experience, I’ll write from that perspective; the being experiencing the experience. Yet, when it comes to memory, I have found that my speaker varies, therefore, it could either be from a first-person point of view, as that person recalling the memory. Or it could be from a third-person perspective. Again, I think that this would be reflective of the writer, and how they would perceive trauma or that traumatic event. Looking at Williams’ essay, I would assume that he could do both, write from a person experiencing the trauma, or a person witnessing the trauma. Both of which, are equally intriguing and something worthy of exploring.

In Lidia Yuknavitch’s *Daguerreotype of a Girl* (2008), we see that here she has given her character the ability to “transform unbearable pain into artistic production – exactly like how women take what turns out to be a life and live with it” (5). From her piece, it becomes clear that trauma is present in her character’s narrative. I think for this piece, there are both elements of writing from experience and memory. Yuknavitch’s piece differs from the rest in that it is a sample of her writing, rather than her opinion of writing, or methods and/or ideologies. Therefore, I think that this piece is effective in illustrating that her character draws on both memory and experience in her narrative, and the writing portrays this by allowing the reader to get a glimpse of the weight of her past. In doing so, the writing is layered and complex, which is a necessary element for the writing to evoke something in the reader. I think that this type of writing is worth looking into as a means of understanding how to pack a punch for the reader, for them to journey with the protagonist/characters in this literary journey from cover to cover. There is something intricate in this type of writing, as it hints little things to the reader, but doesn’t give away too much, which I think is a problem that I sometimes have with my writing. I want to use *all* the words at my disposal, and therefore, sometimes I say too much, rather than letting the reader illustrate it for themselves.

Moreover, what I find especially intriguing in this example of writing is the structure, which is something that I highlighted upon first reading the piece. Here, Yuknavitch uses one-word sentences, which set up either the tone or the theme of the subsequent part. I think that the idea of a stand-alone word is important when writing about trauma, as this would highlight a powerful ‘moment’ or illustrate that something is coming. In my own writing, I’ve found that I use this style of stand-alone words where I want to place emphasis on something, or when there is a change in pace/scene. As I also generally write about trauma, I’ve found that this works for my writing in that, as it can become an emotional ‘blow to the gut’, which is how I try to get a reaction from the reader. Later in the piece, Yuknavitch says “All artists see things that are not there” (13), from my own experiences and from reading various books, I think that this line is important to the topic at hand. I do think that after going through trauma, the healing may come with writing, and patience and whatever help the individual may seek. However, there is also the haunting of these experiences which linger long after. Therefore, this quote from Yuknavitch reminds me of this, the fact that as a writer, you are given the ability to draw from different spectrums and therefore, you can see and feel things that may not be present or material, but they’re there, and they present themselves into the pieces we write and the emotions we want conveyed.

I also think that where trauma becomes the muse, writing becomes the salve. Therefore, this act of writing becomes a way to remember the experience and memories, immortalizing them and thus, healing. In her essay *Narratives of Struggle*, bell hooks states that “people are more than their pain” (hooks, 1991). Here, we see that the idea of trauma haunts people and their writing, yet hooks’ statement about people being more than their pain, is inspiring to a writer. If we see the act of writing as a healing process, it would reinforce hooks’ statement as referring to the importance of writing. For me, there are instances where the traumatic events have been beyond my control, therefore, the act of writing allows me to take control over this, to understand it, work through it and heal. With the writing process, I think that you can show this in the writing, and if you’re lucky, the reader will be able to feel the emotions that the writer is/has gone through. I also believe that there is a freedom that comes with writing; yet to be free, we have to make a choice to survive the adversity that has been thrown at us; as writers we do this by daring to create pieces where the bitter and the sweet elements of life come into being. Writers don’t seem to be able to measure their capacity to endure pain, but rather to celebrate moving beyond this pain. The writing, therefore, is representative of this; in that, it tells a story, it reveals deep and dark secrets and exposes the writer’s soul for the audience to get a glimpse of this trauma, whether the wound has healed yet or not.

This brings me to my next section in this essay. Here, I want to highlight the form of the writing, and how the writing affects, both the reader and the writer. I think something that all writers face, is the struggle to get their talent displayed onto the page. The ideas may come easy, but sometimes the words

feel lost and distant. This is something that I am challenged with from time to time, it's not that the writing is not there, because it is, it's more the challenge of presenting it on paper, to make it as effective as it can be for the reader to get the maximum effect of the weight of the writing. Therefore, my first piece relating to trauma, death in this case, was a piece that I struggled with in terms of form and structure. I found my solution in the fairytale form. The reason for this, is that the fairytale form is simple and there is a structure to it. While the content is always subject to change, the form itself remains true to its 'genre'. Therefore, this brings me to Kate Bernheimer's *Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale* essay. Being a fan of fairytales, it was not surprising to find that I found a solution to my writing struggles with the fairytale form. Here, I stretched my writing into the structure of a fairytale, allowing for *Little Red Riding Hood* to become the basis of my piece, letting my writing change the original story, but coming to a resolution much like the original. There is also a beckoning feel to fairytales, and as Italo Calvino puts it "If during a certain period of my career as a writer I was attracted by folktales and fairy tales. ... It was rather because of my interest in style and structure, in the economy, rhythm, and hard logic with which they are told" (61). By the same token, this is what has always drawn me to the fairytale structure.

However, Bernheimer also speaks of a 'flatness' that comes with fairy tales, and while this is true of the adapted fairytales, I think that where this structure is used to portray a writer's deeply personal and emotional piece of writing, this flatness could be avoided. By this, I mean that it is simply only the structure of the fairytale form that is being used or adopted, but not the general written conventions. Therefore, the writing may begin with a simple statement such as a "Once Upon a time ..." yet the writing itself could go beyond all narrative conventions. So, the structure may be like a general fairytale, yet the piece, evocative of emotion and tragedy, will make the fairytale a stranger to itself. Moreover, this would illustrate that where a writer or the writing is based on trauma, this flatness would be removed, and there would be a great sense of depth, as the writer would create layers for the reader to unpack while reading the piece. I also think that the fairytale structure or form is safe, and it is something that, as reader's, we've come across before, whether in our past, or even now, reading the more dark and twisted fairytales than what we grew up with. Therefore, it made sense for this form to be my solution and inspiration for my first piece on trauma, as it gave me a safety net, and the comfort of a soothing fairytale, even though the writing was going to be darker than anything I had read in fairytale form before.

In her essay, Bernheimer states that "Fairy tales offer a path to rapture – the rapture of form – where the reader or writer finds a blissful and terrible home" (62), I think that this reiterates the stance that the form of the fairy tale helps the writer settle down in a familiar place, where they can tell their tale, renovate the form of the fairy tale, while using it to tell their woes. Moreover, Bernheimer states "That many writers do celebrate the dark, fantastic cosmos of fairy tales is wonderful, but I would also like to see an increased recognition of their artistic dexterity" (63). From this statement, I understand that as

writers, while it may be easier to use this home and security of the fairy tale form as a place for traumatic writing, I think that the content of the writing is challenging in itself, and therefore, the writer should embrace this and challenge themselves too. I've noticed this in my own writing, where I have removed the confines of form for my pieces and allow the writing to guide me to whatever form or structure it wishes to take, rather than going in with a preconceived idea regarding the form, the piece become more effective.

Dambudzo Marechera has an interesting view of this, that I hadn't given much thought of before, he states that "Beneath reality, there is always fantasy: the writer's task is to reveal it, to open it out, to feel it, to experience it" (1988). To me, this statement makes me think about the fairy tale form; and whether using this form allows for the writer easier access to the fantasy realm, as they are using a form that can be taken as a portal to fantasy. This is interesting, as I have not given much thought to this. Additionally, Marechera says "There are writers who can only write while they are free to develop their own personality, to be true to themselves", from this, I think that the idea of trauma comes back, in the sense that developing one's personality would be a way of healing and coming to terms with this as their muse. In my own writing, I know that when I need to have something closed off and accepted, I write about it, whether through invented characters or through myself, once I put it on paper, I feel that the product can find a place in my personality, thereby making me who I am, and ensuring that I remain true to myself.

As a writer who speaks of past trauma, one of my goals of the writing is to ensure that the reader feels some part of the emotion that I try to put into my writing. Amina Cain's essay on *Slowness* speaks of wanting the fiction to talk to her (2015). She speaks of how in her writing she starts from "an open place and trust that the elements that need to be in the story will find their way" (31), she further speaks about how she does not think about whether her writing is accessible to people or not. I find this particularly interesting as when I'm writing, sometimes the writing does not immediately speak for itself. When I am writing from traumatic experience or memory, the words flow a lot better, and I find that I don't look for a certain audience, but rather to write to preserve the experience. Whereas, if I'm writing about something else, or for the sake of writing, and the words have difficulty coming to life, I find that I contemplate an audience and try to write something in that direction. Which is not always effective in writing.

However, when speaking about how writing effects the reader, I found that Lidia Yuknavitch's essay, *Why Do You Write It All Weird?* (2015) puts this into perspective for me. Here, she states that she is "on a mission to bring language and the body back into relationship with one another." I find this line powerful as it is something that I've been trying to do with my own writing; to let the reader actually feel what I want them to feel, to almost smell the smells that I describe, and taste the words lingering on their tongues. Writing about the body has always been important to me because, as a writer, I have not always



been in tune with my body, therefore, this task is something that I want to accomplish in my writing. This is mainly due to the importance of feeling for a reader and the writer. I especially find when the theme of the writing is related to trauma; the writing must be effective enough for the reader to feel the pain and agony that the writer has survived. Even if the writing process is effective and a means of preservation for the writer; the question of whether the writing is effective rises to the surface. And I think that this is important to a writer, as this is the way that we get pieces of ourselves into the world, therefore, it has to be as effective as we can make it to be. The writing needs to evoke some feeling in order to deem it worthy of being read, enjoyed and maybe even understood.

Frederico Garcia Lorca's essay on *Theory and function of the Duende* gives a mysterious element to the art of writing with the "duende" being the "spirit of the earth". Out of all the essays, I think that this essay is the most inspirational to writers. The idea of this "duende" which I understand as being a kind of mysterious power of art which deeply moves a person/the audience, is something that is unexplainable, yet it draws the person in. For a writer, this is powerful, as it allows the writing to speak for itself. However, while my theme has been trauma as a muse, this unexplainable idea of the 'duende' is something that I would want to both reflect on my writing and see if it has a place in there, and still explore further. Lorca states that "those dark sounds are the mystery, the roots that cling to the mire that we all know, that we all ignore, but from which comes the very substance of art" (1). Here, I question where this 'force' comes from, and how does it come into being, both, to an artist, and in their work. My thoughts, here, wander to the darker aspects of writing. In his essay, Lorca explicitly states that 'duende' should not be confused or intertwined with either the angel or the muse. As I've mentioned before, my writing either falls into the spectrum of experience, memory and loss related to trauma, therefore, I look forward to trying to figure this out for myself.

However, not all my pieces are rooted in this aspect of trauma. I've noticed that where my writing doesn't fit into this sphere, it moves to darker, more gothic writing. I struggle to find the words to describe happiness in writing. Writing for me, needs to envelope the reader, and therefore, if I'm writing from a memory of happiness, for instance, I can do it without question. However, where the happiness needs to be present, in that moment, I fall short. Therefore, this idea of 'duende' is exciting, especially now that I can see that it is present in my writing, and there are times when I'm writing, and something dark and sinister grows from it, rather than anything pertaining to my life at that moment. So, here, I question where the inspiration comes from, and by the same token, why is it coming from something so unexplainably dark. Later in his essay, Lorca states "We only know it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, rejects all the sweet geometry we understand, that it shatters styles ..." I think that this statement only makes the idea of the 'duende' more mystical and the desire to find it and adopt it to one's own writing only grows.

I also quite like the idea of inspiration coming from something unknown, it gives the writer a kind of mysterious feel, and because it is from something unknown, I think that there would be more to explore in the writing, rather than having a preconceived idea of where the piece is going. It also highlights that there is a darker side to everything, a *yin and yang* if you will. I also think that because I am a writer who prefers to read and write things that fall into the ‘dark’ spectrum; ranging from trauma to mental illness to death and the like, that this idea of adopting the ‘duende’ into my writing to give it this extra depth is one to explore.

Moreover, Ann Lauterbach (2010) highlights that “art is not sufficiently understood as a meaning making structure which might provide a given culture with nonviolent introductions to alternative modes of thinking about our world, and which, furthermore, might offer forms of redemption, solace, compensation, and critique”. From Lauterbach’s statement, I think what stands out the most to me is the idea of art offering forms of redemption and solace. I think especially if the writing is rooted in trauma, that this act of writing itself can gift redemption and solace to the writer as a means of immortalizing their experience. Yet, on the same note, I think that the same can be given to the reader, where the writing itself resonates with them, and their experiences.

Finally, I have spoken about trauma as being a muse, however, I have focused on the darker, more physical and emotional trauma that has left a lasting impact of the writer. However, for this part of the essay, I want to focus on emotional and mental trauma put into place by feelings of displacement. As a writer, I have been thinking about the concept of ‘home’ and writing home. For this, I’ve questioned my ability as a writer being able to write about this idealized home, even if I haven’t been there. Being a South African Indian, I have always wondered if I could write about India and culture in my pieces, and whether it would be regarded as being *enough*. Even though this topic may not sound as though it fits into the section of trauma, I think that it does. The reason for this is because the idea of home and culture is something that plays a significant role in a person’s identity. Therefore, if the feeling of displacement is large enough, there is this piece missing in their identity, and I think that this relates to emotional and mental trauma. For me, however, I’ve thought about this concept of home, and have realized that home can be created in the writing. Writing itself has the depth to explore the seductions of belonging, it can create this place where one feels welcome. I also think that as writers, we are constantly trying to create new things; be in characters, images and places, so the question of identity is one that can arise through this process.

In an interview of Lesego Rampolokeng and Ike Muila, by Robert Berold (1999), Muila speaks about how people “come from rich cultural backgrounds”. I found this interesting as our culture plays a vital part in our personalities, and therefore, this aspect of our identity is one that must be preserved. Later he states, “when you go back to your roots and feel the real stuff, it’s then that the real artist in you

develops”. From this, I found myself contemplating that if a writer is unable to get to the root of their culture, and identify with their past, I would presume that this would lead to a sense of trauma. And this would be a muse to write as well. Here, I think that trauma reflects the human condition, in many ways and that is why such writing is popular and devoured by readers; as this gives a voice or a description to think that they may not be able to articulate, however, the act of reading it spread out on paper gives them a second chance. From her biography, Anna Kavan states that she wants to free the reader so that they may be “stimulated to relate what is written to his own and the whole human condition, which of course is again different for each individual” I think that Kavan articulates my thoughts on the topic in a better way; as she highlights that the reader will take and relate what is necessary to their lives from the writing.

Another interesting essay that speaks of this conflict between home and not being enough to fit into a set category, leading to displacement is Taiye Selasi’s *Stop Pigeonholing African Writers* (2019). In this essay Selasi highlights the feelings of writers who do not live in a country, yet they regard it as a concept of home. However, they are not regarded as being a part of this place. She states “but the wider literary establishment has trouble with writers who belong to diasporas. It doesn’t know where to put us” from the sense of displacement is felt, and I think that this is quite unsettling. As a writer who has just begun to think about topics such as this, I find it unimaginable to be stuck in an in-between, where the writer can find a common ground and create their ‘home’, yet the rest of the “literary establishment” cannot quite accept this for what it is. I think that this gives a sense of displacement which I think falls into the emotional and mental traumatic sphere.

In Bettina Judd’s essay on *Writing About Race* (2015), she speaks of how, for her, writing is attached to the body. Here, I think this relates to trauma on yet another level. As most things regarding the body are deeply personal to an individual, this would relate to emotional trauma. Looking at the perception of the body in current society, not being ‘perfect’ enough is a reason for deep trauma to stem. Here, the act of writing comes into play again. Judd states that “To say that my writing is attached to my body also recognizes the particular mode of thought that does not separate mind from body and spirit to which I closely attend”. Here, I find that her statement relates to writing being a complete mind and body activity, there is no separating the two. And as a result, the body becomes the home for trauma, while the mind puts this into words to articulate what is going on in the body. Later on, in the essay, Judd says “I write about race for the same reason people write about God, or nature, or their mother’s wedding dress. It is in and around me like the air and it is in my presence of mind and memory”. Given the question of race in history, race is another factor to fall into the traumatic muse spectrum. Many writers write about race and identity, and I think that this is becoming more popular now, than in the past. Writers have always taken power into their own hands, yet now we see that there are more stories coming to life regarding the body and race, as writers want their trauma to be revealed so that they can heal from

whatever caused this pain. Moreover, as race remains a sore spot across the world, it is only fitting that it is also regarded as trauma, thus becoming a muse to those who seek solace and redemption from the confines of this trauma.

As a reader and writer, I think that empathy plays a significant role in how we perceive the world, including what we read/write and how we acknowledge ourselves too. Chris Kraus' essay, *Hunger-Technology-Emotion* (2004), raises the question of this empathy. The first part of the essay is an excerpt from *Aliens and Anorexia*, and the reader kind of understands that the empathy reveals itself in this excerpt by the narrator still caring for the alien after he has said that "he doesn't love [her], [she] can't believe it's true". However, here the reader sees that the narrator still shows empathy towards the alien's trauma of withdrawal from "valium and heroin." Here, I think that Kraus is illustrating that even though we may perceive, to continue the theme, alien encounters as being "hostile and dispassionate invasions," there is also a humanness to this. I take this statement to relate to the idea that even though something is new, foreign and difficult of being understood, empathy needs to reveal itself. In the sense of trauma as the muse, the writer writes their story, and they do so boldly. As a reader, they have the duty of allowing their empathy to be revealed, in light of this story. As a way of attempting to share the emotions displayed for them between the margins of the pages and in the hundreds of lines that the writer has graciously given. Moreover, this idea of empathy in the face of people's feelings, emotions and traumas should not be to reach outward, but rather to reveal that there is no separation from what you are and what you see. Thereby illustrating that you are no different from the books that you read and/or write, as you will find something to take away. I find that as a reader, I allow the emotions found within the writing to take over. I allow it to take me on a journey, and to feel what needs to be felt. Whether it is empathy to a character's situation, disturbance at a particularly grisly scene or even the joy that comes from characters finding hope or love. Here, I find that where I read books illustrating great trauma, I find that I empathize with the writer or narrator long after I've finished the book. And this gives me a sense of sadness in some cases, yet solidarity in others. Perhaps you do become what you read.

In Brian Evenson's "The crazy party guy, or A disruption of smooth surfaces" (2015) essay takes us back to how, while writing is made to reveal the darker and unpleasant effects of trauma, it is also a tool that can be used to disrupt. Evenson states "I've always thought of good writing in general, and my writing in particular, as something meant to disrupt the apparently smooth surface of things". From this statement, fairytales immediately jump into my mind, and how we use this as comfort, from both a reader and writer standpoint, yet writers are disrupting this peace and creating fairytales darker than we've ever known. However, I also think that Evenson's statement on this can relate directly to writing trauma. As a writer of traumatic events, experiences and memories, I think that the writing has to be deeply saturated in feeling and emotion, it has to make the reader feel what needs to be felt, and if done well, it will "disrupt

the apparently smooth surface of things”. I have read books about the darker aspects of life, and many of them have stayed with me, haunting me from time to time because when I read them, they disrupted what I thought I knew about certain things. By the same point, I think that where trauma is the writer’s muse, the writer needs to challenge themselves as much as they can in order to disrupt their reader’s perception of “smooth” and easy reading.

In conclusion, I believe that as a writer, the idea of having multiple words at my fingertips is incredible and gives off a freedom that will never have bounds. However, I also believe that there is a greater freedom that comes with writing about trauma. This freedom is liberating and intoxicating by the wounds it heals. It allows for the writer to open these wounds to the deepest of their abilities, and to slowly write away the pain, and heal as the words find themselves rooted in black ink. Here, a writer reveals herself to the pages spread in front of her; she lets the pain from experiences and memories materialize onto these pages. And as a result, the writer offers herself and her trauma to the reader, with one expectation; for the reader to try and feel as much of the trauma as they can. As much as books should allow the reader to escape reality, sometimes books should also allow the reader to visit reality, to understand that trauma is real, and it is consuming, and as writers, sometimes our only way of healing and coming to terms with our grief, is to immortalize it.

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### **Part Three:**

#### **Reflective Journals Continued: Weeks 15 to 48**

##### **Week 15:**

Between writing the poetics essay and reading, I spent time going through old assignments. This exercise was for me to see if I was putting the things that I was learning into my writing – and so far, I think I have. But I think that overall, I have been learning the writer’s infamous “show, don’t tell”.

I’m reading Han Kang’s *The White Book*.

Kang creates her narrative around a memory and what this memory means to her, and the memories that stem from it.

This is the book that I want to write. I want to write about how a narrator goes on a journey with her memories, how these memories tie together to form an even bigger emotional story. I am also surprised at how incredible the idea of categorizing memories into a colour is.

As I’ve been playing with the idea of writing a collection of short stories that are also rooted in either memory or mythology, I find myself now recreating this idea with aspects of *The White Book* included. Like the MACW coordinator, Hleze Kunju, said, writing about colours adds a new depth to the writing, I don’t think I understood what he really meant until reading this.

##### **Week 16:**

I tried to read Sonallah Ibrahim’s *That Smell and Notes from Prison*, but I found that although I was enjoying the novel and the sense of the character’s longing and displacement was clear and needed to be explored – I was getting lost in the text. I enjoyed that Ibrahim wrote from a modernist perspective. I also found it interesting that the main character tries to write about his experiences, and this ties with my poetics essay.

##### **Week 17:**

“Writing and Re-Writing Death”

The objective was to use memory and strong emotional ties and characters and turn it into a story. This was interesting for me, as this is what I do quite a bit in my writing. I enjoyed taking personal feelings and memories of death and trying to translate it into something that can become indistinguishable from the truth (“In the shadows”).

I also finished reading Charles Bukowski’s *Ham on Rye*. Throughout the novel one line stood out to me the most, “So, that’s what they wanted: lies. Beautiful lies. That’s what they needed. People were



fools”. This was the first book I read by Bukowski, and while it may not have been for me, the fact that a part of it kept drawing me back to the novel until I finished it shows the incredible talent of the writer –to keep pulling the audience in, whether it is to their taste or not.

I started Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Chronology of Water*, a memoir. I found the first part of the book incredibly moving. She speaks about giving birth to a stillborn baby and the aftermath. Her emotions are lifted off the page and felt by the reader. As per the title, the starting point is water. Here, memories are written and flow with the water that is always attributed to the memories. Although I thought that I was enjoying this memoir, I abandoned the book not long after as my attention kept wavering while reading.

As reading plays such an important role in the Course, I enjoyed it when a book or short story immediately reminded me of other texts, clearly indicating the volume of books that I was making my way through: I enjoyed reading Mia Couto’s “The Stain”. There are many elements of mystery in the story and the unknown source of the stained jacket helps bring this out. I got a sense of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* as the reader is thrown into an unknown desolate set of circumstances. I also enjoyed the magical realism from the droplet of blood growing into some unexplainable death. What this story does really well is evoke some sort of reaction from the reader – it doesn’t explicitly have to be *one* thing, but it will be *something*.

Reading an excerpt from Kate Zambreno’s *Green Girl*. I was reminded of Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s *Fleabag*, *The Scriptures*. The breaking down of the fourth wall with the constant use of the “you[‘s]” in the text. I think that the most interesting part is that Zambreno’s writing allows for the reader to sort of imagine themselves as the ‘you’.

### **Week 18:**

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant”

The objective was to write obliquely, which entailed that our writing was to focus on something off-center.

I wrote “Death & Dubai” based on my cousin’s death. Interestingly, I found myself researching how to structure an autopsy report, and that became an element of my piece.

While reading through Jo’s chosen readings for us, I came across Carmen Machado’s story, *Inventory*, this piece clearly illustrated what was required from us, while giving us an interesting structure to borrow. I was delighted to discover that this piece was an extract from her collection of short stories, *Her Body and Other Parties*. My general feel of the book is that it is a mix of all things; strange, experimental, feminist and absurd. Magical realism also runs wild. The first story, “The Husband Stitch”,

is a disturbing story of a husband wanting to know everything about his wife – “a wife [...] should have no secrets from her husband.” The narrator also breaks the fourth wall with the “you” and tells the reader other tales that she recalls – I actually enjoyed these disturbing tales a little more than the actual story. They are absolutely creepy. Another piece, “Especially Heinous”, strongly held my attention. Machado rewrites the series *Law and Order: Special Victims Units* into something darker and addictive. As Kate Bernheimer transforms fairytales into the darker and twisted siblings of themselves, so too is Carmen Machado able to transform episodes of *Law and Order* into a darker and supernatural realm.

Sarah Blackman’s *A beautiful girl, a well loved one* was also a good read. I loved how Blackman took a classic fairytale format/foundation and moved it into the contemporary world of offices and newly restored cars. As I am interested in fairytales, I found this forced movement into a modern contemporary world, while still holding onto the fairytale plot and/or elements fascinating, as I think that this is something that either works really well, or could be flat, and feel like an “Alice in Wonderland” kind of thing.

### **Week 19:**

“Beckett Week”

I remember reading Beckett’s trilogy (*Molloy/Malone Dies/The Unnameable*) for the first time a few years ago and was awed at how his fragmented narratives really worked, yet they confused me. I found that I enjoyed the idea of finding meaning where meaning clearly lay lost, and at the same time, you had to read on to discover that meaning is *meaningless*. Maybe Beckett knew something about life that we don’t. His writing is all kinds of weird and wonderful, but there’s always so much more hidden in his writing.

Kathe Koja’s *The Neglected Garden* is my favourite story of the week. I enjoyed how casually the story begins, with a couple breaking up, only to grow into something darker. The most impressive aspect is Koja’s ability to communicate such an intricately detailed story in a mere four pages. I couldn’t immediately identify the genre, but as the story unfolded – horror became the only option. Moreover, the idea of the woman, Anne, becoming one with the garden is terrifying – which is an absolute juxtaposition when thinking about a garden. I also thought that her decomposition into nature was also reflective of the speaker’s mental state.

Lina Mounzer’s *The Meaning of Being Numerous*, is a beautifully written piece of fiction rooted entirely in reality. As a society, we often dissociate from the news headlines while sitting comfortably in our homes, whereas a piece of fiction has the power to place the reader directly in that warzone.

## Week 20:

### “Experimental Seminar on Voice”

This seminar was exactly what I needed – a means to challenge what I thought I knew about my writing, and, a way to create something new. Even before the seminar, when thinking about ‘voice’, I would always think about the personality that was or was to be embodied in the words. Therefore, so far in my writing journey, I’ve been able to pinpoint my ‘voice’ as being one that embodies tones of nostalgia, memory and loss filtering through it. In my writing there are ‘otherworldly’ aspects, and things that lie in the in between. I enjoy reading and writing about the darker things that we encounter. I also know that I’m comfortable with this voice, and while it will need refining with every piece, it seems to work well for me and my thought process.

However, the purpose of seeking this voice is not to write something specifically in the magical realm, but rather to use it to make people *feel* something. To explain: while I want to experiment with many different styles and voices; I want to be able to write something that isn’t afraid of the darkness, but rather to explore it. I want to write about darker things that play important roles in our lives. The reason that I thought about using a ‘magical voice’ to tell these tales is because sometimes it’s easy to forget certain things I’ve read – maybe I’ll recall a few favourite lines, but it’s more the feeling that’s found in these words that haunts me long after.

I’ve realized that my quest for finding a new voice is simply to have it as another tool ready to use when needed. However, what I’ve ultimately taken away from this seminar is the creation of a voice that is a blend of magic, mysticism, darkness and honesty. I also noted that I need to try writing in the first person more often, as my default setting seems to be the third person narrative, and therefore, I tend to unintentionally leave out details when using the first person.

Tina May Hall’s *The Physics of Imaginary Objects*. I loved the fantasy and connection between life and death; two subjects that I’m interested in.

Noy Holland’s “Rooster, Pollard, Cricket, Goose” took a lot of attention. However, when I read along to the recording of Holland reading her story this made the images clearer. But it still felt like a puzzle that I needed to put together. I found that the confusion towards the text and the title was interesting – in a sense, I felt that Holland was illustrating a way of naming something, which did two things for me; firstly, it familiarized some of the characters for me, however, it also distanced me from the characters – I found that absolutely effective. I was close, but not close enough, rather kept at the edge of the farm.

## **Week 21:**

### “Motif in writing”

I decided to write about memory, but specifically memory associated with food. And wrote “Vinaigrette Vignettes”. I think I enjoyed it as much as I did because I had the preconceived idea that the pieces needed to be short and effective, so I needed to pack as much as I could without it being too wordy or overwhelming. It was another challenge that I enjoyed.

I think that motifs in writing can be effective as it allows the writer to let this element occur throughout the text; and then gives the reader the duty to decide whether this element is objective or subjective to *their* reading of the piece. As a reader, I enjoy identifying the motifs as I read, as it adds a new dimension to the writing. As a writer, however, I think I’m still learning how to effectively do this.

Kali Fajardo-Anstine’s *Sabrina & Corina*, is a collection of short stories centered around a Latina female community. I absolutely loved reading this collection and it illustrated a sense of the ancestry that Fajardo-Anstine holds onto in her writing. The collection is set in more or less the same location - it felt like you were watching a series, where each story/episode took place on a different road from the same place/neighborhood. Together, but apart; same but different. The collection also illustrated the cycles of violence that these women are constantly faced with – certain scenes were a little difficult to read, but I liked how effective the writing was, to be able to cause this discomfort. The title story, “Sabrina & Corina”, was my favourite as there was a depth of sadness that clung to the piece from the first word to the last.

My favourite story of the week has to be Rachel Swirsky’s “The Sea of Trees”. I recently found myself reading up about Aokigahara, which is the setting of the piece, too. I also thought that the writing was just so effective, as I could see myself being placed in the story, and I recall feeling suffocated by the trees. I also love the goosebumps that stood tall on my arms when reading the piece in its entirety. Also, the attention to detail is brilliant! I read the piece a few times and it was just as good as reading it for the first time. This was also the first time I encountered Swirsky, so I’m interested to try and read more of her writing.

## **Week 22:**

### “Writing Life and Lived Experiences”

From the reader that Stacy prepared for us, the section on “Biomythography: we need new myths” really interested me. I liked the idea of Biomythography being “the weaving together of myth, history and

biography in epic narrative form, a style of composition that represents all the ways in which we perceive the world.”

Commenting on my story “Moons & Magic”, Stacy said:

*There’s a wonderful way that without ever stating it, the piece explores the pleasures and pains of growing up, contends with love – lost and found – and sensuality and heartbreak, and ultimately searched for a way of being a woman in the world.*

I loved Mariana Enriquez’s *Things We Lost In The Fire*. This collection, set in Argentina, brought a new perspective of culture, black magic and other disturbing disappearances to me. The stories are all different, yet there is a hypnotic sense of fear and gore. In between all the darkness, there is a lot of compassion and some kindness towards the ‘other’ characters, but while reading I felt like I was being slowly blanketed by the tragedy and haunting atmosphere of the collection. I don’t think that I’ve ever read any literature set in Argentina before, so this was a new world for me – but I enjoyed that it had the same effect that Kali Fajardo-Anstine’s *Sabrina & Corina* had on me.

Hassan Blasim’s “The Hole” was really intriguing with its many missing pieces, which worked well with the overall tone of the piece. I grew up hearing stories about ‘Jinni’ or ‘djinni’ as I know them to be. From childhood, I knew that a djinni is a Muslim magical spirit that can take turn into the human form if called by a person – whom they have to serve. However, with ‘knowing’ that and reading the piece, it seemed like a much darker take of the original story that I was told. I enjoyed that this piece left so many ‘holes’ for the reader to try and fit their own conclusions into.

### **Week 23:**

“Epistolary Writing/The Epistolary Form”

I found that even though there is already a vulnerability that comes with writing, there is something different with the epistolary form. Here, you have the ability to allow your reader into different dimensions of yourself. I realized that there really is no limit to these letters. You could be as personal, as intimate as you wanted – or as political.

I wrote “Dear Hades and other letters to Gods”.

I’ve also noticed that the more I strip away ‘fluff’ from my writing, the more I enjoy the pieces. I find that the simpler the writing, the easier it is to imagine what I’m trying to create for the reader. This is something that I know I needed to learn by practice, as a few of the teachers’ final feedback comments were to go line-by-line and edit sentences to make them simpler. It took some time, but I think I finally understand how to go about this.

I also had to think about titles for my thesis. I submitted *& salt the earth behind you* – it’s something my grandmother told me, and I thought it fitted with the myths and superstitions.

My favourite piece from Hall’s short story collection is “Skinny Girls’ Constitution and Bylaws”. I find the use of these fragments really effective in this piece. Each fragment serves as an ‘introduction’ to the characters and is just long enough to grasp their little traits. I also enjoy writing just like this, I find the use of fragments important as I think that they drop hints in Hall’s story; little moments in memories; snippets of conversations and so on. I’ve used a lot of fragments in my writing. These fragments allow me to give puzzle pieces to the reader, and let them put it together if they want, or they can just look at each puzzle piece for itself.

I read an extract from Lily Hoang’s *A Bestiary* and enjoyed its fragmented nature. The themes of grief, nostalgia and memory drew me to this piece, as these are themes that occur in my own writing time and time again. I found this excerpt to be a kind of ‘case study’ for my own writing. What held my attention most was the juxtaposition between the speaker’s memories and the rat anecdotes – they are incredibly interconnected. With other pieces I’ve read and/or written, the fragments can almost be placed anywhere in the piece. Whereas this story illustrates that each memory and anecdote must be placed side by side, to tell their own stories – apart yet still together. For me, it seems that Hoang uses these anecdotes to add an additional depth to the writing – to perhaps, give another view of the speaker’s memories. I thought that even though these anecdotes are of a ‘scientific’ nature, they also seem to have a mythical (maybe even fairytale-like) feel to them. I found this juxtaposition really interesting and effective in terms of giving the reader more information and answering questions that the reader didn’t know they had.

In my writing, I have done something similar – in “Death & Dubai”, I used an autopsy as my ‘scientific’ aspect and told the story around that. Hoang’s ability to create two ‘stories’ (the ‘experiment’ being the second piece) has allowed me to see how I can take my piece with the autopsy (and others) and add to it, creating layers that don’t have to speak directly to each other, but answers questions that the reader didn’t know they had.

#### **Week 24:**

The excerpts from Selah Saterstrom’s *The Pink Institution* have become a new favourite. Being a fan of both Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner, I find that I enjoy reading about the desires, impulses, transgressive thoughts and behaviour and the overwhelming sense of alienation found in novels of the southern gothic. I found that Saterstrom’s excerpts were off this nature too. I love the fragmented memories/scenes that the reader is introduced to. I find that when reading such short pieces like this, very little needs to be told, as the reader ends up feeling things evoked by these little scenes. I also enjoyed the

range of elements that the writer uses – memory, lived experiences, history albeit superstition, and mysticism.

Samanta Schweblin's *Mouthful of Birds* is a collection of unsettling short stories. I'm enjoying how the stories distort the real world from the imaginary. The uneasy atmosphere that Schweblin creates adds dimension to the story. Similarly, as a writer, I also want to create this kind of feel for the reader – through the distortions in reality and familiar story lines that are rooted in familiar imagery.

### **Weeks 25 & 26:**

Now that our course work is over, I thought that I'd find myself motivated to write new material, but as much as I have ideas that I'd love to put to paper, I also found myself doubting everything last week. I think I just got too accustomed to writing for a 'brief' or an assignment and letting that dictate my writing in a sense.

My supervisor, Jo-Ann Bekker asked me to send a recording of me reading one of my pieces. While part of my editing process is to read the piece quietly to myself, which is mostly to see if the sentences run along together, but not really paying attention to how it *sounds*. I found the idea of reading and recoding to be incredibly beneficial to the idea of 'storytelling' in the sense that as much as what I write is to be *read*, it also needs to be able to be *read aloud* and still be as effective. Going forward, I think that reading and recording needs to be part of my editing process; as I also found that when reading the piece, it became instinctive to just remove words that didn't fit or sound right.

I've been trying to edit a few of my older pieces. These edits are not exactly to mould them into pieces to fit directly into the thesis, but rather to let them stand by themselves if they wish, or to add more to them. The main aim was to remove the 'brief' that originally inspired the pieces due to the seminar topics. I also found a few pieces that I'd like to expand on in time, as I think that there may be a bigger story waiting to come out.

I read Amelia Gray's *Gutshot Stories*. While most of this collection oozed all things bizarre, there was one piece that I really enjoyed, "A Contest". It was about the Gods holding a weeklong contest which would result in the person who "felt the most grief over the loss of a loved one to have that loved one return." It's only 18 lines, tucked into it, are little scenes of people trying to illustrate how much they want their loved one to return - they are tiny stories in themselves.

### **Weeks 27 & 28:**

Just when I thought I was getting the hang of really being in-tune with my writing, the words seem to disappear. I have filled many pieces of paper with ideas for stories. Yet, the moment I put these ideas or

thoughts on paper, I feel like the words just stop coming. Or they'll appear for a few lines, only to escape again. Other times, if the words don't disappear, they just feel forced and are really not worth the read.

Short fiction holds my attention like nothing else. I find that I enjoy breaking a piece of crust to nibble on but feeling as though I've just eaten an entire toasted sandwich.

I think I'm starting to understand the importance of details that need to carry a story— as these are little things that can show the reader about the characters, and where they have come from, where they are going. In my writing, I think that I mostly try to do this with memory – jumping between the past and the present. As a reader, I've understood the work that goes into writing short fiction. Every word has to be chosen perfectly so that the reader can feel as though they know these characters, and what has happened to them, and what led them to where they are now.

I read Asja Bakic's collection, *Mars*. I particularly enjoyed the little anecdotes about death in "Day Trip to Durmitor". I loved the little notes of wisdom in the piece. As a writer, I find it really interesting to add lines like this to my pieces – they fit into the story effortlessly, but they also have the ability to stand alone and tell entire stories by themselves.

I read Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* and I loved how she incorporated Spanish into the text. I also find myself slotting Sanskrit words into my pieces (e.g. "Imprints"). Through Cisneros' writing, I've learnt that a way to represent a community is to write about traditions, and food and use words that are specific to that community. Given the direction of my thesis, this is something that I'm definitely trying to feature – however, my goal is to make it as natural and simple as possible, as I do think that if it is 'forced' it could be too stereotypical.

### **Weeks 29 & 30:**

I've been trying to think of Lockdown as a writing retreat. To find out who I am, what my writing voice/s look like, and how my reading directly influences my writing as I have limited interaction with people.

I find that I don't mind waking up early and writing a few plots or outlining a character – whether I'll ever use the character is uncertain, but I find that I'm enjoying creating 'people' and building up their appearances and personalities. These little glimpses into characters are refreshing, and at the end of the day, I know that I have an array of characters to adopt into other pieces if necessary. Jo and I spoke about me trying to write more about the 'outside', so I think that I should try alternating character creation with landscape and that kind of thing. I find that the best part of these little 'exercises' is that there's no expectations because they don't *need* to fit into something else.

While thinking of new pieces, I decided that I want to move away from writing about family for a little bit.



In terms of reading, I'm finding it a little challenging to get back to reading novels. I think that in researching short stories, they've mainly been my primary focus of reading for the past few weeks, the idea of a novel seems very drawn out.

### **Weeks 31 & 32:**

While editing my last story, "Refuge", I found that the individual characters and setting became a lot clearer after reading Ramona Ausubel's "Safe Passage" from, *A Guide to Being Born*, and the first chapter of Yelena Moskvich's *The Natashas*. Moskvich's piece really helped me create the individual characters, who despite being thrown together, are very much *individual*. Therefore, it became easier to pay attention to the little details of the women in my story. Ausubel's piece helped me conceive a kind of 'afterlife' that held all these women together with no promise of a future, just a harrowing past that they can't seem to escape because of the constant influx of new additions. I also drew inspiration from *The Divine Comedy*. There were two things that stood out in particular to me: firstly, "The path to paradise begins in Hell," and secondly, the idea of a 'limbo'. In my piece, this was translated as the women being in their own purgatory. There's no moving forward, but there is the constant reminder of the past; and they sit in limbo, by continuously doing things without reason. I wanted the piece to suggest that the characters are 'stuck'.

While reviewing Mariana Enriquez' *Things We Lost in The Fire*, I realise, like *Sabrina & Corina*, this collection stayed with me long after reading it the first time.

Enriquez has inspired my own writing by helping me create pieces that are also set in normal settings – my "The woman behind the door" is set between two homes but there are instances of the supernatural which creates a sense of haunting.

For my new piece, "Things to remember", I drew on Enriquez' writing too. I really enjoyed taking simple places like a forest, a desert and a little town and making it darker, with terrifying twists lurking behind trees or around corners and so on.

### **Weeks 33 & 34:**

The past two weeks have been liberating in terms of writing. I found that I've been putting the normal writing conventions aside and just writing what I feel like.

I had another piece that I was quite unsure about – "Boy Warrior Girl Heroine" – the title was rather difficult to come up with, however, Noy Holland's "Rooster Pollard Cricket Goose" served as inspiration. I tried to discard it many times because it felt incomplete, but every time I wanted to delete the document, I stopped myself. In retrospect, I think that there are a few reasons as to why this piece is so special. Firstly, I haven't really written about many male characters before – at least not at the forefront

like this. Secondly, I have always had the whimsical belief about sharing fates with people that we come across in real life, so to have this translated into fiction is a special thing for me. And finally, this piece is one of my more experimental pieces, and I enjoyed writing it.

Much like, “Things to remember” the experimental aspect of these pieces really had me looking outside my comfort zone and doing something ‘different’. Because a part of me assumed that the reason that I wanted to discard it was because there was an element missing – but I realized that this is the best part about experimenting. All rules/conventions go out the door.

In “Things to remember”, I remember that when writing, I wanted the words to speak to the reader like some ominous voice telling you *what to do* and what *not* to do. In retrospect, I think an element of this filtered through from Mariana Enriquez’s writing as I was writing the book review at that time, too. The idea of normal things intersecting with all things supernatural has always fascinated me, and to borrow Kristen Roupenian’s words from “Scarred” (from her *You Know You Want This* collection), “I knew the world was more interesting than it was pretending to be”, I wanted this to feature in my writing somehow.

Jo sent Sheila Heti’s “From My Diaries (2006-10)” to me. I was immediately smitten with the idea of taking pieces from one’s diaries and creating a kind of collection of thoughts that roll together and apart. Although the piece appears non-fiction, it also reads as a piece of fiction through the absence of time.

After reading it, I decided that I wanted to play around with a similar idea. I wanted to use colours instead of the alphabet. And that’s how my piece “Kaleidoscope” was created. This piece is also another experimental piece for me, and I enjoyed it as much as the other experimental pieces – I’m seeing a pattern of discarding writing conventions being a sense of joy for me. Moreover, the sentences beneath the colours are either allusions to how things make me feel (being represented by the colour itself) or even wearing the colour, or a memory and so on – they are all over the place, and that’s my favourite part about it. When writing for the colour ‘white’, I felt the influence of *The White Book* again, and was compelled to write about the snow and the paleness of loss that is echoed in the book.

Jenny Offill’s *Dept. Of Speculation*: a novel of fragments that give you just enough information to pull the story together for yourself, as well as other little gems of quotations or snippets of learned information. I love reading stories and novels with these fragments just as much as writing them. In *Dept. Of Speculation*, I found myself tripping over words as I tried to get the entire story and piece it together for myself. I also enjoyed that only the important details are revealed – the reader doesn’t know what colour the bedroom walls are, or how many lightbulbs are in the kitchen, but what we’re given is more than enough to create a complete world for the reader. As a writer, I appreciated this so much, and I want to reread the book to pay more attention to the writing itself, to see how carefully the words are chosen,

and how the scenes are created. I also had a clear image of “the philosopher’s” apartment, even though very few words are spared to describe it – this was incredible for me.

### **Weeks 35 & 36:**

While going through my written work, I looked at “Death of touch and other side effects” and thought that if I added another two illnesses to it, it could tell a better story. Moreover, while adding the medical/pharmaceutical terms to the piece, I realized that I was writing it with the strong desire to be in control. I wanted to use the terminology, but break it apart in a way that made me feel that although strong medical terms were present, there was still that human aspect of mental illness, and the urge to be in control of one’s mind, especially when put in a situation that you’re not. Looking at this longer version, I felt more into the piece than before, so I’m hoping that it reads as being more effective.

For my piece, “How do you take your tea?”, I went completely out of my comfort zone. Usually when I write, I have some rough sketch of where the piece could go – a rough path to follow or a detour. Somehow, this piece came into play – there was no set beginning, characters or anything. I know that I’ve said that some of my pieces have written themselves before, but for some reason, I think this one takes the cake. This one truly did write itself – and I think that quite a bit of inspiration came from Camila Grudova’s *The Dolls Alphabet*.

I loved reading Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*. And there are so many parts that have stayed with me since reading it, such as: “122. “Truth. To surround it with figures and colours, so that it can be seen,” wrote Joubert, calmly professing a heresy.” And “130. We cannot read the darkness. We cannot read it. It is a form of madness, albeit a common one, that we try.” I thoroughly enjoyed the book, and the conceptualization of life around the colour blue – it made me feel a lot fonder of my “Kaleidoscope”.

Intan Paramaditha’s *Apple and Knife* is one of the strangest books I’ve read. The first two stories, “The Blind Woman Without A Toe” and “Blood” made me feel extremely uncomfortable in the best way. “The Blind Woman Without A Toe” is a different take on Cinderella, placing the attention on her stepsisters and everything they went through while Cinderella was living her fairytale. Although it is written in the second person perspective, I felt that the blind woman was talking directly to me. “Blood” begins with a meeting where ideas are thrown around regarding advertisements for menstruation. The protagonist tells her story and as a reader, you sit there and devour it. Then, in the final three or so paragraphs, the story shifts and is written in the second person perspective, or at least, that’s when the change became real to me. This made me quite uncomfortable as the climax of the story becomes increasingly strange – so this shift in perspective kind of made me feel as though the speaker had leapt of the page and was speaking directly to me. As a writer, I am fascinated by how powerful a shift in perspective, during a story, can be! And this is something that I want to try and explore further, as I think

that this provides an incredible shock factor to the piece, and leaves the reader wondering what they had just experienced.

Yelena Moskvich's *The Natashas* read like a fever. There were moments where I was genuinely confused with what was happening when the stories meshed together.

### **Weeks 37 & 38:**

While doing the final edit of "A collection of broken things", I was trying to figure out what my aim was for that story – and I realized that I didn't have one. I didn't know where the story was going, I didn't know if we were going to see the 'stolen' children again. I didn't even know why they were the chosen children, nor why they were part of the "broken things". So, I thought that it was quite interesting that it could be read as children being 'rescued' (stolen) from abusive households – I also liked the fact that even this was uncertain, so the story *truly* is open-ended. After reading it a few times, I thought that maybe I was writing it for the 'feel' of it, and the fact that there is *no true story*.

Last week's piece "The Gallery" may be one of my favourite pieces yet. Again, it's another one that popped out of nowhere and didn't want to leave until it was immortalized in words. But while editing it, I found so many personal snippets in it, that it felt like I was reading it for the first time. For instance, the coffee-stained white dress hangs in my closet right now, a recipe book of different types of hot chocolate sits on my bookshelf back in Durban. And the Goddesses. The Goddesses are my nine favorites who I do feel I have a deep connection to.

While editing, I found that I kept looking at the abstract, and decided to add a little more Indian mythology to the mix. It wasn't forced or anything, but the "Festival of Lights" was born.

### **Weeks 39 & 40:**

Draft thesis week.

On one hand, I felt confident in my writing, and that the pieces seemed to come together properly with underlying themes flowing through them. On the other hand, there were moments when I felt that I wasn't doing enough. Then came the arranging of the thesis. I changed the order of the stories many times. For some reason, I felt that the flow between them wasn't as free flowing as I hoped. When I had to send the first draft to Jo, I gave up on an order and decided to just place the stories in alphabetical order because it seemed like a good starting point.

For the second draft, I went on a whim and decided to place the stories about my grandparents first. Here, I just chose the pieces that gave my grandfather a stronger character presence and placed them first, as there is a ten-year difference between his death, and my grandmother's – this seemed to work

well, as I thought that the ‘age’ differences of the narrator/speaker seemed quite clear. Thereafter, I just slotted the other pieces in between – some according to length, some according to creativity/stranger pieces. The aim for this was to highlight the familial pieces, by adding stories that detached from this in between them.

While reading the final version of the draft, I quite liked the way the stories were arranged by this ‘idea’ – as the themes were clear, and even though side-by-side stories may not have had the same theme, I felt that they still resonated quite nicely. Although I’m glad that I can have a break from the thesis and focus on the portfolio now, the anticipation of the Reader’s response constantly seems to loom.

“Trajva” is a new favourite piece. I found myself re-reading the title story of *Sabrina and Corina*, and I found that I had the same reaction to it as the first time. This inspired “Trajva”, which incidentally is made up of a few things; while thinking about my SA Indian story, I was searching the web for inspiration, and stumbled upon trajva tattoos, which are mainly tattoos for Indian women made up of dots and lines in specific patterns to represent certain things.

I also found Arundhati Roy’s quote from *The Cost of Living*: “To love. To be loved. To never forget your own significance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To see joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.”

Reading Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* – it seemed as though someone was in my head telling me the story while sitting with legs dangling from my eye socket. Emezi takes the Self and breaks it apart, then puts it together with all these additional pieces to it. As a reader, I loved the way in which the reader is given this entirely new world that stems from Ada’s mind. It also made me wonder about the truth in it, about these voices in our heads, and how difficult it is to recover from ‘life’ when there are all these other ‘beings’ steering the way. Also, being interested in spirits, the fact that Emezi intertwines spirits as easily as she does really fascinate me- especially as it opens the reader to new dimensions that have cultural significance.

As a writer, I was blown away by how Emezi paints circles around ‘life’ as we know it and creates all these hidden worlds that challenge everything we know. Moreover, the novel has such incredible lines that while reading it, it felt like the person telling me the story was doing little mic-drops in my head. For instance, the lines: “It’s not easy to persuade a human to end their life – they’re very attached to it, even when it makes them miserable, and Ada was no different. But it’s not the decision to cross back that’s difficult; it’s the crossing itself” and “Your graveyard looks like a festival” made the biggest impact on me. There are just stories within stories in those lines alone.

## Weeks 41 & 42:

I was thinking that of the 71 books I have read this year, the six which have been the most influential on my writing, imagination and storytelling are; Han Kang's *The White Book*, Kali Fajardo-Anstine's *Sabrina & Corina*, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, Mariana Enriquez' *Things We Lost in The Fire*, Tina May Hall's *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* and Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*.

Kang's *The White Book* has guided my writing about painful memories while using a colour to bring images to life. I found it surprising that an entire book was based around a specific colour, but later, I understood the importance of this – that by using a simple factor Kang's words immediately became tangible. Since reading this book, I found myself experimenting with vignettes more. I wanted to create moments that are as haunting as Kang's. I realise now that my use of Hindi numerals was also inspired by this book. After assembling my thesis, it was clear that vignettes/fragments play a significant role in my writing. Out of the 24 stories, 6 are made up of fragments.

Fajardo-Anstine's *Sabrina & Corina* inspired quite a few pieces of mine, most significantly “& salt the earth behind you” and “Trajva”. Moreover, Fajardo-Anstine's writing is steeped in Latina culture and tradition, and she writes about them unapologetically and without explanation. This helped me understand how to write about my community, and traditions. Before reading Fajardo-Anstine, where I found myself adding Hindi and Sanskrit words to my writing, I always felt compelled to give an explanation or translation of the words – which would remove the effect. Like how Fajardo-Anstine writes about her culture and its richness allowed me to let go of any reservations that I had about navigating the tricky subject of culture.

Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, like *Sabrina & Corina*, showed me how to write about a specific community. Her collection is made up of fragments of memories. The most important lesson being the length, as some memories can be short and direct. Whereas, other memories can be longer, allowing the reader to linger in the memory for a little while.

Enriquez' *Things We Lost in The Fire* is another complex and haunting book. It was a lesson in how to distort reality and add little supernatural aspects into situations that feel ‘normal’. Her stories about the turbulent history of Argentina and its effect of this on the people. This showed me how to use the lens of history to write stories so drenched in horror they appear almost surreal; this inspired my story “Blood seeping”.

Tina May Hall's *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* moves between everyday life and the things we do not see. “Skinny Girls' Constitution and Bylaws” may have been the initial flame for the first draft of my story “Refuge”, as the characters are described in a similar way. Just as Enriquez' writing showed

me how to add supernatural and/or gothic elements to my writing, Hall's collection made it easier for me to imagine and write about the little veils between worlds.

The sixth on my list is Carmen Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*. Her story "Inventory" read like something completely new to me. I loved how Machado had her character take stock of her life through the lovers she had. I think that the form of this story inspired my two "list" stories: "& salt the earth behind you" which is an inventory of my grandmother's remedies and superstitions, and then again in "Things to remember".

### **Weeks 41 to 48:**

#### Reader's Report:

I was quite taken by the Reader's analysis of my thesis. As I compiled my thesis, I knew that many of my stories could be read differently from my intentions and this worried me. However, the Reader's Report showed me that the reader grasped the themes that I wove through my thesis. I found that reading about my stories from another person's point of view made it 'real' for me. My writing did not simply feel like it was in my head, but rather it became tangible and easier to see from someone else's thoughts about it. I also found that I looked at my writing in a different, more detached way.

The reader easily grasped the collection as being: "an exploration of death, grief, community/family and the idea of home. [T]he writer takes the reader on a familiar path of life and loss that is sometimes accompanied by unfamiliarity and strangeness. The writer's stories and fragments give voice to a liminal world that is part of life and death." Reading this made my writing feel new, at first, it surprised me that this was someone's view on *my* work – however, the familiarity began to set in.

As I began to think about my thesis during the course, I knew from early on that I wanted it to be a collection of short stories – I wanted the stories to be short and simple for a reason, primarily so that the stories lingered after being read. I was pleased when the reader highlighted this: "... the strength of this work is its simplicity of style, and the brevity of the stories. And yet the ideas conveyed are far from simple. Like life itself, consisting of a mix of brief and fleeting moments. Then death."

Hindu belief is also incorporated into my thesis – although this is an integral aspect of my writing, it worried me that the reader would potentially not 'get' it or like it for that matter. However, this seemed to work well, and it was an immense relief. In retrospect, I think that this worried me more than anything, as the incorporation of Hindu belief was largely an 'ode' to my childhood, and put in place for *me*, so without it, I imagine my thesis would feel incomplete and detached.

Even now, one of the biggest surprises in the report, was reading that I had written about: "the plight of the transnational subject who longs for home and hankers to understand their origin/s". This was

familiar because I touched on the question of ‘home’ in my Poetics essay, but I did not intentionally let it filter into my stories. For my final story I took inspiration from this comment and wrote “Blood Seeping” – a story in which the narrator journeys to find ‘home’. This story draws on the first Indentured Labourers in South Africa from India and how they made a home here. This piece of history has always interested me by being my ‘origin’ in South Africa, as I have always longed to know more, therefore, I hope that this is echoed in the story. I was inspired by my family’s desire to trace our lineage back to India and possibly gain dual citizenship. However, the other ‘memories’ in the story are mainly fiction with a few lived experiences which made it easy to write. The problem that I kept facing with the story, however, is that I had this preconceived idea of how I wanted it to look and/or read – but this kept changing as I wrote. I felt that there was a standard that I needed to meet as I was writing about a legacy in a sense.

I read Ronnie Govender’s *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* to help me conceptualize the “memories” in the story, as much of his collection speaks about the early Indentured Labourers and how they lived at the time. My story seemed like the ‘grand finale’ to my thesis as I felt a sense of completeness after writing it. The reason for this is that, as mentioned in my abstract, most stories are influenced by Hindu superstitions and folktales. Therefore, “Blood Seeping” felt like I had gotten to the origin of where it all began for me – or at least the beginning of a journey to discover more.

The Reader Report mentioned that the word, “shadow” appeared 16 times in my thesis, and “home” 38 times. This was interesting, although my writing usually tends to play in the spaces between light and dark, it’s not something that I particularly pay attention to – the stories write themselves into these spaces.

Magical realism is another thing that the Reader touched on, I was pleased by this as this had been my intention when writing “A collection of broken things”, “Festival of Lights” and “The Gallery”.

In terms of things that didn’t work so well, the Reader said “Death of touch and other side effects” seemed out of place in the middle of the collection. As I only have two stories based on mental illness, I thought that I could use these stories as the first and last stories in the thesis instead.

Tenses were another aspect that the Reader highlighted. And while reviewing the stories, I found that some tense issues could have been due to lack of attention to detail when editing, however, for the most part the continuous present tense is used intentionally. Therefore, for the final thesis submission, I have decided to choose voice and/or feel (as a style) over grammar unless it’s an error.

The Reader described the ending for “Trajva” as somewhat flat. When writing the story, I didn’t know how to end it, but felt that ending it with a direct quote from one of the characters made the story linger longer. Therefore, trying to find a ‘right’ ending has proven to be a little tricky. I finally decided that I wanted to keep the ending of the story quite open-ended. Therefore, I tried to create little cracks in the sisters’ relationship which could go in any direction that the reader allows their mind to wander.



Finally, the Reader suggested I rework the order of the stories. I was not surprised by this as I struggled to find a set order, constantly changing the stories. I struggled to place “Blood Seeping” – my instincts told me to place it in the middle, which is what I ended up doing. I took the Reader’s suggestion about using “Painting of a panic attack” as the final piece, and I found that when I read it all together, it seemed like a great final note. I also noticed that the order of the stories allowed for a good mix of the Hindu superstitions/folktales with the other more unconventional stories. Read together, I thought that they flowed into each other (themes/imagery) quite nicely. I initially wanted to use my mental illness stories as bookends for the thesis, but I ended up changing this. For the final thesis, “A collection of broken things” is still the first story, and “Death of touch and other side effects” is tucked somewhere near the middle.

Reworking the thesis was not as daunting as I thought it was going to be – I agreed with the edits that needed to be made and tried to comb through the thesis with a keen eye for errors/things that didn’t belong. I enjoyed reviewing it as I had taken a break from reading the stories, therefore, it felt like I was reading them with new eyes.

At the beginning of the course, I found it a little difficult to shed my English Literature skin, as I kept looking for symbolism and meaning in everything that I read. It took a while for me to stop looking at everything with the impulsive need to understand meaning and rather look at the writing for itself. I was finally able to just read for writing research, to try to understand *how* the writer did what they did, rather than trying to figure out *why* the writer did what they did. Now, when reading and writing, I look at everything through the eyes of a writer.

## Part Four:

### Book Reviews

#### *The White Book* by Han Kang, translated by Deborah Smith (Hogarth Press, 2016)

Much like the veiled image on the cover, Han Kang's third book is delicately wrapped in memory, nostalgia and mourning. *The White Book* is a fragmented meditation on the transience of life and the acceptance of human fragility. It is a novel which compels the reader to return to it again and again; I have read it three times. Perhaps this stems from Kang's compulsion to write it: "I felt that yes, I needed to write this book and that the process of writing it would be transformative, would itself transform into something like white ointment applied to a swelling, like gauze laid over a wound. Something I needed." Perhaps we all are drawn to the paleness of loss.

The novel is a collection of fragmented thoughts and memories separated into three parts: "I", "She" and "All Whiteness" which are translated into Hangul, the Korean alphabetic writing system. In the first part, the narrator makes a list of white things, which become chapter titles with memories relating to them: swaddling bands, newborn gown, salt, snow, ice, moon, rice, waves, yulan, white bird, "laughing whitely", blank paper, white dog, white hair and shroud. Early in the novel, the reader learns of the death of the narrator's older sister, who died two hours after being born. As a result, these white items are a direct reflection of these thoughts and the allusions to her sister's death and the aftermath.

Set in Seoul and Warsaw, although these cities are never named, snow plays a significant role. From the chapter "Fist": "Walking this city's streets until her calves had grown stiff, she waited. For something of her native language, sentences or even mere scraps of words, to surge swiftly to the tip of her tongue. She thought she might be able to write about snow. In this city, where they say it snows for half the year." Later, the narrator illustrates the ephemerality of admiration: "When it first begins to fall, people stop what they are doing and turn their attention to the snow. On a bus, they lift their eyes from their laps and gaze out of the window for a time. Once the snow has been soundlessly strewn about, with an equal absence of joy or sorrow, and the street's erasure is complete, the people turn their faces away, and the blurring streaks are no longer reflected in their eyes."

Moving effortlessly between the first, second and third person, the novel dissolves the boundaries between the narrator and her sister, the worlds between the living and the dead. In the chapter, "Boundary", the narrator allows her sister to live "inside this story". She writes: "And yet before dawn, when the first milk finally came from her mother's breasts and she pressed her nipple between the tiny lips, she found that despite everything, the baby was still breathing." Through these unconventional narratives and vignettes, some two pages long, others as short as two sentences, the reader comes to

understand the complexity of mourning the loss of someone you have never met. Therefore, the reader joins Kang on an incomplete journey of memory, creating new realities that could have been part of a life they did not know.

Kang constantly catches the reader off guard. For instance, in “Handkerchief”, she describes a falling piece of laundry as, “A single handkerchief drifted down, slowest of all, finally to the ground. Like a bird with its wings half furred. Like a soul sounding out a place it might alight.” She leaves you wondering whether there really are signs of greater significance in everything.

In “Small white pills”, the narrator wonders how many pills she has taken. “How many hours of pain has she lived through?” The simplicity of the words in this one-paragraph fragment, and the strength of the image of a palmful of tiny white pills surprised me. Kang’s poetic language alters the common act of simply taking pills. Instead, it becomes something just out of your reach, close enough to see the pills, but far enough to frustrate you about the depth of a reality you can’t quite grasp.

“Silence” is a visceral chapter in three lines: “When long days finally come to a close, a time to be quiet is needed. As when, unconsciously in front of a stove, I hold my stiff hands out to the silence, fingers splayed in its scant warmth.” It becomes easy to envision the narrator’s need, amid everything, for quiet and warmth.

Scattered among the fragments, Kang introduces Korean traditions of mourning. For instance, in “Mourning robes”, we learn that presents of cotton mourning clothes are given to the deceased: “The woman he was to marry had prepared a white cotton skirt and jacket, which I spread out on the rock. In the meadow of long grasses beneath the temple where our mother’s name is chanted after each morning’s sutras. As soon as I held my brother’s lighter to the sleeve, a thread of blue-tinged smoke spiraled up. After white clothes dissolve into the air this way, a spirit will wear them. Do we really believe that?”

Later in the novel, the narrator reflects that if her sister had lived, she herself would not: “This life needed only one of us to live it. If you had lived beyond those first few hours, I would not be living now. My life means yours is impossible.” The third part, “All Whiteness”, dedicates its final pages to the newborn that was lost. In “Parting”, we get some sense of closure: “*Don’t die. For God’s sake don’t die.* I open my lips and mutter the words you heard on opening your black eyes, you who were ignorant of language. I press down with all my strength onto the white paper. I believe that no better words of parting can be found. *Don’t die. Live.*”

Every fragment in *The White Book* is written in unembellished language in its simplest form. Kang ensures that there is no room to hide; from one’s emotions, thoughts, memories and even spirits. The novel truly feels like it is haunted by an overarching presence in white, perhaps the newborn in the white gown.

***Things We Lost in The Fire* by Mariana Enriquez, translated by Megan McDowell (Hogarth Press, 2017)**

Set in Argentina, Mariana Enriquez's collection of short stories, *Things We Lost in the Fire*, has a sinister beauty. Its twelve short stories intertwine black magic with brutal political murders and disturbing "disappearances". Here, we find a serial killer who is just a few years older than the babies and children he hunts, restless ghosts of political activists who were buried in cement, human sacrifices to the Saint of Death, a girl who pulls out her fingernails with her teeth, a boy-turned-demon who sinks his claws into a cat and women who become self-mutilators and set themselves on fire to protest against widespread gender-based violence.

In an interview with the Johannesburg Review of Books, Enriquez explained that, although the military dictatorship in Argentina was violent, it was carried out in a secretive manner. This violence was not portrayed through open fire in streets, but rather through the kidnapping of people who were never seen again and referred to as the disappeared. This became the root of fear; as there was something horrible happening beneath the surface, yet the surface remained untouched.

Moreover, Enriquez uses supernatural elements as a metaphor for the darkness of the brutal civil repression that ran from 1976 through 1983. This collection draws attention to groups that society prefers to forget (homeless street children) and those whose losses will not allow them to forget (the burnt women and the ghosts of murdered activists). It also further dramatizes the scenes of being terrorized, both by the state and other societal horrors, such as drugs and extreme poverty. Written in hypnotic prose, which gives a sense of charm to the grotesque, the reader is unwittingly drawn towards the exploration of what happens when dark desires roam unbridled.

While many of the stories begin in a 'normal' setting, they slowly begin to flirt with the supernatural or hint at strange coincidences that cannot be ignored. In "Adela's House", a young girl, her brother and their strange one-armed neighbour move from watching horror movies to becoming obsessed with an abandoned house with shelves full of jars of fingernails and teeth. "At first I didn't know what I was looking at. They were tiny objects, yellowish white and semicircular. Some were rounded, others sharper. I didn't want to touch them." The house buzzes and a girl screams. Only two make it out.

Other stories in this collection run towards the outstretched embrace of horror with delight, which makes it easy to be blanketed by the tragedy and haunting atmosphere Enriquez creates. In "The Intoxicated Years", girls under the influence of acid give in to their dark desires of wanting their friend's boyfriend gone. "Standing above him, we circled the punk boyfriend. Lying on the ground with his eyes half-closed and his chest covered in blood, he seemed insignificant. He didn't move. Paula slid her knife

into her jeans pocket; it was practically a toy, a little knife for spreading jam on bread. “We’re not going to need it,” she said.”

Moreover, Enriquez not only writes of the supernatural in the conventional sense, but also across these ghostly plains, where the people are just as haunting. This is perfectly seen in “Under the Black Water”: “She tried to stop her but the woman murmured something about the barges and the dark depths of the water, where the house was, and she pushed Marina away from her with a head butt right when the people in the procession began to shout “yo, yo, yo,” and the thing they were carrying on the bed moved a little, enough for one of its gray arms to fall over the side of the bed. It was like the arm of a very sick person and Marina remembered the fingers in her dream, the fingers falling from the rotten hand, and only then did she start running away with her gun drawn.”

“Under the Black Water” is representative of both the dark history of Argentina and its polluted present. “Argentina had taken the river winding around its capital, which could have made for a beautiful day trip, and polluted it almost arbitrarily, practically for the fun of it” thinks a district attorney whose duties take her into a dangerous slum which even taxi drivers won’t visit. The pollution has contaminated the people of the slum too, spawning children with “horrible skin eruptions that ate away at their legs and arms. And some of them had been born with deformities. Extra arms (sometimes up to four), noses wide like felines, eyes blind and set close to their temples.”

Violence and peril are constant companions in the collection. For instance, in “The Dirty Kid,” a child is found decapitated, leaving a young woman to wonder if the victim is the same homeless boy that she cared for one evening after his drug-addicted mother failed to return home. Disappearances appear mainstream; in “The Intoxicated Years”, a girl steps off a bus and disappears into a park; in “Spiderweb”, a mobile home with an old woman inside, is stolen.

The hypnotic sense of fear and gore compels the reader to lurch between reality and magical realism, where the supernatural gives its shadowy presence.

Touch plays a significant part in the collection, and I think the breaking down of these physical barriers between characters is also representative of Enriquez allowing the supernatural and horror to break through, into real life. For instance, in “Adela’s House”, the one-armed girl touches people with her stump; in “The Dirty Kid”, an unwashed and smelly boy shakes hands with passengers on a train. In the title story, “Things We Lost in the Fire” a girl who has been badly burned by her husband rides the subway telling herstory. “Her method was audacious: she got on the train, and if there weren’t many passengers, if almost everyone had a seat, she greeted each of them with a kiss on the cheek. Some turned their faces away in disgust, even with a muffled shriek; others accepted the kiss and felt good about themselves; some just let the revulsion raise the hair on their arms, and if she saw this, in summer when people’s skin was bare, she’d caress the scared little hairs with her grubby fingers and smile with her

mouth that was a slash. Some people even got off the train if they saw her get on. They already knew her routine and wanted to avoid the kiss from that horrible face.”

As more men begin to burn their wives and girlfriends, the subway girl becomes the symbol of a movement which literally grows like wildfire. “Burnings are the work of men. They have always burned us. Now we were burning ourselves. But we’re not going to die; we’re going to flaunt our scars.” Perhaps one of the most vivid scenes comes from this story: “The woman entered the fire as if it were a swimming pool; she dove in, ready to sink. There was no doubt she did it of her own will. A superstitious or provoked will, but her own. She burned for barely twenty seconds. The two women in asbestos suits dragged her out of the flames and carried her at a run to the hospital. Silvina stopped filming before the building came into view. That night she put the video online.”

The stories have a depth of compassion for those who are frightened and lost; the dark sides of reality that often lie forgotten, until they are exposed.

Enriquez writes about her characters, who are mostly women, with a sense of equality. Her women do not need to be viewed through the lens of being *good*. Instead, she allows them to also be villains, to be hard and vicious, threatening territory which has often been reserved for men.

These stories are told mostly from a woman’s point of view, each one keeping her distance from the lure of horror for as long as she can, before willingly giving into it, walking into the heart of darkness. The final lines of “The Neighbor’s Courtyard” sum this up perfectly: “Paula wanted to run, but her legs were heavy as if in a nightmare. Her body refused to turn around; something was holding her there in the bedroom doorway. But she wasn’t dreaming. You don’t feel pain in dreams.”

The voices in *Things We Lost in the Fire* ring loud and clear, so much so that they feel spoken. This makes these twelve stories come to life as they represent a gothic portrayal of a country trying to move away from the memory of horrific trauma while new trauma lurks around corners and hides in shadows. Some readers may find it an uncomfortable read at times – because of the unknown and the things that you’re not sure you understand ... until you do.

Kona, Bongani. “‘Dark history is good for literature’ – Bongani Kona chats to Argentine author Mariana Enriquez about her English debut, *Things We Lost in the Fire*.”

<https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/07/02/dark-history-is-good-for-literature-bongani-kona-chats-to-argentine-author-mariana-enriquez-about-her-english-debut-things-we-lost-in-the-fire/> [accessed 13/08/2020]

***Touch* by Adania Shibli, translated by Paula Haydar (Clockroot Books, 2010)**

Palestinian writer Adania Shibli's *Touch* depicts childhood through the sensorial and imaginative overload of the child's gaze. The story does not adhere to chronological timelines, which adds a layer of confusion, yet, perfectly captures the movement of time and memory through the eyes of a child.

It is a fragmented novella, broken into five parts; "colors", "silence", "movement", "language" and "the wall" illustrating a girl's fixation with hues, sounds, motion and words. This is seen clearly in; "Every other day the father would sit down to shave. The little girl would bring one of the chairs and place it in the sitting room. Then she would get the shaving kit, take out the little mirror and come back with a glass filled halfway with clean water. The water in the glass would get dirtier at the same rate that the father's chin got cleaner, aided by his hand tightly gripping the old brush. But a little bit of soap would remain under his ears. Then they both would sit down: he to eat breakfast and she to watch the bones of his face near his eyes move as he chewed."

The protagonist is the youngest of nine children and her thoughts ring louder than her words. Her world is lonely, she exists in the in between of life, longing to be part of the family. In "language", while the mother mourns behind closed doors, the girl is deliberately excluded, left to sit outside the room, waiting for a way in; "A blink could come at an unknown moment." Later the weight of alienation of loneliness sinks in; "The little girl sat in front of the door, her throat filled with the loss of language mixed with the loss of being included in the pronoun *you*."

Shibli's third person narrator distances the reader from the protagonist, however, the reader is still urged to feel sympathetic toward the girl. Age goes unnoticed, as the novella is read through a hazy visual of time with the protagonist referred to as "girl" or "little girl" throughout. The only reference to the world outside is in "Language", when the words "sabra and shatila", referring to the 1982 Beirut massacres, are uttered and then rendered forbidden.

As the narrative constantly moves back and forth in time and place, the central story is illuminated through fragments of stories and scenes that appear unrelated and even obscure upon first reading. The little girl's voice calls out from the pages, compelling the reader to piece the story together.

***Fever Dream* by Samanta Schweblin, translated by Megan McDowell (Riverhead Books, 2017)**

Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream* reads like a car crash; every nerve compels you to look away, but the desire to feast on the unsettling scene triumphs. The novella provokes a range of visceral reactions through its hazardous ecological landscape which poisons the townsfolk, mainly children ("Some of them were born already poisoned, from something their mothers breathed in the air, or ate or touched."), and the enigmatic portrayal of maternal love.

There are two sets of mothers and children; Carla and David's relationship illustrates maternal love which is alienating and surreal: "He was mine. Not anymore." And Amanda and Nina, a mother and daughter bound with an invisible rope or "rescue distance"; this mother continuously calculates how long it would take to save her child in an emergency.

"And Nina? If all of this is really happened, where is Nina? My God, where is Nina?"

*That doesn't matter.*

It's the only thing that matters."

The novella is a haunting tale of these mothers and their children. While on holiday in a rented house in the country, Amanda sees Carla, "I was the one who insisted on iced tea, and I invited her over for *mate* the next morning". Amanda soon regrets these overtures once she meets David, a strange little boy who seems to play the role of a death doula. David narrowly escaped death by poisoned water through a process of "transmigration". This "transmigration" removed a part of his soul, placing it in another body, and leaving Carla, with a "monster" in place of her son who "doesn't call [her] Mom anymore".

The two-timeline structure is eerily compact, and disorientating; primarily constructed through dialogue. In the first timeline, David visits Amanda in a clinic and pushes her to relive the horrific events that had brought her there. The second timeline is Carla's explanation to Amanda of her past, which is a premonition of Amanda's future.

The timelines overlap with dizzying effect, shining a light on things we don't see. There is a glimpse of the liminality to life in the darker reality of how far a mother will go to save her child's life: "I needed someone to save my son's life, whatever the cost."

Schweblin also gives a taste of disaster and foreboding with Amanda's words: "My mother always said something bad would happen. My mother was sure that sooner or later something bad would happen, and now I see it with total clarity, I can feel it coming toward us like a tangible fate, irreversible."



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