

TOUCHING *BRÝNSTONE*

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Abstract

Touching *Brýnstone* is the story of Beth, a young journalist who is troubled by misfortunes in her family and work circumstances. In a Pretoria library she is seduced by a book that consoles her and progressively becomes a fetish object. It sparks a journey to Japan, where she arrives to teach English. She is intent on meeting the author, whom she confounds with protagonist and book. This Bildungsroman is an exploration of the complex relationship between inner and outer self, and the struggle towards wholeness. Beth must find a way out of the obsession so that she can return to South Africa with an enriched insight into her shadow self.

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“If you burn a book, it opens unto absence in the flame. If you drown it, it unfolds with the wave. If you bury it, it quenches the thirst of the desert. Because all words are pure water of salvation.”

-Edmond Jabès, *The book of questions Volume II*

Library book

Stepping into Pretoria Public Library is like opening Ouma's cupboard. The one with the boardgames – Mastermind and Ludo – and the books that didn't make it onto the *sitkamer* shelf. I inhale deeply as I enter the realm of Fiction, sniffing my way past the *Reader's Digest* collection and the *skop, skiet en donder* paperbacks. But before I continue to the corner of the room, where the air is enticingly thicker, I notice a girl in a blue school uniform on the floor in the children's corner.

She's sitting where I always used to. Long afternoons spent crosslegged on the carpet, moving in and out of other worlds as my fingers turned the pages. An abiding place of solace. The librarian often had to tell me to go home, especially as I grew older. Why did I have to leave behind the friends and lovers I met among the shelves? They never expected anything from me, they were just there to be read. And they're still here, yellowed and wise, offering uninterrupted companionship. Something I need more than ever now, knowing that the home I grew up in is no longer mine.

The faded pinks and turquoises of the Romance section lure me away from childhood memories. I inhale the lifedeath air once more, close my eyes, and raise my hand to comb the bookspines with my fingertips. Their long, white wrinkles graze against my skin. Then comes a book so soft that my fingers almost miss it. They walk back and allow themselves to trail down its length, explore its texture. Like moleskin, it offers no resistance. Instead, it calls me to hook its light green backbone with my forefinger. It falls back into the palm of my hand where I take in a small copper flame and the name *Brýnstone*. Between thumb and forefinger I pry the cover apart from the body.

La Grotte. Underground bar, heart of Liège. Two months after hook-up. Rats in coffin seats, graffiti scrawled on table. You traced your fingers over the name. Gabriel. Moth doused candleflame. He was your first. Screwed you later. Your mind absent. Never loved you more.

The breathless, staccato lines make me gasp. I step back into the bookshelf behind me, my thumb only just bookmarking the page. A display book falls to the floor, its thud-clap cracks the rigid silence of the dark room. I pick it up, fumble it into a perspex

mould, and walk over to the loam-coloured settee against the back wall. Who's this written by? Don't recognise the book at all. Michael Franklin, say the tiny copper letters on the cover. Michael Franklin. English? American? Never heard of him. I sit down, run my fingers along the thumbspace and let the book fall open on my lap.

Mouthed your neck. Just under mole on chin. Life made sense there. Where your sandalwood-essence lay. Breathed in. My source of oxygen. But for how long?

A warmth spreads from my throat down to my belly. I can't believe I've never heard of this writer. And the title, *Brýnstone*. Wonder what it means. In a copy of Chambers's Etymological Dictionary in the reference section, I find nothing under the name. But on the previous page, I discover that the word 'brimstone' comes from the Old English *brýne*, burning, and *stān*, stone. Burning stone, sulphur. But what does it *mean*? A force beyond me compels me to sit back down and read on.

"Where did you find that book?"

My head jerks back. The librarian is looking down at me from behind rectangular glasses. I struggle to find my footing as I get up from the settee with one arm.

"Sorry?" I ask, registering the nametag on her frilly purple blouse. Ms Jeanette Anderson. She's standing too close to me. I can't step away from the scent of geranium she's exuding – the settee's in the way.

"I said, where did you get this book?" she repeats, stressing each word.

"Um, I found it over there. In the Romance section, I think. Why? Is something wrong?"

"Yes, there is. It shouldn't be out on the shelves."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," I say. "I was just having a look, if that's okay. It's quite –"

"Absorbing, I know," she replies. "I chose it myself. Now, why don't you hand it to me and go have a poke around the Reader's Choice section? You might find something more suited to your taste," she smiles, her head inclined to one side.

“Go on, have a look.”

There’s a swell in my throat and I bring the book to my chest.

“No ... no thank you. It’s very kind of you, but if at all possible, I’d really like to take just this book.”

“I’m not sure,” she says, then lifts her head and purses her lips together.

I look behind me for a space to step back into.

“It’s just that I’m quite –”

“Intrigued. Yes, I can see that. Typical. Still, don’t think it’s worth your while to bother with this silly little book.”

I say nothing. What does she know about me? What does she know about the book?

“I’m willing to give it a try. If at all possible,” I reply, forcing the words out.

“No,” she says, almost militantly.

“But why not? Surely if the book is on the shelf, anyone can take it out? I don’t see why –”

“Fine. Give it to me.”

She flicks out an open palm and raises her pencilled eyebrows. I hesitate. But what can I do? This book has chosen me, its author But she snatches it out of my undecided hands and turns on her heels. I almost trip on a fold in the green carpet to stay close behind as she marches to the other side of the loans desk.

“Go have a little browse around while I attach the slip,” she says, leaning on one elbow. Why is she trying so hard to get rid of me?

“No, thank you, I’m happy to wait here,” I reply, resisting the urge to shake my head.

My handbag. It's still by the settee. Do I get it now, or stay and keep an eye on her? I decide to stay.

She puts the book face down on the counter and opens the back cover.

"This is going to take a while," she says, peering over her glasses. "Rather come back next week."

I cross my arms and tell her I'll wait. She narrows her eyes, but I stay put. Then she releases a heavy sigh and walks unhurriedly to a metal cupboard where she extracts a pink pad. She smears a gooey line of Pritt along the top of a slip, presses it onto the last page and runs a cherry red fingernail over it. Then she writes *Brýnstone* in cursive in the margin of a thick Croxley notebook.

"Just waiting for the glue to dry," she says, raising her hand to the pearl stud in her ear, which she twists between her fingers. She blows on the slip, then stamps the due date.

"Okay, and now the warnings. Very important, you know."

She looks me in the eye and scratches in a red metal box among stamps with inkstained knobs. With a wordy warning stamp she brands the title and rear pages. With another, she marks two near the middle.

"Your card," she says.

Sudden panic at the thought of having to leave this place of proximity. But I have to. Scamper around the shelf with the *Reader's Digest* hardbacks, snatch my handbag and scramble for the library card among pens and receipts. My foot gets caught in the fold of the carpet and I fall to my knees. Gather the coins that have rolled out and find my card in the side pocket.

The girl in the blue uniform looks up. Next to her are two Enid Blyton books, another open on her lap. I read all of them when I was a kid, especially *The Secret Seven* and *The Famous Five*. But there was no other book I loved more than *Frog and Toad*, about two amphibian friends in waistcoats and hats, who lived in the English countryside. My

favourite episode was where Frog and Toad went swimming in the pond, and Toad refused to get out. He said he looked funny in his bathing suit, and stayed in the water till sunset. I reread it every night, till the librarian forcibly separated me from it to give other children a chance.

This librarian – Ms Anderson – is new but no less crabby. When I hand over the card at the loans desk, she inspects both sides closely. I think of grabbing the book, which she's holding to her waist, and dashing out of the library. But once she returns the scanned card, I simply reach out for it. She moves it up against her chest, eyebrows raised once more.

"12 November," she says. "Not a day later."

Slowly she removes its body from hers, dithering even then. I stretch further across the counter. At the touch of the smooth cover, something makes me tug at it hard. I secure it and take a step back. Release a breath and gingerly lift the lip of my leather handbag. Her eyes follow me outside, where I cover mine from the midday glare. The book is mine now, safe in the cool leather folds of my handbag.

On the way to the car, the book bids me to read once more:

Fruit in my hands. Ripe papaya. Split you open on black seed bed. Breathed your rootedness. Grass of your hair. Folded myself into your fruitskin. Tasted your hands with my lips. Held out your arms: branches. Brought them back. Loved hated loved you.

A cloud passes in front of the sun and I remember what else I have to do.

Homeless

Star-pointed creepers still cover the wall. The dead pores tagged to the dirty white surface are like preserved antibodies. I should get out and press the brass button, but what if no one's home? Arcadia residents don't answer their doorbells these days. Unless someone phones them on their cell, of course. So why should these people open for me?

I reach over to the passenger seat. Ouch! My skin burns on the searing leather of my handbag. But as I touch the book inside, it liquefies under my fingers, healing. I pry open the pages and rest its body against the warm steering wheel.

Busy. Attention not on you. Newspaper. Novel. My writing. You came from behind, bored. Kissed crown of my head. Happy distraction from empty sheet, dead pen. You took me like a stone. Enveloped me in your flame. Led me to your bed. Slut.

Talk about provocative. This book stirs something deep inside, I can't quite put my finger on it. As if I myself am the burning stone, wrapped in its yellow flame. I can't even think of any other book I've had a similar experience with. Oh, wait, *Disgrace*.

I remember, I had no idea who JM Coetzee was, but when I saw the title in the university library, I had to know what could be so disgraceful. Ravished it in three days where I normally take a week. And then reread the part where the professor has an affair with a student. Imagined myself as the student, wished I could go to the University of Cape Town. Just to have him look down at me as I passed by his window. His character was repulsive, I know, yet there was something about him that I found irresistible.

Brýnstone's protagonist is Owen, a gifted writer who struggles with the craft. His lover is a green-eyed editor named Sophie, who suffers from indecision:

You couldn't decide on wine. I kept quiet. Which one do you want, you asked. A crow. On a fence, watching. Ready to pick out my unwavering eyes. Your rudderless existence, lack of coherent narrative. I write again.

“Hello?” A woman’s voice crackles through the intercom.

“Hi ... hello. I’m terribly sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if I could take a look around your house?”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, sorry, my name is Beth. Beth Strydom. I used to live here. I’d just like to look at the house for old times’ sake. I’m leaving Pretoria in a few weeks’ time and it would really mean a lot to me.”

“Who did you say you were? Why do you want to look at the house?”

The woman’s voice is shrill, panicky.

“I’m sorry, it’s Beth Strydom. I’m Magda’s daughter. The woman you bought the house from. I just ... I didn’t get to see it before it was sold.”

I pinch the book between my fingers. Please let me in. Please trust me.

“I don’t recognise the name, sorry.”

“Magda,” I repeat, this time making a hard ‘g’ so that it sounds English. Why did I go and say it in Afrikaans to start with?

“Oh, yes, Magda Strydom. I didn’t know she had any children. But all right, you can come in. Not for too long, though. Today is shopping day.”

The gate clicks open and I give it a slight push. A woman’s face appears at the kitchen window, a grey bun cupcaked to the top of her head. I pretend not to see her as I step along the stone path. To the left is the fishpond, no longer congested with algae. Two goldfish are necking past each other and orange trumpetflowers crawl blindly around its border. This is where I spent most of my time between library and dinner. I’d gather droplets in the round leaves and rest them on the black earth to lure the faeries out. Near the strelitzia bush lived the frog choir that used to start chirp-chirping when it was time to go inside. I wonder if they’re still there, under the leaves, singing the faeries to sleep.

"Hello?" calls a voice from behind the front door.

It opens a little, half a face peeks out.

"Thank you so much for letting me in," I say.

I reach through the gap to receive a cold fish handshake.

"Yes, I see the resemblance with your mother. Same green eyes," says the woman.

The door opens wider to reveal a paisley dress tightened with a black leather belt around her slight waist.

"Now, I haven't packed the boxes out yet, so the house is rather messy. It was left in a bit of a state, actually. I'm not even sure they got the domestic in, but never mind."

"Oh, sorry," I say, "I'm sorry about that Mrs –"

"Jenson," she replies, waving me into the *sitkamer*. Mom's sarong-draped couches have been replaced by what looks like an antique furniture shop. What a contrast. I used to love reading on those couches. Over the years, the off-white armrests started splitting open. Mom was no good at sewing, so she covered them up with sarongs. They somehow enriched every reading experience.

The four of us – mom, dad, Eben and I, used to meet here every Sunday for a *huisvergadering* to discuss house matters and chores. The best was when I was allowed to chair, which happened often because Eben had no interest in coming. I had to call him in from the garden about five times before he'd saunter in like a spoilt prince.

"*Volgende!*" I'd shout to announce a new speaker, always the happy little secretary. Until dad was next in line, that is. He always had something to say about my maths marks, and never anything about Eben's.

Mrs Jenson is staring at the back of my head, I can feel it. Bet she thinks I'm going to take something. Maybe I should put my handbag down. No, there's the book. I'd rather not have it leave my side. Let me ask her if I can look outside.

She nods at the request, her eyes following me to the *stoep* where I still feel like an intruder. But what else can I do? Everything happened so fast. It's not like I had a say in the move. Now I'm the one left hanging, forced into this awkward space that used to be my home.

Freshly mowed grass wafts by from the clumps around the garden edges. It was dad who used to mow the lawn on Saturday mornings when we were little. When he was done, my brother and I would play badminton. We always fought about where the centre line was, and who must pick up the *pluimpie*. After dad left, the grass grew tall, and Eben and I would try to cut it with scissors, taking turns till our fingers cramped.

Beyond the lawn, the swimming pool sparkles a Grecian blue. We used to play *Adam en Eva* till we got granny fingers and feet. When Eben was on, I'd eel my way along the inside wall. He'd have no idea where I was until he'd lose patience and open his eyes on *skrefies*. I could see he was cheating and I'd threaten to get out if he didn't stop. That was before I decided I was happier in the library than playing in the garden. After a long day at Arcadia Primary, anyway.

The tap with the green *tuinslang* attached is still to the right of the house. One afternoon when I was still in nursery school, my brother and I played *Vloed Vloed*. We left the tap on until the concrete area beside the house was flooded. Ran naked in the water and splashed each other before it started draining away. My dad came home, squelched through the soggy grass and he gave us a *pak slae* that burned so much I couldn't sleep on my bum that night.

The memory makes me shudder even in the hypnotic sunlight. Mrs Jenson watches as I head back to the sliding door. When she realises I see her watching, she turns her head to a painting on the wall. I wish I didn't have to be doing this. It's embarrassing. But it's my last chance before Cape Town.

"Mrs Jenson, do you mind very much if I have a look in my old bedroom? It's the first one to the right," I say.

“Yes, I suppose,” she says. “But please hurry. I have to get to the shops before they close.”

A clock on the wall shows it’s half past one. How long does her shopping take? Wonder what happened to her husband. She must’ve been married. Otherwise, how would she own this house? That’s how mom got it, after all. When dad finally decided to quit sneaking around and move in with Tannie Rita. Not something I want to think about now.

The passage looks empty without the magazines and bookpiles against the wall. I’m tempted to peek into the main bedroom. What does Mrs Jenson think about when she’s in there? What went through mom’s mind all those years? Well, whatever it was, she no longer has to go there. She’s not alone any more, not ours any more. Nothing is how it used to be, least of all this house.

Bits of prestik from *Huisgenoot* posters are still stuck to my door. As I turn the knob, the neighbour’s Jack Russell barks. If it agitates Mrs Jenson, she’ll come tell me to leave – I wish it would just shut up. But even though Mrs Jenson can see me from where she’s sitting, she seems to be busy with something else. Probably adding to her shopping list.

Labelled boxes cover my bedroom floor and the built-in desk by the window. I used to sit there for hours and kite my mind into the clouds instead of doing maths homework. Or reread one of my library books. Anything was better than another equation.

And then the late nights at varsity, eyes forced open by the bright study lamp while Ulysses’ journeys swam beneath. Writing stories for *Die Perdeby* so I could get a foot in the door. And burning the candle at both ends at the Pretoria News to submit my stories on time. At least working for the magazine in Cape Town means I’ll have fewer deadlines. And I won’t be forced to come face to face with mom and Carl any more.

The bed. In the exact same position as mine used to be, in the corner against the wall. I move two boxes onto the floor so I can sit down on it. This is where I first made out with a boy. I’d just started varsity and mom was at some art exhibition in town, so I

invited my new boyfriend over. Lester, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed electrical engineering student. He couldn't believe I'd never been kissed. I told him I'd never kiss a boy at school – what would the teachers think?

“Not *at* school,” he laughed. “In your school years, silly.”

We were a perfect match. How could we not be? He was the ideal combination of good-looking, funny and clever, and he liked me. Until he told me three weeks later he was dating a girl in his class.

And then Steve, the computer science nerd. Mom went to Clarens for an art workshop. I invited Steve over; he brought some red wine and convinced me to try a little. He finished most of the bottle and we ended up in my bed. I didn't want him to stop liking me for not going one step further. The next day, when we hugged before he drove off, I was sure I'd found a proper boyfriend. But he didn't reply to my smses later, nor to the ones sent every day after.

Such a disappointment, unlike the book, which will never let me down. I take it with me everywhere I go, especially since I found him. Michael Franklin, the author. It was a bit tricky because there's very little about him on the internet. All I know is he's English, *Brýnstone's* his debut, and he now lives in Japan. And from a tiny jpeg I could make out a man with glasses and mousebrown hair. A man who doesn't compromise on good literature. Who did he say he reads? I pry the book out of my bag and have a quick peek:

Before me, postmodern lit. Then only Dostoyevsky and Proust. Stolen from my collection. Your flame latched onto my stone. I let you singe my gravelly pages. You singed but never charred.

Ah, the imagery! How I'd love to meet this man! I close the book and smooth over the cover's curling lip. As I look up, I catch a glimpse of the picture. The one of the Wave, attached to the built-in desk, right beside my bed. I've had it there forever. I don't know why I never took it off, even after the corners got grubby from the prestik stains. They must have missed it when they packed up my stuff. I used to follow the curly

white fingers reaching out from the Wave with my own before I fell asleep. Feel them rise up, roofing over the two yellow boats in the violent sea below. I'd imagine myself as a foam bubble, floating in the air and pop-splating above the snow-capped volcano beyond.

"Uhum!"

I sit upright and hide the book behind my back. Mrs Jenson is by the door.

"What is that you've got there?" she asks, lifting her nose in the air.

I don't want to show her the book, but she'll think I've stolen something. I bring it out slowly and she comes closer, only stepping back when she realises it's mine.

"The shops are closing soon so I'm afraid I have to go now," she says.

"Yes, of course, Mrs Jenson," I stammer, getting up to replace the boxes. But she's already gone. I hasten along the hallway to catch up with her and realise it's too late to ask for the picture. For a flash second, I entertain the idea of renting the room so I can get it back. As if that would be easier than simply asking for it.

Mrs Jenson hurries out of the front door. I feel like I've left something behind, something other than the picture. Only the trumpetflowers around the pond can briefly console me now. But I must remain polite.

"Thank you Mrs Jenson. I really appreciate this," I say to her as she slides the key into the gatelock.

"Yes, well, I hope you got whatever it was you were looking for," she says.

She waits by her beige Datsun for me to get into my car. She only starts her engine as I reverse into the road.

The picture of the Wave. The only thing I had left in that house.

News café

Living in a stranger's house is bad enough. The fact that it's the Mexican-style kind with a cactus hanging by the front door just adds insult to injury. And then there's the room where they've put me. Mouldy walls with paint peeling off. A Top Gun poster above the creaky single bed, and another with a Porsche by the window. The duvet cover is brown striped with grey, matching the dismal curtains. And the room's way too small for all my boxes. If it weren't for the book, I don't know how I'd survive in this hole. Entering the world of *Brýnstone* is all I can do to forget where I am.

Crow inspiration faded. Your corruption turns me to rot. I no longer am writer.

Search in decay for wings of words. I am what I attempt: failure.

I find reading without a pencil impossible, so I underline the last sentence. I'll rub it out later, of course. Wouldn't want that librarian to catch a fanny wobble, especially after taking so much *moeite* to brand the book with her stamp. MAKE SEPARATE NOTES, DON'T UNDERLINE OR WRITE IN THE BOOK, it says. As if I'd write in a library book.

Owen's self-doubt gets me thinking, though. I feel like he needs me somehow. I don't understand how he can question himself when he writes such evocative passages. Using metaphors like 'crow inspiration' I'm incapable of even thinking up.

At around half past twelve, I happen to look at my alarm clock. I've been reading all morning and lost track of time – all Owen's doing, of course. I bolt out of bed, slip on jeans and a t-shirt – I'm supposed to meet Naomi for lunch.

But how do I get out without them seeing me? I heard noises from Carl's bedroom this morning, but I don't want to assume he and mom are still there and then bump into them in the living room. All I can hear when I put my ear against the door is the same faint strand of Metallica riffs coming from the garage all morning. I turn the doorknob bit by bit and carry my tekkies to the living room. Breathe out when I realise no one's there.

Once I'm in the car, my phone vibrates. Must be Naomi asking where I am. I glance at the message – it's from an unknown number. Scan the sms and gasp when I realise what it's saying. I open the window – the cooler's useless in this heat, and my t-shirt's already sticking to me. Ten past one. I should really sms Naomi, but that'll just make me more late.

News Café is surprisingly quiet for a weekday during lunch. I soon spot Naomi under an umbrella in big round sunglasses, talking to someone else. Her chic halter-top and a chunky bead necklace make me feel like a bit of a pleb. The guy she's talking to sees me heading towards them. He's shortish, with curly brown hair. I don't recognise him, but he looks at me as if he's trying to figure out where he knows me from.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Naoms," I tell her as she pushes back her chair to hug me.

"Oh, hi Bethie! Not a problem. Neels has been keeping me company. Neels, Beth. Beth, Neels," she says, her palm slicing the air between us.

"Neels is also Afrikaans so you guys can *praat* a little. Such a co-incidence, hey. We're old school buddies and he just happened to walk past. Mind if he joins us for lunch?"

How can I say no with him right there? This is the last thing I need: to have to share Naomi with this Afrikaans guy I don't even know. And now I have to sit opposite him too.

"Hello Bef," he says.

I want to correct him, but he gets up to shake my hand and asks in Afrikaans how I am. His voice is deep, like sweet honeybush tea. But why must he invade our space? I just want to talk to my friend alone.

Naomi props her chin on her palms and asks him if he's told Richard about the reunion. Whoever Richard is. He confirms that he has. Our eyes keep meeting so I turn to look for the waiter.

“No, it’s fine. I mean, it all happened so long ago. Sorry, Beth. We’re just talking about one of my exes. We’ve got a reunion in Feb and I’m just worried ’cos I don’t know if he’s over me, you know.”

How does this conversation even relate to me? I should’ve stayed at home. Earlier, before I realised I was late, I read something about Owen’s frustrations that I found intriguing:

Soles of my feet don’t know. Creak directionless over wooden floor. Sophie wrapped in iron-green dreams, oblivious. Friend says book knows. Where it’s going. WHY MAY I NOT KNOW. Need map, route. What makes book so special?

Something like that. I can’t remember exactly, but I might as well check. It’s not like any one at this table is concerned about me anyway. I open my handbag while they carry on talking. But the book isn’t inside. How could I have left it at home?

“Hey, is jy okay?” asks Neels, sitting up.

“Ja, I’m fine,” I reply.

What does he care, anyway? He doesn’t even know me.

“Is jy seker?” he asks again.

I hope my mom doesn’t go into that bedroom. Or Carl.

“Ja, I just left something at home. Don’t worry about it.”

Naomi moves closer to me, puts her hand against my ear and asks if I need a tampon.

“No,” I say out loud. My face is hot. I wish I could just go home now.

“So, Beth, what do you do?” asks Neels, leaning forward as he fixes his t-shirt near the neckline. It smells as if it’s been stowed away under a pile of others for some time. It reminds me of Ouma’s cupboard. Still, I really don’t feel like sharing my life history with this guy. I tell him I’ve quit as a journalist, and turn to Naomi to ask how she’s been.

“Ag, busy you know. But the printing biz is going well. Jon’s got one or two more clients lined up, so it’s looking good. He’s gonna go to the States on a business trip soon, so I might have to take over the shop. That’ll be hectic, you know. But I’m a big girl. I can manage.”

“I wish I could do that,” I say, watching Naomi squeeze a slice of lemon into her spring water.

“What?” she asks. “Work at the shop?”

“No, man. Go to the States. Or anywhere overseas. I swear it’s my only option.”

“What do you mean, Bethie?” asks Naomi, her tone suddenly sober.

“I don’t want to tell you right now,” I say, looking her friend in the eye.

Why must I talk to her in front of an audience? But when both of them keep quiet, I decide maybe just to tell her. He’s just going to have to listen.

“Okay. You know I went to Cape Town two weeks ago for that interview at Cape Living magazine, right? Well, just on my way here I got an sms from the editor to say I didn’t get it.”

“What?”

“The job, Naomi.”

Her mouth hangs open, revealing the passion gap that’s always made her popular among boys. She catches her sunglasses before they fall off her head, and pries them out of her messy blonde hair. The Afrikaans guy just stares at the table.

“And you know Naoms, I was totally cut out for that job. I’ve got four years’ experience and all the contacts. And then this black chick goes and gets it. Okay, I don’t know for sure, but she was the only likely candidate other than me. You know, I’m all for black empowerment and stuff, but seriously, she wasn’t even properly qualified. She had a three-year diploma at Cape Tech with some courses in media

studies. That's not even a proper journ degree. Ag, I'm so friggin' fed up with this country."

"It's not necessarily the country's fault," says Neels.

How dare he interject? I really don't need any advice from this guy, so I turn my shoulder towards him. Naomi takes three menus from the waiter and tells me to go on.

"I just don't know if it's worth staying here anymore. You know I used to get so irritated with people wanting to leave South Africa. Remember when Eben and his girlfriend went to Canada? And I tried to convince them to stay? Well, I'm actually starting to see where they're coming from now. I can't stay in this country. I don't even have a home here anymore."

"What do you mean, Bethie?"

"My mom's gone and sold the house."

"What?"

"Ja. You won't believe this. While I was in Cape Town she went and moved in with Carl."

"Without telling you?"

"Ja! She picks me up at the airport, and she's like, '*Liefie*, I should have told you sooner ... but I didn't want you to get upset. Carlie and I have been planning it for a while now. I've sold the house and moved in with him. It just works out better financially for both of us.' I couldn't even say anything. And then she goes and justifies it by saying I'm moving to Cape Town anyway. So basically they moved all my stuff into Carl's son's old bedroom. And now that I didn't get the job in Cape Town, I don't know what I'm going to do. There's no way I'm staying with my dad and Rita in Hermanus. A week was bad enough. And Carl's house is disgusting. He's such a hippy with his ponytail and his handlebar moustache. I'd be surprised if he even baths once a week."

I try to swallow the thickness in my throat. I really don't want to cry in front of Naomi's friend, who's now staring at the menu. Not that I should care – it wasn't me who invited him here anyway.

When the waiter comes to take orders, Neels says he won't be eating. Naomi gives him a questioning look.

"Nee, ek's fine. I'll leave you guys to it," he says, looking at me.

If he thinks that's going to convince me to ask him to stay, he's got another thing coming. But he takes one more sip of his coffee, puts the cup on the saucer, and pushes his chair back.

"You know, I've got a cousin who teaches English in South Korea. Did you ever consider that?" he asks.

"Korea? Ag, everyone does Korea. It's such a cliché."

"Well, you don't have to go there. You can go to Taiwan. Or China. Or Japan," he says, moving to the edge of his chair. I sit back in mine and touch my neck where I feel my jugular pulsing suddenly.

"Japan?" I manage to say.

He leans forward and I catch the t-shirt scent again.

"Well, from what I've read," he says, "the culture is fascinating, and it's a great place to make money and travel. *Maar luister, mejuffroue*, I have to go."

"Are you *sure* you don't want to stay for lunch?" Naomi asks, sliding her sunglasses back on her head.

Don't encourage! Just don't. Now that we finally have a chance to talk.

"Nee, nee. Looks like you guys need some alone time. Besides, I have first year marking coming out of my ears. Lekker eet, julle."

He gets up and pushes his chair against the table with both hands.

“I’m sorry to hear about your job, Bef,” he adds with one last glance at me.

Shame, he’s not so bad. He’s just so ... Afrikaans.

As we watch him negotiate his way between the tables, the image of the Wave comes back. There’s nothing I’d want more at this moment than to be washed onto the shores of Japan.

Interruptions

Ice breakers, articles, adverbs. English teaching notes spread in orderly heaps on Carl's living room floor. And the present perfect. They have to ask something about that. I'm still trying to get my head around it a week after the course. Weird how you use a tense like that without quite realising why. 'I have lived in Pretoria' shows a past activity continuing now. Whereas 'I lived in Pretoria' is a complete action, finished en klaar. Can't wait to change my life to the past simple.

Carl's at work and mom's pottering around in the kitchen. It's uncanny how she's made herself at home here and even started baking again. The oven in our Arcadia house stayed shut for years, as if there were too many spiderwebs to clear out. Now the chocolatey aroma coming from the kitchen is distracting me almost as much as my mom's clumsy dishwashing. If only I could do the interview in the bedroom. But Carl's only landline is in the *sitkamer*: an old beige paperweight with a see-through rotary wheel. I mean, come *on*.

The phone rings. I put my hand to the hollow in my collarbone, breathe in-out-in, pick up.

"Good morning, it's Beth Strydom speaking. How can I help you?"

The song I've sung ever since I was allowed to pick up the phone sounds infantile, too high-pitched to my self-conscious ears.

"Hi Beth."

"Hi, is this ... East Asia Recruit?"

Silence on the other end. Then, "Hah! No. This Chinese lestualant. You wanna spling loll? Five Land a plate."

"Sorry? Is this ..." I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand.

"What's a happen? You no want no spling loll? You plefer sweet sour pork?"

“Eben? Is that you?”

“Ha, no master Eben. Master Carl speaking!”

“Carl! Is that you? It’s not funny.”

“Haha, vely vely funny!”

“No Carl, seriously. I have a very important phone interview today.”

“I quickie speak sexy your mother?”

I feel the anger burn my cheeks as I call mom. But then I remember I’ve left *Brýnstone* on the couch. Put down the phone and quickly slip some notes over it. Mom opens the kitchen door with her foot while sucking something from her thumb, her fingers fanned across her face. She eyes the papers on the floor as if to ask, “What’s all this?”

I don’t care what she thinks, she just mustn’t see the book. I hand her the receiver and she steps towards the wall.

“Carl, *liefie*, how are you?” she says.

When she looks back my way, I show her my watch: seven minutes past ten. She knows about the interview. But she turns her head back to the wall and scratches a stockinged calf with her toe. I don’t see why she has to wear stockings in the middle of a heatwave.

“Carlie, I told you this morning, I’m busy baking cupcakes. *Wat? My* cupcakes? *Nee, jou stouter, nie nou nie!* Well, there might or there might not be a little icing left over.”

She notices a splotch between her thumb and forefinger and catlicks twice at it. Why can’t she just grow up?

“*Okay, skat. Ek’s jammer*, but I have to go now. Beth’s giving me the evil eye. What was that? *Spling* what?”

She glances at me while listening, then throws her head back and laughs.

“Okay jou stoute kabouter, I’ll see you at five then. Mwa mwa. Bye!”

On her way back to the kitchen, she steps on my adverbs of frequency. I’m about to yell at her, but the phone rings again. She spins around, the adverbs suffering irreparable damage under her heel. But I get to the phone before her. Hold out my hand to say I’ve got it, Go Back Into The Kitchen.

“Good morning, this is Beth Strydom speaking,” I sing again while she watches me. Better not be Carl again.

“Hi Beth. This is Dave from Eas’ Asia Recrui’. I’m phoning for your interview for Sain’ George English School. Sorry ’bout the delay, I had to help ou’ with a teacher here in Taipei who go’ into a motorbike acciden’.”

The interviewer’s accent is so weird, I have to concentrate to hear what he’s saying. I turn my head away from mom. She’s not helping slow down my heartbeat. The interviewer asks me to tell him a bit about myself. As I mention that I’m looking for a change from journ, the kitchen door finally closes. I continue to say I’m a reliable person who takes her job seriously and is excited about being – that is to say, teaching – in Japan. He tells me my pre-interview task was good, and he’ll ask some specific teaching questions now.

“Let’s star’ with a simple question abou’ pronunciation, which, as you know, is a major focus of English teaching in Asia. I wan’ you to tell me how you would teach a child to pronounce the sound ‘th’ in ‘thank you’ correctly.”

How am I supposed to answer a question like that? To someone who can hardly say ‘t’ himself? I rub my palms over my jeans and repeat ‘th th th’ under my breath.

“Beth?”

“Yes, sorry. Um, I think I would say the word ‘thank you’ to the learner ... and repeat it a few times and make sure they copy me? And then, I don’t know, just try it again in the next class?”

Silence. What a fail. When he asks me how I'd show it physically, with the mouthparts, I tell him I don't know.

"Basically, you'd instruc' the child to pu' their tongue between their teeth and then make the sound 't'. Quite simple, really. But one of the tricks you learn along the way, I guess. Now, moving on to the adul' question. The phrasal verb 'manage to'. You know i'?"

"Yes," I answer.

"How would you teach i's meaning and use to a group of adul' students?"

I frantically scan my note farm, as if a 'manage to' pile will magically appear. Suddenly Owen creeps into the blank space of my mind.

Touched your warm earth body. Wet sand of belly. Reached into your foliage mind. Chaos inside united us at sunset. Chaos and sweet rotting leaves. No man could resist. Nor I. Just another man. You: just another woman.

"Beth? Are you there?" asks the voice on the other side.

"Yes, sorry," I utter. Why must the book interrupt me when I'm least in need of it? What am I going to say to this guy?

"I guess I'd start by getting the learners to brainstorm some examples? And then ask them to make sentences with the verb? Ja, I guess that's what I'd do."

I sit down on the couch and resign to failing the interview.

"Okay. Yes, tha' could work. But wha' I'm looking for here is a way of explaining the verb through an example, even before you elici' and drill. The poin' is tha' you'd need to demonstra'e a degree of difficulty involved. So, for example, I'd go to the door and open i', come back and wri'e on the board, 'I opened the door', and then go back and close i'. Then I'd pick up a pile of books, try to open the door holding them, struggle, bu' eventually ge' i' righ'. Then I'd wri'e on the board, 'I managed to open the door,' showing tha' the books made i' more challenging."

“That makes sense,” I say, defeated.

I feel so stupid. I’ve thought of myself as a teacher since I did the course, but now I’m the student. How can I teach if I don’t know all the rules? So much for thinking on my feet.

“Okay Beth, I think I’ve go’ enough for now – we’ll contac’ you to le’ you know.”

“Thank you, Dave,” I reply, sinking to the floor.

I’m screwed. Japan is my only door left. If I don’t get this job, I’ll never get to meet you-know-who. The last thing expected was a pronunciation lesson from a guy who chops off his t’s. About ‘th’, which is part of my own name. At least now I can teach that Afrikaans guy how to say my name properly if I ever see him again. But then also the verb ‘manage to’: ‘Last night I *managed to* get out of dinner so I could be alone with the book.’

The book. Despite its interruption this morning, it’s the only thing holding me together. I’d never have thought that a man’s descriptions of his lover and his ongoing struggle with writing would fascinate me so much. I need to renew it, actually. My two weeks are almost up. But I’ve found an excuse to delay. This morning, I put an empty coffee cup on the book by mistake. It left a large brown circle on the cover. I tried to wipe it off, but the stain was all soaked up. It reminded me of what Sophie said about Owen.

You said I stained with words. Later rubbed them out with saliva. When I trusted you with them. Erased good with bad. Wordstain no more.

How can he say that when he stains *me* so. And how do I justify returning a book that speaks so directly to my essence? I am Sophie: warm earth body and foliage mind, even with my faults. Returning the book would be like cutting off one of my very own branches.

Flight

The aircon in the plane is forcing its way into my every pore, drying out my skin, cracking it up. Sitting in the window seat isn't helping either – I feel trapped here in the corner.

The man next to me has an Asian wife. Japanese? Korean? Will I be able to tell the difference after a year? Why am I going to Japan of all places? This was a bad idea. What if I don't find him? And what do I know about Japan anyway? It's an island of buildings. The sky never gets dark at night because of the bright city lights. Women wear kimonos, men wear black suits, everyone eats sushi.

The cabin lights have all gone out. Only two people behind me are awake, reading under dust-speckled spotlights. How do the others manage to sleep? They must've done this trip before. Maybe once you've done it five times, you step onto the plane as if into bed. But then, they don't have a three-day course waiting for them in Tokyo either. Just the thought of teaching kids, never mind learning how to, is enough for me to need my spotlight on.

Mom was really upset when I wouldn't allow her and Carl to take me to the airport. What did she expect though, after pulling the rug of my childhood out from under me? And she had plenty of time to apologise before I left. At least I gave her a goodbye hug. She'll be fine – she's got Carl.

Both readers behind me have turned their lights off. It's official: I'm the only person awake on the plane. Can't I also just switch off? Not before Dubai. Maybe I should read something. In the chaos of packing in that hole, there's only one thing I remember slipping into my backpack. I zip it open as quietly as possible so as not to disturb my neighbour. Thank goodness I got the bag down when they went to the toilet. I rummage around where the magazines are and feel the book. Cream under my eager fingers. Except for the one corner, which has bent into a dog-ear. I rub over the wrinkle to smooth it out.

I went back to the Pretoria Public Library on the due date. Sneaked up to the window to see if the librarian was there. She was, so I decided to go home and kept it for the weekend. Returned on the Monday and paid the R2 fine to another librarian. Must've renewed it three times since then, every time *she* wasn't there. The fourth will just have to last a bit longer; I can always pay the fine when I get back. I need this book right now. Even if I don't read this minute, just holding it on my lap means everything will be okay. I certainly need it more than that librarian, the only person who even knows it exists.

While I was waiting at the boarding gate earlier, I underlined another quote on page 23, without a ruler this time. Owen sees these words on a bathroom wall: ***Trick is to lower expectations to where already met.*** He writes them down on a dirty serviette which Sophie later uses as a tissue. I'll rub out the pencil another time. I have to, since that other stamp is on the same page. It says PENCIL, PEN AND HIGHLIGHTING RUINS BOOKS FOR OTHER READERS. It's not like I've used pen or highlighted anything. I mean, I'd never do that. Besides, no one else will read this book for the next year, depending on how long I stay in Japan.

The immigration official doesn't smile when I hand him my passport. He continues not to smile as I greet him with my first *konnichiwa*, but replies with words like knots in a rope.

"*Sumimasen*, I don't speak Japanese," I say.

He stamps my passport and slips a piece of paper inside. It says that I'm an alien, and as an alien, I must register in my ward of residence within three months of arrival. Alien. I prefer the word *gaikokujin*, which also means 'foreign person', but sounds a tad less xenophobic.

An eye-ball-sized camera attached to the counter takes my photo. Then I press down into a transparent orange dip for electronic fingerprints. No inky thumbs to wash later,

like at the Brooklyn police station where I got my clearance certificate. The ink wouldn't come off with the police soap – Lux or something cheap.

In the bathroom at Narita Airport you don't have to touch anything to get the business of washing your hands done. Frothy egg-white liquid foams out of the soap dispenser when you put your hands underneath. You don't even have to wait for warm water. Every toilet has a heated seat, and as if that isn't enough, there's a bidet function so you can refresh your bum after 24 hours of flights.

A young woman in petite shorts applies mascara in the mirror. She's not even wearing any stockings. I guess the winters in Japan aren't as cold as I expected. I fill my waterbottle at a low metal fountain and head for the Meeting Point to wait for a St George English School representative. She arrives just as I'm about to read *Brýnstone*, which I swiftly slide into my backpack.

On our way to the hotel, neon signs speed past the train windows: Bic Camera, Tokyu, Softbank. Softbank? A bank's name? Bizarre. As we step out of Fujisawa station, the crisp air invigorates my bones – a welcome relief after Pretoria's heat. The trees on the way to the hotel are lit with blue Christmas lights, or 'illuminations', as the rep calls them.

There's no futon in the Sundance Hotel room, only a stonelike double bed into which I try to snuggle. There's something inside the pillow. Sand? No, it feels like beans. Luckily the other side is soft, so I turn it over and try to get comfortable. The ivory pages of the book watch me from the bedside table. I reach for them, trail their length with my middle finger and close my eyes. I'm closer. Closer to him now. But how am I going to sleep?

The receptionist mentioned a public bath on the tenth floor. Strange way of phrasing it. I mean, who baths in public? Sounds like a swimming pool where people wash themselves in each other's dirt. With a ring of grime around the inside wall – gross! But since I'm wide awake, I might as well go explore. Should I take the book along? No. Don't want it to get wet.

The grey-tiled bath area is the opposite of what I expected. To the right is a dip twice the size of my bed, and not an inch of grime. It looks like you first wash yourself under one of the showerheads hanging between the mirrors. While sitting on a plastic stool. There are big dispensers of shampoo and conditioner in front of each mirror. The kind that would disappear within minutes in good old South Africa. Mind you, I'd take one too if I wasn't so paranoid about getting caught. Besides, I'm not exactly sure which is which. There's no English anywhere.

This doesn't seem like the kind of place where you wear a cozzie, so I leave mine in the corner. What if someone walks in and sees me naked, though? I guess I can just hang one of the white towels in front of me.

Immersed in the bath, I'm back in the womb, a hungry child absorbing its delicious warmth. Only my head peeks out, the rest of me lying weightless under the water. Then, with a towel on the bath edge ready for emergency, I walk my hands over the bottom tiles while my legs hover behind. I'm sure it's not standard etiquette to wallow like a crocodile, but no one comes so I swim back and forth until the heat gets too much.

I'm quite excited about the wallowing opportunities ahead, because I'm going to live in a coastal hot spring town. Originally I was going to teach in Tokyo, but a week after I got accepted by the school, they informed me about a vacancy in Mizushima. I don't know many Japanese place names, but that one rang a bell at once. Mizushima International University, on the southernmost island of Kyushu. What are the chances, I thought. It's where Michael Franklin works. This could only mean one thing: Japan was my destiny.

The town has thirty-seven natural hot springs. I discover this in a pamphlet in my new apartment the day I move in. It says unlike a regular *oofuro*, like the one in the hotel, natural hot springs or *onsen* make your skin feel *sube sube*. Which they translate as 'smooth smooth'. You can indulge in all kinds: a beachsand bath, a mudbath or a milky white sulphur spring. There are also springs called 'hells' which are too hot to swim in, but sound tempting all the same.

It's Yuzawa-san who shows me the apartment on my arrival in Mizushima. He must be in his late forties with a boep veiled under his suit jacket. He doesn't have to stoop to turn on the taps in the plastic bathroom unit, as I suspect I might have to. There's something charming about his inability to speak English as the manager of a conversation school. Even if part of his job is showing teachers around what he calls their *apaato*. He talks in nouns as he points at things: kettle, heater, *terebi*. *Terebi*? Short for terebision.

The bedroom is the last place he shows me before leaving. Like in the Tokyo hotel, there's no futon, just a normal bed. Even though I think it's a bit strange, I don't say anything about this to Yuzawa-san when he walks out of the front door. He holds my gaze for two seconds, then bows and says, "*O tsukare sama desu.*"

"What does that mean?" I ask him.

"Thank you for working hard today," he replies, after a pause.

I'm tempted to ask how he can thank me when I haven't even started at the school, but decide to save it for someone who can speak proper English.

An hour later, I drift between the bathroom and the bedroom. I'm alone. Alone. What am I doing here? What was it that made me come here in the first place? Michael. Mousehaired Michael Franklin.

My eye falls on an empty box from a heater Yuzawa-san brought. I close the top end, push it against the bed and drape my purple scarf over it. Then I extract the book from my backpack, nuzzle the dog-eared fold, and place it in the left-hand corner of my new makeshift table. Same corner where my Bible lived when I was in primary school.

Milla's the third *gaikokujin* I meet in Mizushima. Or *gaijin*, as even foreigners say here, though it's meant to be politically incorrect. Milla's the only other female teacher at the school, and comes from Melbourne. Her navy blue suit goes with her red ponytail. When I tell her about Yuzawa-san showing me the apartment, she gives me a concerned look and warns me to be careful. Strange thing to say about such an

unassuming man. I can't imagine him getting up to any funny business. Not with those square glasses and boep.

The school receptionist, Sato-san, looks like a flight attendant in her dress suit and red and blue striped scarf. More so than the Emirates staff, anyway. She leads me from one kids' classroom to another with a smile stuck to her face. There are ABC posters, toy chests, boxes with flash cards and magnet letters. How am I going to manage this? Adults are fine, adults you can control. But kids? Especially now that I've found out I'll *only* be teaching kids. I thought incompetence had a South African copyright. Clearly I was wrong.

My first lesson is teaching two to three-year-olds. Three students plus three mothers means six people in the classroom plus me. The mothers leave their high heels by the door next to my flat black shoes. Two are wearing skirts so short they refuse to sit down on the chairs. One clutches a Louis Vuitton bag with pink and mauve sequined nails. Male teachers in my position would probably not be complaining, but I find the mothers intimidating. They watch my every move, curious but critical, willing me to make a mistake. I have to remind myself quietly that the book, incapable of judging, is waiting in my handbag. That Michael is waiting for me somewhere in this town.

I look for him in the subway, but there are no *gaijin* at the station. And none on the train. Opposite me, a *sarariiman*, or 'salaryman', is sitting perfectly straight while sleeping. From here I can smell his breath – whisky or something strong. Behind him though, a poster catches my eye. I instantly recognise the Wave. Can't make out the writing, which is all in Japanese except for 'Hokusai', 'Mizushima Art Gallery' and '3/2-3/6'. Is that 3 February to 3 June? Or 2 to 6 March? The latter would make more sense. Either way, I have to go. If only to honour the Wave that has brought me closer to him.

The Wave

Mizushima Art Gallery is squeezed between the International Centre with its library and the Passport Centre on the other side. Imagine the equivalent at Home Affairs in Pretoria – a queue snaking around the building and the people reading books while waiting. No sms-ing, or checking emails on their phones. Everyone reading crime fiction, fantasy or romance.

It's half past six. Or six thirty, as I've become accustomed to saying. It's the second last day of the Hokusai exhibition – a sea of black suits against the white walls. No hook marks from previous artworks, like in the museums in my beloved homeland.

To a small woman with a baby pink sweater I pay one thousand Japanese Yen, probably around a hundred Rand. On display are prints of Hokusai's 'Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji'. I read somewhere that five to eight thousand impressions were made of The Great Wave of Kanagawa, the full name of my Wave. And in 1842, a single sheet cost the equivalent of a double helping of noodles.

I get absorbed into the current circulating the room. Heads are bobbing up and down, insights quietly shared, a suppressed giggle escapes in the corner. I avoid standing right in front of the first print because I'm worried people can't see over my head. At the far end of the rectangular space, the white fingers of the Wave await, but I look away so as to savour the moment later.

The crowd is shuffling ahead in an orderly fashion I've never known. As I scan the room, still avoiding the Wave, I spot the back of the head of a tall *gaijin* in a tieless blue shirt. He's looking at the picture of a red volcano against a blue sky. I can make out a few grey hairs and a slight thinning at the crown. What if it's ... you never know ... it might be Michael Franklin. My tummy turns over at the thought. Should I get closer to him? No, I mustn't – he needs to see me first. Maybe if I go and look at the Wave, he'll come and join me there.

Up close to the Wave, I want to touch the white fingers and follow their strokes with my own. A hundred curling claws forming one grabbing hand. I want to dot the

bubbles with gentle fingertips, and smooth over the boats with a flat palm. But most of all I want the *gaijin* to see me. I turn around to look for him, but I'm lost in a sea of suits. Then someone pushes me against a low rope barrier in front of the Wave, apologises in Japanese, and I lose sight of the *gaijin*. I have to get out of here too, this recycled air is suffocating me. I move along the current a little faster than the others. Heads turn as I do, but I don't care, as long as I'm not swimming against it. Milla told me that's a big no-no in Japan.

Outside the gallery I can breathe again. It's seven forty, which means I'll be able to get home by eight and snuggle into bed with you-know-who. I want to reread the part where Owen speaks about enjoyment and writing:

Friend put in two cents. Said I'm treating writing like work. How else. Who writes for pleasure. Write only for pain. Hammer wordnail into wrist. Next, next. And next.

I like the idea of suffering for art. Without pain, after all, how could life be enjoyed?

The International Centre to the left of the gallery is still open. Since I've lost my *gaijin* companion, I might as well see if they have any good books there. Have to join a library sooner or later.

Inside, there's a couple conversing over a study table and two people reading newspapers. Further down, the English fiction section appears to be the biggest among European languages. I have a look at the shelf of Japanese books translated into English.

On the other side, I hear two people speaking Japanese. The contrast between the woman's high-pitched questions and the man's slow-paced responses perks my interest. The man's voice sounds like an iron bar rung along a pipe. Unable to see through to the other side, I lean closer to the books.

"O namae wa, Michael Franklin desu ne," says the woman.

"Hai," replies the man.

Michael Franklin ... it's him! I wish I could understand what they're saying. I have to go around the corner. A rush comes over my body – it's the tall *gaijin* who was looking at the red volcano. He's wearing a pair of roundish glasses, his shirt tucked into his corduroys. There's no mistaking. I've found him. Mousehaired Michael Franklin.

My heart thumps hard against my chest. I ignore it and try to look as aloof as I can when I approach the shelf nearby. I draw out a copy of *The Little Prince* in Spanish, but can't help to glance up every now and then. The cropped-haired woman, probably a staff member, asks him a question, head cocked to one side. When I find myself staring at the slight bulge in his corduroys, a wave of sensation surges through me.

"*Brýnstone*," he says, and our eyes meet.

I feel a flash of red over my face and have to look away quickly. Did he see me looking down there just now? The woman, suddenly aware of me, asks in a Japanese-American accent if she can help. At my No Thank You, she smiles back at him, smooths out her white shirt and walks away.

"Excuse me," I say, stepping closer once she's gone.

He looks annoyed.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I know this is really random, but I heard you talking about Michael Franklin."

No need to tell him I know who he is. Don't want him to think I'm a stalker.

"What about him?" he asks, lines bunching up on his forehead.

"He's my favourite writer at the moment. I really adore his work."

"Michael Franklin? He's not really a writer. He barely published one book."

"He is! He's a master of the craft. I'm not exaggerating when I say *Brýnstone* is one of the best novels of all time. I have it on me now."

A boyish smirk appears on his face. I mustn't sound so eager. He might suspect something.

"You know I'm Michael Franklin, right?"

I step back and ogle at him, but he stares back nonplussed.

"*You're* Michael Franklin. I can't believe what a co-incidence this is. I mean, I only found out about you a few months ago and And it's just that I'd never have expected to see someone like you in Japan. Are you doing research for a new novel? I mean, *Brýnstone* was what, 2003?"

"I don't write any more. *Brýnstone* was a once-off."

"How can you not be writing anymore? I mean, surely –"

"It's not something I'm prepared to discuss. Suffice to say the book didn't get the critical acclaim it should have. I have to go now."

He turns to walk away, but I clutch at his shirt. He stops and looks at where I touched him.

"I just want to say that I ... I love the way you write about Sophie. Sometimes I feel like I am her and she is me, you know. And the way you express the novelist's frustrations. I mean, I'm not a writer myself, but I understand it so well."

"Fine," he says, walking out of the library with a deliberate gait.

The woman in the white blouse raises a desultory arm at his turned back. I'm also left standing, staring at the floor. I can't believe I've met him. Him! Michael Franklin. The reason I've come to Japan. I must get hold of him somehow. I can help him write again, I *know* I can! I just need to figure out how to find him. How to climb inside his mind like he has climbed into mine.

On the way home, I stop at the *kombini*, Japanese English for 'convenience store'. Past the donuts and hotdogs is the stationery section where I find a local brand of tippex. When I get home, I fish the book out of my bag, and kiss its evergreen cover.

"I found your owner," I say. "Can you *believe* it?"

For a dreamy moment I trace the coffee stain with my pinkie. Then I open the book and search for the branded pages. One by one, I tippex out the words: MAKE SEPARATE NOTES, DON'T UNDERLINE OR WRITE IN THE BOOK. PENCIL, PEN AND HIGHLIGHTING RUINS BOOKS FOR OTHER READERS. When the job is done, I hold its clean body under my chin, arms propped on the table. Then I wallow in the warm memory of Michael's gait out of the library.

Convenience

Finally I can google the university. Everyone's left the school office, including the receptionists. Which is unusual because they normally go home an hour after the classes end at nine. There must be a meeting on one of the other floors.

Now I can also dig into the *omiyage* – snacky souvenirs – without anyone watching. It seems like a ridiculous tradition to bring your co-workers a treat every time you return from a trip, even if it's just to the next town. But I shouldn't complain too much. After all, I do get to reap the benefits every Monday. And when you haven't eaten since your three o'clock lunchbreak, it's a gesture you soon learn to appreciate.

I install myself in front of the flat black screen of the *pasokon*, a hybrid word for 'personal' and 'computer', and place three Tirolian biscuits next to the keyboard. Strawberry must be the favourite because there are only a few vanilla and green tea-flavoured ones left. As the *pasokon* starts up, I tip the book out of the teaching box where I hid it earlier. My fingertips are charged with anticipation as I enter my password and open the book to the Hokusai exhibition ticket.

In red brine you lay. Carved figure alive. Out of the bath, dripping. Now flesh. Our heads connected in hallway. Bare bed. Candlelight. No moth. Licked over white animal body, yours. Cavities filled when I touched your wound. Sprouted goosebumps. Wound between your legs became my wings. Candlewax dripped over your back, your belly. Rolled onto sheets, rest at last. What do you hide beneath your bed, vixen? Pointed stone? Scythe? Axe? Careful. I will match it.

Wow. I'm the one sprouting goosebumps here! What a profoundly erotic passage. No wonder the book won't stop interrupting me. But I really should check my mail now. Otherwise how am I going to find him? I lock the book under my left hand and scroll over five new mails. One from mom, which I delete without opening. One from Naomi, entitled 'Souvvies'.

Hi Beth

Hows Japan? Sorry Ive been so outta touch. When Jon got back from the States he took me on a five-day trip to Sabie Sands and every day he gave me a souvenir from a different town he visited and on the last day he gave me a diamond ring from New York – he proposed! So outta the blue I couldnt believe it. Dont worry were not gonna get married this year so you won’t miss anything. Whats up with you. How goes teaching and have you met any cute Japanese boys yet?

Big hug

Naomi.

I mean to give a quick reply but end up typing almost a page. There’s so much to tell her – about the exhibition and the Wave. I even imitate Michael’s style – minimalist sentences, gunshots. I should probably tell her about him too, but I don’t want her to think I’m nuts. Besides, she’s never quite had an appreciation for a good book and author, or for any fiction, come to think of it. She doesn’t even know who JM Coetzee is.

A deep throated rumble from the office entrance makes me twist around in the chair. I lean over the keyboard so that Yuzawa-san, who’s made the noise, won’t see the biscuit wrappers. His grey suit jacket splits over his boep as he stubs a thumb into his belt. I imagine him in a white butcher’s apron smirched with blood, stuffing chunks of raw beef between his blubbery lips. Or worse: wolfing down horse *sashimi*.

“*Misu Sutoreidomu*,” he says, stringing ‘Miss Strydom’ into an eight-syllable sausage.

“*Ima*, I close office, okay.”

“Yes, *sumimasen* Yuzawa-san. Can I just log off the *pasakon*?”

“*Hai, doozo*,” he says, giving me the go-ahead. With each lightswitch click outside the office, a shadow filters through the doorway. Why didn’t I google the university first? Now I’ll have to wait another day to contact the exceptional Mr Franklin. Or is he a professor?

Stuffing the wrappers into my suit pocket, I walk to the school exit where Yuzawa-san is standing, his eyes on me and his finger on the light switch. Little bit creepy... Milla's warning. Ag, Beth, stop making up stories.

Yuzawa-san follows me into the elevator, as I now call it, because no one knows what 'lift' means here. He lets me out first and I'm pretty sure he's looking at my bum. Thinking about how unappealing it is compared to what he's used to: women with handsome boy-like figures, curveless in their designer jeans.

"*Misu Sutoreidomu. Eeto... you go to house on bicycle?*"

It still amazes me how the manager of an English school gets away with such poor grammar.

"No, Yuzawa-san, I take the *chikatetsu*. In South Africa, we have no subway, so it's very exciting for me."

"I take you to house by my car. No problem. Car is better – more combinient," he insists, stepping closer to me.

I don't want to be rude, so after two polite refusals, I finally give in.

"*Doozo*," he gestures to the garage. A man in white gloves pushes a button and the door rolls up. On a circular carousel hangs a long white car. I watch in wonder as the man pushes another button and the carousel moves in an anti-clockwise direction. When a black Toyota comes into view, the clever contraption stops. Yuzawa-san gets in and tells me to wait while he reverses onto a turntable plate, which rotates till the car faces the street.

The offensive odour coming from his armpits overwhelms me as I get in. That's a first. The Japanese men I've met thus far are so spruced up they seem incapable of even sweating. Not that I've had any close encounters with 'Japanese boys', as Naomi calls them.

Yuzawa-san turns on a small TV located where the radio usually is. I ooh and ah and ask a lot of questions because I've never seen one before. Isn't it dangerous? Can it

really be legal? What if the driver gets distracted and has an accident? Yuzawa-san assures me that it's all perfectly above board, but I still doubt it somehow.

We reach my apartment quicker than expected, perhaps because I'm watching an entertainment show where two chefs compete to cook for Paris Hilton. I regret not looking out of the window – I might've caught a glimpse of Michael.

Yuzawa-san parks on the street, not even pulling up onto the pavement. I'm so glad I don't have to drive in this country, dodging cars parked on the road like this. I've seen other people do it while waiting for someone or catching a nap, engine left on so they can use the aircon. Yuzawa-san, however, switches off the ignition and Paris and her two chefs disappear.

"Doomo arigatoo, Yuzawa-san," I thank him. "I really appreciate it."

"Misu Sutoreidomu. Chotto matte." Wait a minute – one of the few phrases I've been able to remember. Yuzawa-san unclips his safety belt and reaches for the push button. I think he's unlocking the door to open mine from outside, but instead he locks it. His hand goes down to the fly of his grey suitpants and unzips it. I look in horror, unable to move. He puts his hand inside and takes out an erect penis. I continue to stare at it, my head locked in position.

"Misu Sutoreidomu, yatte." Do it.

I look at his square glasses and even before I can shake my head to say no, I feel his porksausage fingers pressing down on my neck. I try to push my head up, away from the penis, but the hand resists, my head goes down, Yuzawa-san sighs.

Upstairs in the *apaato*, I trip over the step of the bathroom unit. Reach for the plastic wall for support, and spit into the loo. I crumple onto the bed with my workclothes on. All except the flat black shoes, dutifully left by the entrance.

Milk onsen

The night passes in humiliated churnings about Yuzawa-san. Morning arrives. I have to do something, go somewhere.

A woman at the Information Centre explains in broken but determined English that the sulphur springs at the top of the hill are *saikoo* – the best. The low thatched huts in the pamphlet she shows me offer a hidden space to cleanse.

The bus is empty except for an old *obachan*, or an ‘auntie’ as I would say back home. Not that I can even call it that any more. I’m still angry with mom. The woman’s clutching a flowery handbag to her chest. She turns her head to the window as I get on the bus.

Last night was the first time I didn’t read the book before bed. It feels like when I skipped Quiet Time in primary school. Must catch up on my Bible verses.

Ale-coloured water. You swam in through sun. Pulled under by weeds crawling up. Calling you down. Beneath. Through. Stones barked silence through bubbles. You did them with your mouth. Your water wings flew. Wax scar forgotten. You moved with purpose in your purposelessness. Mid-water suspension: surrounded by me. Lost.

Lost... but found, surely? Lost, but alive. Sophie needed to lose herself in him. How else would she have known who she was?

The bus inches up the hill so slowly you’d think it was full. But I get a good view of the vapour rising from the *onsen* town rooftops: flameless fires everywhere. Through the windows on the other side of the bus, green hills swell into the sky. I skim over the *kanji* letters on a blue road sign to see the English for ‘Mizushima International University’. Michael! Or should I say, ‘Professor’?

“He’s nearby!” I whisper to the book. “Do you think he’s teaching today?”

The book keeps quiet, but I know what it’s thinking. Choosing the milk *onsen* on the top of the hill was no coincidence.

When I get to the *onsen*, however, I'm told that I can't go into the huts, which is where sulphur flowers are cultivated. I have to go to the *rotenburo* – the open air spring. Ag, I don't want to. Don't want anyone to see how dirty I am. But when I get there, it's empty. The tufts of steam rising above the bamboo fence with the sea beyond make the *rotenburo* a good second best.

The contrast between the crisp air and scorching white water induces a shiver as I step inside the bath. I slowly sink myself in a corner, lean against a flat rock and pull my knees up to my chest. The book is next to me, in a ziplock bag that I found in the changeroom. I can't be without it, not even here, and it's safe from getting wet.

Why didn't I say anything to Yuzawa-san? I was like a robot obeying orders. What will I do when I see him again? He hasn't been at the school this week, but he'll be back. The square-rimmed glasses, the porksausage fingers. A spasmodic shudder courses through my body, as if an awkward animal inside is needing to get out.

The changeroom door creaks open and an *obachan* waddles towards the showerhead. Dammit – I thought I was going to be alone. I *need* to be alone. The woman's not even trying to hide her nakedness with her towel, which is rolled up in her hand. She perches on the white stool I used ten minutes ago, dips her towel in a small tub and wrings it out over and over.

I mouth the greeting *o hayoo gozaimasu* to be polite when the *obachan* comes. But she looks straight past me when she approaches the bath. Not the first time, I admit. In town, people never look me in the eye, never acknowledge I'm there. But then I realise it's the woman from the bus, and it's the book she's looking at. I scramble up, seize it and climb clumsily over the rocks. She pretends not to see me, but I feel her eyes on my back, scrutinising the ripples on my thighs. In the changeroom I get dressed without drying myself. I can't believe I allowed the book to be seen, in an *onsen* of all places.

At the bus shelter, I sloth down onto the seat, my skin red and soft. But I don't feel relaxed. My heart palpitates too fast at the shock of my carelessness. Only one antidote. Open to page 83. Sophie's becoming increasingly dependent on Owen, her

neediness really starting to get to him, especially now he's developed a daily writing routine. At four in the morning, *nogal*. But he's no less frank with her in his text, no less unashamed.

I wish I could be the recipient of such sincere chiding. Wait! The sign to the university, just down the road. I jump up, out of my stupor, and start marching downhill. Why didn't I think of this before? Metal grates exhale vapour as I pass. Steam, stream, everywhere. It's as if there's a volcano breathing under the ground, just waiting to push its lava out.

There's no obvious entrance to the mammoth grey university building, which looks like the American Embassy in Pretoria. I ask an Indian student to direct me to Michael Franklin's office. He shakes his head in bewilderment.

"He's a published novelist," I tell him, but the ignorant fool just stares back.

A security guard eventually points me in the direction of a staircase inside. I go up to the third floor where the English staff is located. Wait outside a large room divided into chocolate block partitions. A woman with a polo-neck sweater walks out, and I ask her about Professor Franklin.

"Professor Franklin? You mean Michael. He's not a professor," she snorts, and puts her hand over her mouth.

I don't see what's so funny. If he isn't one, he sure should be. Not that someone like her could appreciate that. She clearly hasn't read the book. Directions are all *she's* good for.

I'm here. In this place I've imagined so many times. My feet squeak over a waxy yellow floor past a cleaner tugging a mop contraption. She glances at me, looks behind her, walks on.

Outside the staffroom entrance, I think of the mirror behind my dad's office door, so he could check his hair before leaving. I wish there was a mirror here. I'm sure my face

is still red from the *onsen*, and my *kroesies* won't lie when I bat them down. But since Michael wears glasses, maybe he won't notice.

I slowly lower the doorhandle and look through a gap between two lockers. I catch the scent of iron, like his voice, blackjacks between my teeth. He's here, he's here! My heart throbs hard against the cage. I don't suppress it this time.

His ankle is resting on his knee. Long legs in black jeans. He's leaning back into the chair, the book in front of his face a wall between his world and mine. I stand still, notice a tiny mole south west of his eye. As he lowers the book a little, his nose rises like a bridge out of land, unafraid to be itself. A cluster of grey hair gathers by his ear, it's fought long and hard to be there.

He's no pretty boy, but there's definitely something about him. The glasses, the combination of black jeans and brown jacket – easily rectified. The bulge is there again, in the triangle of his legs, perhaps even bigger than before. And the same smirk on his face.

"Mr Franklin?" I say, my voice faltering with the 'lin' bit. He lowers his book and draws in his chin.

"Do I know you?" he asks.

"Yes. We've met once. At the International Centre in town. When the Hokusai exhibition was on. I'm really sorry to bother you. I just happened to be in the area ... and I just thought I'd come and, you know, ask you a question or two about *Brýnstone*. I found it in a library in Pretoria of all places. If you have a spare moment, I'd just like to ask you –"

"You found it in a library?" he asks.

"Yes."

"And you brought it to Japan?"

"Yes. I'm going to return it, of course."

“You nicked my book from a library,” he says, uncrossing his legs.

“I just couldn’t *not* take it, you know.”

“Mmm, I’m intrigued.”

It feels warm between my legs. I want to tell him I always have the book on me, but manage to stop myself. An awkward silence falls over us. I have to fill it up.

“Do you mind if I ask you some questions?” I say, stepping a little closer.

“I’m pressed for time. I have a class in fifteen minutes and I need to have this chapter wrapped up by then” he says.

“Please,” I beg, my voice higher than usual. “Just five minutes.”

“Be quick,” he replies to me, fawning in his ambrosial reproach.

I sit on the edge of the settee opposite, and twine one leg around the other. Do his eyes flit to my chest? Or is it my throat, still red from the *onsen*? I stroke my hair back, hoping he doesn’t notice the *kroesies*. What should I ask?

I hear myself say that I’m fascinated by his ability to describe Sophie so poignantly.

“Not a question,” he says and closes the book, bookmarking it with his forefinger. He puts his ankle on his knee again and clamps the triangle with an arm. I have to stop myself from looking at the bulge.

“You have four minutes left to get to the point. If there is indeed one.”

I rub my clammy fingertips over my pants and breathe in.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I just wanted to know, well, where you got your material from. Was it based on personal experience or did you research other people? And why do you think you can’t write any more? I mean, after publishing that masterpiece. Surely –”

“Look, I appreciate your interest, but most readers never get to pick the brains of the author, and to be honest, that’s how it should be. Characterisation is none of the reader’s business. I have no obligation to talk to you about my subject material.”

“Okay, I understand. But let me just ask one more question. It’ll be the last one, I promise. I’m just fascinated by your writing style, and wondering how you came to write such punchy sentences?”

He shakes his head and says, “Enough now,” then asks me to leave.

I’m caught between the shame of being reprimanded and the wonder at his naked candidness. He treats me as an equal by being as brutally honest with me as Owen is with Sophie. Surely that must mean something?

“Thank you so much for your time, Michael,” I say, bowing my head slightly, a habit I’ve picked up in Japan. But his nose is already back in the fold of the book. He’s completely forgotten about me.

I, however, will never forget this. To have seen him again, to have spoken to him! Intrigued, he said about me stealing the book. Intrigued.

Finger spaces

Two pillows propped against the wall behind my bed. You're on the makeshift table, my hands are on my lap. One glance at you sends a wild pulse through me. No Beth. Don't touch. Resist all temptation. Lead me not. But why may I not? Why must I not?

I pick you up lightly and lay you on my lap, where you soften the branches of my legs. Close my eyes and slide my fingers over your cover. Slowly, slow. I'm reading the braille of Michael's face on you. The imposing nose that has something to say. The eyes: coal lashes exposed when I cast his glasses to the floor. The irreversible dog-eared corner: his only wrinkle. I spread my fingertips over his cheeks: red glow on apple green. Then the brittle grey plumes of stubble against my skin, driving me to a dimension of unspeakable rapture. I come back to thumb the lips forming two sulphury syllables. The chin of the page won't withdraw this time with a brash 'Do I know you?'

I run my hands along your spine, and take it between forefinger and thumb. Pinch until it's damp underneath my aching fingernails. It is his neck I hold, with urgency, his neck that can't move away. Squeeze harder until you pulsate, a living heart in my hands.

I relax my grip, the taut muscles of my body liquefying as I lightly tease the minute folds. Then, with an even hand, I caress your body until my own body is besieged by goosebumps. Put it back, Beth. Neatly. Into its holy space. Put it back and go to sleep.

But I don't.

I feel along the frame of your pages, run my finger over their sharp, inviting edges, reading where to enter. Slip it in, tentative, with no intention to force. In, in, further in, in all the way. In until you open over the longing of my lap. I lift you to my hungry mouth, against my itching nostrils. Close closer closest to inhale Michael's exhalation, breathe in your iron breath, my oxygen. Let my head roll back against the wall. Sigh out. Breathe in. Read.

***Lost in me. Couldn't find way back. Breadcrumbs guzzled by birds. Voice given away.
Thought you'd found yourself. Thrived on sweet delusion. Fed on it. Insatiable greed.
Lifted you from depths of debris. Life direction marked, you thought. And I.
Deplorably caught in your net of loss. No wordnails hammered.***

Oh Michael, if only I were at the receiving end of these words. Your mute real life offensive launches itself from the pages of your fiction. No apology for the utterings that cut through a woman's soft skin. I want to explore the spaces between your words, mark them as mine. I want to press harder with my pencil when I write in your margins, when I question, when I contest, when I admire. When I say, 'Why were you with her if you hated her, Michael? Michael or Owen? You or him? Both of you or neither? And who is Sophie, a real woman? How many times were you with her? Would you cast me aside in this way? You: writer or pretender? Your bittersweet words of lovehate love froth over my skin. Mulch my very core. Corrupt my entire being.' Our conversations must become etched where I mark the veins of your body.

I bring your book to my chest with clammy hands, steaming up your skin. Wipe your moisture on the duvet and, perilously aroused, return you to your Bible space.

"What's your name?" I ask Keita, who's first in the queue of seven-year-olds outside the classroom door.

"My name is Keita."

"Now me," I say and touch my nose with my forefinger, the way Japanese kids do.

"Ask me."

Keita looks blank for a moment, then remembers: "What is your name?"

"No, Keita. *What's. What's* your name."

He rubs the strap of his backpack between three fingers. Then he looks up with coal coloured eyes and repeats after me.

“Good. My name’s Beth. How old are you?”

“I’m six. How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-seven.”

A mother in the reception area nods sweetly. The idea of school on a sunny Saturday morning is no oddity to her. She watches on as I tell Keita to sit in the front of the class. Next to Aoi, far away from Daichi.

Today’s lesson is about living room furniture. Once I’ve drilled the vocabulary and played a game of ‘slap’, the kids take out their notebooks. They copy down the list on the board. Keita’s first word is ‘cheir’.

“Keita. Look at the board,” I point. “See, this is an ‘a’. Can you rub it out please?” I say, pretend-erasing the word.

“*Keshigomu ga nai*,” he says.

“Aoi, can you please lend Keita an eraser?”

Aoi looks up from her neatly printed list. She’s drawing a 3D table that puts my whiteboard attempts to shame.

“An eraser. For Keita,” I repeat, “He doesn’t have one today.”

Aoi nods and zips open a furry tortoiseshell pencilcase. She explores inside with deft little fingers and extracts a Nemo eraser.

What if I lose my eraser like Keita? If pencil equals pen. My marginalia becomes unalterable. I can’t rub out I LOVE YOU. I can’t rub out I HATE YOU. I can’t erase the hearts with their burning arrows of fire. The map to the university, us kissing in the staffroom. The notes that say, ‘You insert yourself into women but you don’t let them enter you. Let *me* enter you, Michael. The way I have entered your book.’ That’s what I wrote that this morning, in response to Sophie’s singeing but never charring.

Megumi sits quietly at the back of the class. She’s copied the example sentence as:

Thebookisinthecupboard.

I tell her to rub it out. But she shakes her head indignantly, as if to ask how the fruits of her effort can be so completely wasted. I rub it out for her, then rewrite the sentence on the board, exaggerating a finger space between each word.

Fingerspaces. On page 45 of *Brýnstone*, there's a hanging gap between each word, as if Michael confused tab with spacebar. I imagine dipping my finger into a pot of blue ink and blotting out each space. Word – fingerprint – word – fingerprint. Him writing, me marking. A team effort. As Keita shamelessly walks over to Daichi, I wonder if they sell ink at the *kombini*.

Time for another game. I get Keita and Aoi to stand at the board. Their team members run between them and me, spelling the flashcard I hold at the back. Hinata tells Keita in loud Japanese there's no space between cup and board.

"No Japanese, please Hinata," I say. She continues in a whisper, fanning the flame of aggravation inside me.

"I said no Japanese, Hinata! It's one word, Keita. One."

One word. Cup plus board equals cupboard. Brýn plus stone equals *Brýnstone*. Beth plus Franklin equals Beth Franklin. All it takes is a black marker for our two names to become one so that your book is my book is our book.

Ten minutes left of the class – just enough time for a pictictionary game.

"*Onaka ga suita*," says Keita, rubbing his tummy.

"Keita! What did I say about Japanese? I know you're hungry but you're going to have to wait ten more minutes, okay? Now, Aoi, please can you choose a page in your picture dictionary?"

Aoi opens up on *Under the Sea*, then goes to the board and starts drawing.

"*Tako!*" yells Keita.

“English!” I shout.

“Ocutopusu,” says Hinata.

“*Tabetai*,” yells Keita.

“Keita! I’ve had enough of you!”

I walk over to him, ready to smack his bottom. But I manage to compose myself and write MINUS 2 on the board instead. *Tabetai*: I want to eat it, as if it’s the only reason for an octopus to exist. But Keita’s unconcerned. In fact, he’s looking at the classroom door, completely unperturbed. I follow his eyes to where Yuzawa-san is looking through the porthole window. My whole being solidifies. He looks sternly through his square glasses, pushes them back, walks away.

After the class, I sit down at the desk and heave out a loaded sigh. The dictionary still lies open on the Under the Sea picture. I wish I could dive into it with the book clasped in my hand. Swim above the dolphins, in the shadow of the shark, around the noiseless whale. Head down to the ocean floor, twirl through the seaweed and find the treasure chest beyond. Open it up, put the book inside, swim back to the surface, lighter.

At seven ’o clock, I say goodbye to the receptionist, and wish her a happy Sunday. I hope she won’t notice the missing marker and the pot of mislaid red ink.

Love hotel

Try to lift my head. Head says no: stay. Throb, thudding. Where am I? Open my eyes to see red leopard spots circle the room at a nauseating pace. Mascara-blotted eyes look down from above. Mine, in a ceiling mirror. There are two portholes on the blue duvet I'm buried under. Beside me, in the mirror, is a hairy arm over a white pillow. Shudder as a sudden airstream combs the dark hairs to one side. Who is he?

Michael. I mailed you again three days ago. Poured my soul out over your stone heart. No reply. Nothing.

If I move now, my head will burst into a million stars. There'll be more throbbing, thudding. It's better to stay under the porthole, covered up. I lower my eyes to the end of the ceiling mirror. The disco ball leopard spots flash over a karaoke sound system, microphones and shakers. In the corner of the room, a big TV screen is suspended at an awkward angle. Below it hangs a girl's sailor suit in a clear plastic bag. On the opposite wall, beyond the hairy arm, is a picture of the QEII. Where the hell am I?

The wreckage of mixed drinks in my stomach causes an involuntary lunge. What happened last night? My head feels compressed into boxing headgear, a swirl of images appears. And then I remember something.

Two girls approached me. I was in a club somewhere. Yes, two Japanese girls, coming up to the high table where I was waiting. For who? They were giggling, clad in tiny silver shorts over tights and boots. Spaghetti-string tops over an excuse for breasts. The one with the blonde hair and fake eyelashes said, '*Haroo.*' She wanted to know my name. I told her 'Besu', and tried not to sound too interested. Were they hostesses? No, just ordinary sluts. Who was I waiting for? How did I end up with the black-haired arm?

One of them squealed that I was *kawaii* – cute. The other said my face was small. Not the first time I'd been told this fascinating fact. Or wondered how this could be a

compliment if everything else about me is so big. Next to their bodies, anyway. No cellulite to speak of.

I thanked them in Japanese so they wouldn't milk me for more *eikaiwa* – English conversation. I know their type. Shouldn't have been surprised when they asked me the default *gaijin* question: 'How tall?' Got up and went to the bathroom. Yes, I remember – Smirnoff Ice in hand. Must have been *nomihoodai* – all you can drink – or I wouldn't be caught dead with the stuff.

The hairy arm moves. Lie dead still, Bethie. Stop breathing if you have to. Don't wake him up, whoever he is. An American marine? An teacher?

A snort-snore escapes from under the pillow. Like a snort-laugh last night. Who was it? Sniggering at the pavement pizza we saw on the way to the club. Pushing his friend towards it. Saying that Japanese men can't hold their drink, me thinking we're no better off. Calvin.

It was Calvin, the new part-time teacher. Is it him next to me? This could be awkward come Monday morning. I remember him pouring me a drink in a bright room. A long wooden table surrounded by beer-filled fridges and hanging snacks. Dried meat sticks and rice crackers with processed cheese and almonds. Bottles of *sake* on the shelf behind the table, the patrons' names written in *kanji*. A lucky white cat waving its paw up and down. The *tachinomi* bar. A liquor store where you can stand and drink.

"Aren't I meant to do that?" I remember asking Calvin when he poured the beer for me.

His friend laughed. What was his friend's name? They looked like brothers: both dark blonde with blue eyes. Calvin just a little taller, with thicker and healthier hair. He told me his girlfriend is a hostess. The irony. Because I too was a hostess last night. Yes, I was! But not one who waits outside the seedy bars on the dodgy side of town. I was dressed to kill and on an expedition to find you, Michael. Because if you insist on ignoring my emails, I *will* find you.

I made myself resplendent before I went out, like a woman I passed after lunch yesterday. A foreign woman. A hostess. From Eastern Europe? Russia? A *gaijin* lioness with curls, prowling the streets of Mizushima, ready for a long night ahead.

I noticed her stilettos first. *Hemelhoog*, like the ones Japanese girls wear. Not once did she falter like they do, when their heels sink in towards each other. She marched forth over the zebra crossing, clad in black, head held back. A short skirt and stockinged legs under a long velvet jacket. Around her neck, a chain with a cross, pointing to the divide in her bosom. Shades of peacock around the eyes, a blush of pink on pallid cheeks, the shock of lacquer red lips. I wanted to follow her everywhere.

You don't have to sleep with them, the old men who come to hostess bars. It's all about desire. About you pouring them beer as they ogle. About them wanting, but knowing there's a limit. They're sensible. They go back to the single bed next to their wife's. They don't need to tell her about their problems at work – they've spent the whole evening sharing them with you. The gracious hostess, always thinking about her tip.

I'd listen. I'd sit there, perched on a high chair, ready with a bottle of beer, batting my fake eyelashes and inclining my head to the side. It sure would beat teaching kids who don't listen.

But I'd never have the pluck to do it in real life. So after I saw the goddess, I decided to be a hostess on the prowl. To find you, Michael. Find you in whatever drinking hole you lurk. You must have a dark side. I would offer to pour your drink. Make you open up, take me home. I know you're waiting for me to convince you that you *are* a writer. No more of this business of *I am what I attempt: failure*.

Another snore-snort escapes from the pillow. Then a sigh, and the stale mouthbad of a beer drinker. I keep still. It's not safe to move yet, especially now that the aircon's died down and the room is quiet. Next to the bed, my green dress is draped over a chair. To match your book. To signal my destiny.

That's it. That's what I did. I went home directly after school and headed straight for my cupboard. It's been too cold to wear the leaf green dress up to now. Mind you, it's still too cool outside. But last night, I was hostess, and could put up with whatever weather.

Where make-up normally takes a minute, it took me half an hour. Eye-liner, mascara, lip-gloss, the works. Go big or go home. The top of my dress revealed a little cleavage. Just a little. Wasn't planning on throwing myself at you, like Sophie does on the first night. I was just saying, 'Take a peek.' Take a peek, Michael. This is what's on offer. Didn't think I had it in me, did you? The plain girl with the frizzy hair. I too can be a whore. One you'll never admit to secretly desire.

But Calvin and his friend hijacked my mission. Both of them, standing in the *tachinomi* bar, his friend with his thumbs in his pockets. How many bottles of beer did we share? Three? Four? Five? How do we get to the seedy side of town? The love hotels and hostess bars prostituted by their neon signs.

Calvin's friend – what was his name? He paid my entrance to the Happy Cock because I didn't have enough money. Calvin talking loudly to the barman, a *haafu* he knows. Half Japanese, half American, with a fauxhican and a black stud in his ear. I tried to imagine Calvin's girlfriend. Any match for me? Calvin came over and said he had to leave: his girlfriend's shift was over. His friend offered to get me another drink. And that must have been when the sluts came to me.

Calvin's friend. The arm moves over the pillow and for a minute I think it's reaching for me. I lean away from the body and feel a jolt of headpain. A hand scratches the sheets between the man's legs and rests there. Calvin's friend. That's who this is. The guy with his thumbs in his pockets.

Oh God. I remember now. He led me by the hand to the love hotel. I leaned against him in front of the machine where you choose your room and pay. Swayed away from him, put my hand to my head; he asked if I was okay. He chose the ship because he said he wanted to be my captain. I told him any room was fine, I just wanted to get to bed.

And now I just want to get out of here. I sit up slowly and remove the porthole duvet gingerly from my naked body. Sit still on the bed for a moment, head pounding. The aircon comes back on in a sudden whoosh. I step in something squishy. A condom? Lose my balance for a second. Feel for my clothes and head past the karaoke sound system.

In the bathroom, bottles of shampoo and make-up samples line the mirror. I close the toilet and drape my dress over it. Return to the mirror to see again the two mascara bruises. Fumble among the samples and squeeze something into a wad of cotton.

Where's my underwear? The turquoise bra and pink g-string I chose for Michael tonight. I start to feel dizzy and sit on the dress. Hang my head into my hands, propped shakily on my knees. Close my eyes. Where are you? I brought you with me tonight, of course. To refer to when I found him. To show my devotion. I abandoned him, but I must find you. I must talk to you now.

Ah no. My handbag is still in the bedroom. I must sneak back quietly. Calvin's friend has put a pillow in the place where I lay before. He's a short, balding man, his hairy black chest exposed above the sheets. I'm afraid he'll see me, so I get on my knees. Crawl along the floor to the chair where my bag is, then back around the bed to the door.

Close the bathroom door behind me. Your cover burns my hands but I welcome the pain. Open to page 71. Only one line: ***I cannot write. I am not a writer.*** I lie stomach-down on the cool bathroom tiles and dig for a pen in my bag. Lift my legs like flags behind me, cross and uncross them for you. The tip of my pen is fire. I cross out the first 'not', then the second. Cross them out then scratch them out. Scratch scratch till both nots are red knots in the page that has become mine. Cross out both sentences and write above, "You *can* write. You *are* a writer. You, who sit there in the staffroom, open-legged, like a man. Why not be that man, Michael, and write. Be the writer you already are."

I want to tear out the pages and send them to you. But then, what will I read? Where, my love, will I write?

Sand onsen

Sand, everywhere. Need to cross the desert to the other side of the bed. Swim through dunes to get to handbag. The oasis where you rest.

But not yet. Greg is down there somewhere, kissing my thighs under the bedsheets, oblivious to the sand whittling into my skin. Forging red squiggles on my back and legs, imprinting itself on me. In the same way you have done. The way you've carved my body, like I've engraved yours. We write each other's story, our destinies entwined through the words you write and the words I devour. Sand in my hungry mouth.

I imagine it's you under the sheets in the dark room. But then, you would never be like this. Like Greg, who grunts like a hog, his breath stickier than the humidity that has besieged this seaside town. His beast-like body so unlike your smooth, hairless sharkskin. How did I get from last week to here?

Sandgrains all over. The beach after dinner, mojitos the selling point. How many did he buy for me? Not enough to make me oblivious to his grunting, his licking up and down. Is he finished yet? Is this what you've reduced me to, Michael? Numbness to all other men. Only your words can stir me. Your poisonous words leave me swollen and red and ready for more.

I need to touch you. The impatience is wearing me out, Greg's inefficacy claws in my chest like a locust in a bottle. I breathe deeply, deeper, deepest. Release a moan that shakes even myself. Greg comes up from under the sheets. Sweatbeads roll from the tip of his nose, dripping onto the mattress where the cover's come off. You vixen, say his eyes, as he gropes my sandy bum.

I tell him I'm going to the bathroom. My fingertips explore the passage wall. How many women has Greg had here? Drunk on mojitos, slipping barefoot over the carpet, fumbling for the lightswitch. His bachelor pad is chic and simple: two leather couches and a coffee table. He can afford to buy women, but he won't buy me.

Where did I put my handbag? Why must I get so plastered every time? Sand all over the cream carpet.

"You sneaked out the other night," Greg had said when he phoned me earlier.

I had to try remember what he looked like.

"When can I see you again?" he went on.

I told him I was very busy. And yet here I am. It's you who's driven me into his arms. With your refusal to reply to my mails. I don't want to be here, Michael, but I want something.

I find you by the entrance where you slumber safe in my handbag covered in sand among Greg's scattered shoes. Carry you to the toilet, close the door, and put down the cover. Bathrooms, my only refuge. Open the zip and let my fingers scramble inside as my heartbeat quickens. Lipstick, tampons, pen. Then you. Yes, you! Dog-eared you. Smooth over the corner I tore off the last time you didn't reply. A minor injury, really. Nothing sticky tape couldn't fix.

Open to page 119 and read.

Infantile. How much longer, child. Wouldn't let me leave house. Demanded detailed account. Beer with friends, I said. You sat alone at home. Sulked all night. Called girlfriends. Waiting for daddy to come home.

What I would give to be her. To wait all night in the cold bed for you to return. And when you do, at dawn, to turn my back to you.

Let me write this down with my blue ballpoint pen. Twirl the nibfluff over the corner of the page. I'm so at home with you, I don't even bother to use a spare piece of paper any more. What would Ms Anderson think? Mom forwarded a letter from her to say I must return the book. And pay the R100 fine. What would she say if she could see me now? Defiling your holy spaces. With the begrimed nib of a pen.

But the pen rebuffs my attempts to write. I start to scratch above the text. Left to right, back and forth. Up down, up down, over the page. Nothing. Clench the pen in my fist, thrust it harder and harder against your skin. Until the ink finally bleeds over Sophie's silent sulking, and I can release my weapon.

"Beth!" comes a call from the bedroom. "Are you coming back to bed? I'm horny, woman."

How did I end up with this man? Why didn't I just go home after dinner? I could still have caught the train.

"I'm coming," I call back with forced enthusiasm.

Lay the bleeding pen into the gulf between your pages and nudge you into the bag.

"What were you doing in there?" says Greg when I walk in the room. "Come, lie down. I've cleaned off the sand. Put down your handbag. Come here."

He pats the space next to him. I hesitate for a moment, then lower myself down onto the mattress. There's still sand everywhere, and he hasn't fixed the bedcover. He cups my breast in his sweaty hand and says, "Why do you torture me so?"

What could Greg teach me about torture? The torment of meeting a mate who buries himself behind book-cemented walls. Who offers a taste of his intrigue, then refuses to let me step closer. Torture is having to watch Greg lumping up slabs of tuna *sashimi* at dinner, and stuffing his mouth with grated radish after. Having to listen to this Japanophile going on about *seppuku* and *chonmage*, and the samurai code of honour. Who cares about that stuff? History should stay in the past.

Japanophiles. You can never trust them. I used to envy *gaijin* like this, and their obsessions with bizarre Japan. But it's just a brainless way to escape from their own problems. Just like they come to Japan to run away from something.

Listening to Greg was mind-numbing. In a way that would be impossible with you. You would entice me with titbits from Old English literature. Quote DH Lawrence and Shakespeare verbatim. Moisten my thighs with your spontaneous poetry. Confront me

with my faults too. I would bask in your literary brilliance. Feed off every guileless word coming from your unafraid lips.

He's licking me again, Greg. Lapping me up like his first lolly ever. I'd like nothing more than to swat him away. I can see it turns *him* on, though. He's loving every minute. What he loves most of all is my reaction. The sigh sigh sighing when I think about you walking out of the library the first time we met. Your entry into my mind and the space between my thighs is the only way I can bear this.

He's breathing over me again, ready to enter. Where can I take you so we can be alone? I know – a beachsand bath.

I sit down in a shallow grave and dig a hole at my side. Wrap you in the sand and cover myself up. You must endure the suffocation with me, the wet earth pressing onto our bodies. Reddening our skin, thawing our layers, softening the hardness of your stone.

Greg is moving up and down, faster and faster. I know I should feel something inside me, but there's nothing. I stretch my clammy fingers in your direction, aroused by your burial here, by knowing you can't escape. I release a heavy sigh.

"You're loving this, aren't you?" says Greg.

"Yes," I say, sweating into the hot sand, only my face exposed. Tasting the sultry air on my tongue, watching the noiseless sea.

"There's more where that came from," says Greg, pinching my nipple hard.

I squint up at the midday sun. Lift limbs slowly. Cracks in the hot, wet sand. I dig for you beside me. Deeper and deeper, but you're not there. Why must you always withdraw like this? I need you here right now. But first I have to let Greg finish. With all my remaining energy, I squeal as he comes.

At the sound of the first snore-snort, I dive through the dunes and swim to my bag. Behind the closed bathroom door, I get comfortable on the toilet seat again. The sand has crept into every page. It trickles to the tiles as if from a broken hourglass. I scribble, "The erection in the library, you walking out. I grab your hand and pull you

back. Back into the library into the shelves into the books into the pages into the words into your words you into me and me into you and in and in and in until we're covered in words, like sand."

Sigh with content, head back to the bed.

Greg's hairy arm hugs a pillow over his head. I lie down next to him with you on my belly. Dreaming about being buried together in a grave overlooking the sea. Waves creeping up towards us but never quite reaching. Sand connecting our bodies.

But the thought of Greg tomorrow morning over coffee plagues me. Him wanting to hold my hand, me entertaining a fake grin across a cup of milkless coffee. Why did I come back to the bedroom? How can I stay here when you are all I desire? It's time for me to go.

Outside the high-rise apartment, the salty sea breeze entices me. I follow it to the beach, find a place to sit on the moist sand and watch the unmoving ocean. So quiet, so unlike the Wave that brought you and me together.

Then I think of Pretoria. The last time I saw mom at Carl's house, just before Naomi and Jon picked me up. She was so upset, and I just wouldn't budge. I mean, didn't I have a right to be angry after what she'd done? I guess it wouldn't have killed me to let her take me to the airport. To have said a proper goodbye.

And then, another strange memory. Of Naomi's friend at News Café, pushing his chair against the table. Slowly, with both hands. What was his name? I can't remember, just that it was Afrikaans. Not English, not Michael.

Bath

Sunday morning, eleven o' clock. I wake up in the sauna of summer, sticky, unbreathable. Like Durban in December, but worse. Struggle to breathe through the stiffl. Stir some turmeric into my yoghurt – it's meant to help for hangovers. Tastes like sand in my mouth. Down a glass of water, and then another one. Nothing helps.

Last night. The shock of you standing on the opposite side of the British pub, an ale in your left hand. My first instinct to hide, hide behind someone, anyone. Sneak into the bathroom to splash water on my face, straighten my shirt. Step back into the pub, ready for you to lay eyes on me, to take me home. Disbelief as you leave the bar. Your arm around a woman, looking back at me, a malicious glint in her almond-shaped eyes.

What makes you think she can satisfy you? Give you what I can? With that skinny ass and superfluous make-up that took hours to apply. It's all exterior, a façade. What you need is someone with substance, someone with grit. You need me, like I need you, inside. Yet here I am, alone, with only your book to sample for comfort. With only Owen's words to soothe my tortured soul.

Hated the way you looked. Thighs too large. Breasts too heavy. Cheeks too red. Nose too freckly, hair too curly, eyes not green enough. Delighted in showing off defects. Used them to deny my affection. Only thing I loved.

You're describing *me*, Michael. I am Sophie, standing in front of the mirror, analysing my faults, basking in their imperfection. How your flame licks into my core, Michael. I love you, I love you! You who said you were intrigued. May you forever regret your unintended compliment.

Why do you seek love in dark places, Michael? Surely you've learnt from the empty women you've been with before? Why can you not find it here, where I wait, naked at midday on the sheetless mattress, fondling the skin of your cover, scratching with impatient fingernails. Raising you to my mouth, gnawing the inviting edges. Leaving bitemarks on your pale green skin as I recollect the bulge in the staffroom. Nestling

your words between my breasts, full and voluptuous like Sophie's, not small and plain like that Japanese whore's. She means nothing to you. It's Sophie I envy. She's the one caught in the words streaming from your consciousness. I'd let you reject me a million times over just to be with you for one night. Just to feel your human skin under my teeth.

The smell of paper, yours, and the unliving air suddenly makes it hard to breathe. I have to get out of the house. Must go to the river to compose myself, to take in some clean air.

The river. Five minutes from my apartment, constricted between concrete slabs and coerced into the sea. It may not have the best scenery, but the gurgling water over stones has been luring me there lately.

Just a month ago, cherry blossoms and their pink popcorn carpets stretched along its paths. Small groups of families stretched out on their groundsheets to have *hanami* celebrations – 'flower see' parties. They laughed as they drank green tea from flasks, *sake* from cups, *umeshu* with ice from glasses. I wanted to put you away. Join them and nibble from their trays of sushi and chicken *karaage*.

When Eben and I were small and dad was at work, mom used to take us to Magnolia Dal – a park near the city centre. For hours we'd play in the stream, roofed by weeping willows. Making river boats from leaves and ice cream sticks we picked up by the bin. Eben would walk up along the stream, put our boat in the water and shout GO! I'd wait further down to catch it. Or we'd both run to the bridge and watch it go under to the other side, away forever.

When we'd get back to mom, she'd put down her knitting and take out a storybook. My favourite was called *Die man in die swart pak*. It was the story of a man in a black suit who puts a green apple on a windowsill. A fireman in a red suit sees it and takes it. But first he has to help a cat out of a tree, so he forgets the apple on a bench. There it gets picked up by a clown, who juggles it along with two yellow balls. The clown puts it down on the grass to make twisty animal balloons for two children. One of the children picks up the darkening apple and throws it into a street canal. It bobs down

into the nearby river where the captain of a small chugboat chances upon it. He takes the apple home and plans to eat it. But on the way, he's interrupted by a friend, and puts it on a ridge of an open window. The man in the black suit returns to the same windowsill and finds his apple there, now a deep red. He looks at it in wonder, and takes a big bite.

The same way I bite into the apple of your knowledge, Michael. Oh, the delicious temptation of your flesh! I want to know you, I need to know you. Only your poison can give me sight.

The sky is dark. How long have I been here? I need to get back home now, I need you on me, under me, inside me.

I stride home with long steps as raindrops begin to fall, marking the start of monsoon. At home I run a bath and light a sandalwood candle. Find you on my bed. **My source of oxygen.** Place you on the edge of the small, deep bath where you watch me pull my damp dress over my head. Cast it into the corner, slip into the lukewarm water, move my legs up the wall. Lie back so my face becomes a mould.

Oh, Michael, if you could see me now, with my legs stretched out along the wall, you'd want to keep watching. The way Owen watched Sophie in the bath, mask fallen to the floor. Yes, you'd want to watch, admit it. You'd think to yourself, "God, look at her breasts! Not like my girlfriend's excuse for tits."

And oh, when you see me grip them, the bulge between your legs returns. And then as I reach down, slowly over my stomach, you think fuck fuck fuck, if only that were my hand!

The drone on the roof amplifies underwater, raindrops against my skull. Such palatable thrashing compels me to grope you where you lie on the edge of the bath. The rain comes through an open window, I lean my knees together, and finger your pages apart.

Faked orgasm. Saw through it. Touched yourself after: obvious. Aroused me more than anything. I could do to you. Not stop writing later.

I put your face down on the bath rim and caress the papaya skin between my belly and breasts. Squeeze your spine, straight and hard, as I play with a nipple-island in the water. As the rain comes harder, I pinch it with my fingertips. They move down over the rise of my stomach and tug at single strands. Put my feet between the taps and lift my pelvis out of the water. Then take your book, unlock my legs and press its flatness between. Hard, harder, hardest. Hard, harder, hard.

Oh, what are you doing to me, Michael? How can I get you inside? I press the book against the side of the bath until my fingers are stiff and red. The other hand stretches down again, now stroking the soft strands. You wish you could touch mine – so delicate compared to the forests that grow over your whore. Old man's beard when she gets out of the bath.

The scent from the sandalwood candle makes me feel lightheaded. But I tug at the strands again until the pulsing mound lures me over, and inside the dark cavern. Raise my pelvis higher to get more leverage. A probing forefinger enters the wet cave. The other hand pastes you hard into the bath wall, locked under my grip. Forefinger probes deeper into the vacuum left by the absence of your maleness. Then retreats for my whole hand to press into the ball of my clay. Hard harder hardest.

Two fingers reach inside, firm against the wall. Stonehard like you, who should be entering me right now. I want you to watch, see what your stonewords do to me. To the wound between my legs. Imagine yourself inside me with your fingers, your mouth, your thrust.

The tense muscles of my torso relax for a moment, then I raise it higher. Fingers over the sacred rise and round round faster faster fuck fuck fuuuuuuck! Left hand grips the cover of your book, slipping towards the water. I mangle it between my wet fingers as I raise myself higher and fuuuuuuck! Head twists back into the water, under, then up to breathe in out in as I lower myself slowly into the tepid fluidity. Push you over the edge of the bath where you plummet to the plastic floor.

You ripened, fell. Your undercurve: bait. Your crevice. My clay.

Motionless I lie in the stagnant water, save for my trembling legs. Lean them to one side against the wall, body up-downing with each breath. I am spent. Or am I? Five minutes to recover and reach for the mound again. I have to keep you engaged. Keep your eyes glued to my body. Just raw me. Just me, raw.

Circling circles, faster faster, tensing muscles, fuuuuuuck! I collapse into the bathwater, a comatose jellyfish. Candlewax rolls into the bath, congealing on the surface.

Pause with a woozy arm against the wall. ***Out of the bath, dripping***. Pick you up with a lazy hand, your cover castled with candlewax. Blotchy and dampened in between. When you dry my love, there'll be waves in you. Like the ones you've made in me.

Wash my hands in the basin, but your acrid ink remains.

Lie down on the bed, dig up a creased sheet. Slide beneath, turn to one side and straighten your mutilated cover. Fold your moistness between my thighs. Fall asleep, our bodies feeding off each other through the long night.

Replacement

Can't concentrate for a single minute on the group of six-year-olds. During a short break after the class, I read to still my disturbed mind.

You thought it would last. After fucking on first night. Over before it began. Stupid woman. Everything attractive now repulses.

I have to admit, these words are quite harsh. Still, I keep picturing their first night together. Then Michael and I together, making love in the library. I want more, more of the fantasy, so I go out for lunch to read on.

You spun dreamwebs. Safetypinned hopes to my body. Thought we'd move beyond skin and liquid defining us. After first night. Impulsive woman. Naivety: curse of Eve; Adam knows better. Access to my essence, you thought. Like all women getting on in life. Cling to dream while men run. In opposite direction. Cannot replace what first was. Cannot control. Cannot be. Me.

Instead of entering another daydream, I find myself questioning your attitude. Your assumptions, your refusal to take responsibility.

Entered room. Didn't knock. Refused to leave when I ignored you. Not see hand moving. Over paper. Creating. Sat down on desk. Barricaded stream. Pen dry. End.

Why did you even stay with her this long? So that you could write? Now it seems the very reason you've chosen for leaving her. I wish I could figure all of this out, but Calvin's calling me for karaoke. School's finished and all the teachers are going.

We get three big pizzas at an Italian place in town. Calvin comments on how Japanese women should all be wearing braces. Their teeth are horrendous, he says, incisors growing in all directions with hideous gaps between. I nibble at a slice of bland margherita and say nothing. Then I try to remember what Michael says about Sophie's teeth in the book. I can take you out any time to check. But I don't. Don't want to expose you to the eyes of others. Maybe there was a reason you never got the critical acclaim you thought you deserved.

By ten thirty we head for a twenty-four-hour entertainment centre with karaoke. We hang around outside till eleven so we can pay a flat rate for the night. At the *kombini*, Calvin buys three cans of *chuu hai*. It tastes like Fanta Grape vodka. We share it while watching teenage boys with plucked eyebrows and baseball caps walk past. Calvin is on his phone. Probably sms-ing his girlfriend.

On the fifth floor of the centre we do a few rounds of table tennis and play a drum arcade game or two. When everyone's had enough, we collect two microphones and tambourines at reception and find a karaoke room.

While one of the teachers sings 'Bohemian Rhapsody', Greg walks in. Greg. The last person I want to see tonight. Calvin's doing, of course. He waves to Greg to come join us. Greg glances at me as he crosses in front of the TV and I grip my elbow with my hand. We ignore each other until Milla's boyfriend arrives and some shifting takes place. Two beers later, Greg is next to me with his arm around my waist. He starts kissing me on the neck. I let him, for a second, because the stubble tickles and it feels good. But then I remember what the book says about perpetuating a false feeling, not being true to yourself. Something Owen did for a long time. I turn away from Greg and push him gently aside. Then I get up, hook my bag with two fingers and walk out of the room.

On the way to the exit, I pass the saloon doors of private internet booths. There's an empty one by the elevator. Why don't I just go in and check if there's a reply from Michael? I slip inside, install myself in a black leather chair and log on. Nothing. Place the book on my lap. Then face down next to the keyboard, and start typing in a Word document:

"You took me like a stone. Now I'm holding you. In my hands. You spill your self through my self and everything I was ends. Can't you see I am holding you I am supporting your weight in my dumb hands?"

Your crevice. My clay. Michael angel I pour sand into the cracks of your pages. I pour sand onto your pages and lick it off and spit it out and rub it through the letters. Rub

rub rub it into the wounds – gaping holes that give me life. You spill your self through my self your words flood me – Vloed! Vloed!

Hated the way you looked. *But I don't. Not any more. I stand naked in front of the mirror. Hold you open over my stomach, your pages swim into me melt into my skin. Paper and skin and only ink between. Let me take off your mask tear off your cover let me come inside you this time let me spill over you through you swim in and out of you. Your water has spilled through my cavern. Through the emptiness you filled with your maleness.*

Who writes for pleasure. Write for pain. *I burn you I burn your pages tear out your skin your insides. You refuse to give me what I give you.*

You singed but never charred. *I burn my hands on your cover I burn you we burn up together rubbing rubbing the heat is too hot the hot is too cold the sweat runs off your cover my skin is burnt and black and the ink won't come off I wash and wash but you remain. Stained to my hands, tattooed to my essence. Inseparable youme.*

Enveloped me in your flame. *My hands move over my body, yours. Over your body, mine. Your skin is my skin is paperskin is soft is hard is melted together by the flame this flame that I hold under this book imprinted to my soul this flame that threatens to kill us to bring me to life.*

Mid-water suspension. *You throw salt in my eyes, but I bite back hard. I gnaw at your spine leave teethmarks in your sharkskin, hard hard I bite you back you bastard why can you not love me. Why can I not be in you.*

Wordstain no more. *I tear out a page two pages crumple them up put them in my mouth and chew chew chew. My mouth is black with ink. Black stained lips. Go and wash my mouth with soap but it won't. It won't come out. Black like dead skin.*

Fruit in my hands. *You in the staffroom. I stand in front of the mirror naked you fall to the tiles I lie on top of you you suffocate under me as I move over you over the floor the cold floor between the kitchen and the bathroom the floor moves I rub harder over you more furiously more desperately make it come make me come now give me.*

Wound between your legs became my wings. *Fucking hell why must I wait? Move harder against your cold skin I want to feel I want you wet I want you wrecked. Your pages, naked while I moan. Your pages yellow as you get old and I am revived. I am alived.*

Rest at last. *You on the floor, me on the bed. I have gotten all I wanted from you. I have given it to myself. I was the one who loved me. You fucking bastard, you can never love me your words can never be what mine are. I destroy your pages they don't deserve my time my time is mine.*

I have torn from your centre cracked open your falsities your lies, replaced them with my own honesty, my own truth. Fuck you Michael. You no longer deserve. Let summer take you over, let the mould take you over so that life becomes rot and rot becomes black and black becomes dust and dust oh glorious dust you no longer deserve me."

My fingers cramp like a crow's claws from typing so fast. I rest my hands on my lap, one claw in the other. Pick up the book from where it's fallen to the floor. Print the document in landscape format so it looks like the pages of a novel.

There's a slight breeze as I walk home. I taste sweet salt on the air in the dark night. A taxi drives past, slows down, continues.

When I get home, I take a ruler and some glue out of my drawer and sit down on my bed. Open to chapter ten, where Michael describes how he seduces Sophie on the first night. Wedge the ruler into the inner spine and tear a page out to the right of the text, leaving a strip of paper the width of the ruler. Tear out all pages of the chapter in this way. Fold my own printed pages in half and open them up again. Apply glue along both vertical sides and stick each side to the paperhinge. This is enough, Michael. Your words will no longer affect me. It is time to replace you with me.

I put the book on the makeshift table. As the first light comes through the thin white curtains, I drift into a slumber.

Burial

Silence now. Distractionless. No papaya, wet sand of belly. Breaking off your branches: jouissance. Roots dug out of skin. Free: softness no more. Now only hardness of pen on paper. Cannot improve one word. Devotion to art: freedom. Your flame doused. My stone remains me. Soot coat peeled off. I am writer. Your absence: all you are good for.

Why did I love this passage so much? Why did I keep wanting to read about your honesty, expressing the need to be alone? To write, to create, alone. Your inability to turn away in silence as most men do, when they have to speak the truth. But you can't even write a single complete sentence! You're not a complete person, Michael!

Yuzawa-san is looking through the porthole window. The door handle lowers. I grab the book so I can put it under the table. But why must I keep hiding it? I'm going to leave it there, in full view of Yuzawa-san. I don't care what he sees: the coffee-stained cover with the sticky-taped corner, the fatty wax residue, the name Beth Franklin. The wavy pages containing your entrails: illustrated, edited, replaced. I no longer have anything to hide. From anybody.

"Misu Sutoreidomu, ima chotto ii desuka?"

He enters the room, doesn't wait to hear whether I have a moment or not. He sees the book, looks confused, but then says, "Ryo mother come to St George last week. Ryo mother very angry because Beth-sensei too much shouting at son. Scared of come to class."

His big hands are on the table. Porksausage fingers pushing into my neck. The air in the room is dry, all moisture sucked up by the dehumidifier. The damp I so hated outside I crave for now.

"Hontoo ni gomen nasai, Yuzawa-san. I am very sorry. I will be more gentle with the children."

I want to add what a terror Ryo is in class, how he disrupts each lesson by speaking Japanese, but I keep quiet.

“Kore de owari desu,” he says, pushing himself away from the table with his fat fingers. *Owari desu:* I’m finished. He glances at the book again, then looks me in the eye as he leans a last moment over his hands. His meatbreath reaches my nostrils.

“Yuzawa-san ...” I utter, my heart beating fast. *“The night you gave me a lift home....”*

His eyes scan over my skin, wanting to enter, wanting to swallow me as I had to swallow him.

“Hai,” he says, and winks.

“Yuzawa-san dame.”

I manage to force out the only word I know that means ‘bad’. I expect him to laugh, but all expression drains from his face. He leaves the room without looking back.

As I walk home later, I welcome the muggy air for the first time. My lungs feel bigger, freely taking in oxygen and expelling it into the dank evening warmth. On the opposite side of the road stands a three-story internet café called ‘Popeye’. I walk past it, but something pulls me back and across the street and into the red-mouthed doorway.

I don’t bother to check my mail like before. There’s no point. I open a new Word document and start typing. The letters come out in Japanese characters so I get the assistant to change the setting. Finally, I can talk back:

Dear Michael.

I have been listening to your condemnation for the last 152 pages. I have swallowed it, the way I used to swallow you to please you. Tolerated being on my knees because the taste of your fearless confrontations satisfied my hunger. I was consumed by your boldness, your male pride, rising above and into meagre and meek me. Seduced by your erotic images, honouring my body which I could never accept in its form.

But there was always something lurking beneath. Your sadistic pleasure in finding fault, in putting all women into one pen, compartmentalising us so you could cope with a multifaceted world.

Now it is enough. I can no longer be defined by your words. If I continue to accept your glib expressions, to love them the way I have blindly loved, my flame will be extinguished.

I hereby reject your definition of me. I refuse to be slave to your genius, to the words that have seeped into me like a slow poison. I now see that you are not what you seem, and that I am more than I was. The words in my mouth come out like grey sludge, failing every time to be what I mean. I can work on paper, but am forever caught in the net of language. My word order is off beam, my vocabulary inappropriate. English grammar is a stone on my eager tongue.

But now I say it to you in all that I can offer: simple words.

I reject your definition of me.

I reject your me.

Goodbye Michael.

Sophie

I sit back and reread the letter. I like Sophie's simple, straightforward style. Compared to Michael's inability simply to flow. No wonder his book never sold. After the assistant helps me to print the letter, I skip steps down to the street. When I get back home, I stick the letter into your back inside cover with cut-up strips of masking tape. The last word is Sophie's. The last word is mine. I push you under my bed and slide under the sheet.

But I can't sleep. I listen to the mufflerless exhaustpipes of *boosoozoku* streetgangs as their motorbikes howl through the streets. When I look at my phone and see it's three o' clock, I get up and slip into a skirt and tank top. Put my hand under the bed, feel for

you in the dark. You are there, among the dust and scraps of paper that have collected since I arrived. My fingers read you like an injured limb, tattooed plaster. I draw you out from the debris, dust you off and place you against my heart.

I descend the steps of my apartment barefoot. A taxi passes below. I turn into the main road to the centre of town and walk past the grey buildings of the department store, the post office, the station. You lie in my hand, oblivious. The air is even lighter than last night when I inhaled the first hint of autumn.

It's still dark when I arrive at the beach. The spotlights from the promenade don't reach the quiet water, where I sit down with you pinched between my knees. The streaks of luminous algae shoulder themselves onto the sand with every waveroll; the dark sea breathes. I become the vacuum, the greatness and nothingness of the ocean.

The sky turns from blueblack to eggplant. At the sign of first light, I put you onto the damp sand and peel off my clothes. Walk with you, step by careful step, to the edge of the sea. The icy water touches my toes, goosebumps spread over my skin. As I edge closer to the vacuum, I think of Virginia Woolf. But I have no pockets, only a stone: you. I think of Ingrid Jonker. But the sea is placid, the only danger is this stone I carry: you.

The saltwater curls around my ankles, my knees. Slowly, slowly. Legs numb as it comes up my thighs. Still I move further into the sea, holding you above the liquid black velvet. When the water swells around my belly, I stay still. Breathe in. Breathe out. Close my eyes. Open. Not deep enough. Not deep enough.

You hover above my head, silent in my outstretched arms. When the water reaches my shoulders, I am ready. Close my eyes and gather all strength from the core of my body to submerge you. I push you down. Under the water. But you pull yourself back up to the surface, gasping. I thrust you down again, keep you there until you no longer resist, but rest in my hands, defeated.

My skin reddens in the cold water, but I will not get out. I plunge down head first. The salt stings but I refuse to close my eyes. Take you between my teeth and swim to the

bottom, your pages wave seaweedlike in front of me. Your ink runs out into the vacuum of the sea. You become lighter between my teeth as your leaves detach from your body. Blindly I dig into the shifting sand, into the pointlessness of creating a hollow there. When I can hold my breath no longer, I come back to the surface.

I breathe in and hold together the soggy remains I've reduced you to. Set your spongy spine between my teeth, plunge in once again, dig deeper. The sand shifts and shifts, but I manage to create a shallow hole in the ocean floor. Push you into the sludge, deep inside, deeper, deepest, until you are no longer there.

I come up and secure my footing between heavy breaths. When I find a place to stand, my torso relaxes and warm liquid surrounds my thighs. I don't move away. Only when the shivering becomes unbearable do I turn around and wade out of the unbreathing sea.

The lights on the promenade are still on as I head back into the city. Black suits fill the streets, cars drive by, schoolchildren laugh at my bare feet. At home, I take a blanket from the cupboard, mouldy from disuse. Like the t-shirt at the bottom of the pile. I remember his name now – something like Nils or Neels. I nestle inside the blanket, breathe it in, and finally fall asleep.

Tsunami

The school phones me to ask why I'm not there today. I tell them I have a fever. A fever is very serious in Japan and you can get away with taking the day off. But it's more than a fever. Everything I am is soaked in icy water, drowned in hotcoldhot.

Enveloped me in your flame.

I dream I'm writing a sentence in English on the whiteboard. A child – Aoi – comes up to the board and copies it out. I tell her, 'No.' I rub out her flawlessly printed letters and say, 'Your lines are too straight. Write it ugly, write skew.' I push the red marker into her little hand. She gazes up at me with wide eyes, she's about to cry. ***Erased good with bad.***

Images on the analogue TV churn through my mind. I don't know where in Japan it's happened, but it's happened, and it cannot unhappen. A wave has come – a ten metre-high wave from the belly of the sea, the same sea in which I buried you. ***Your crevice. My clay.***

On the land there are cars. Rows of them lined up in orderly fashion. And rice paddies. Squares of them with greenhouses and bridges and lines and lines and lines. Perfect and orderly until the wave vomits itself onto the land and rolls over the rice paddies and around the greenhouses and under the bridges. Roads buckle, highways collapse. ***Everything attractive now repulses.***

The wave persists and picks up cars and houses and makes of them toys. Toy cars and dolls' houses. People look out their windows and watch the cementwave and when it picks them up and takes them along, it makes of them dolls too.

The lines of the cars and rice paddies are meant to be straight. But the sludge comes and smudges them out: twisting, distorting, interrering. ***Chaos and sweet rotting leaves.***

I go back to sleep after reading the images repeated on TV. This time I'm in my standard five prefab classroom. In front of the blackboard to teach Japanese kids table, cupboard, chair. The sludge surrounds the prefab, uproots it and raises it above

the ground so that it becomes a floating boat. The children scream and huddle into a corner and I shout, 'No! Spread out! Spread out!' But they don't understand my English and cluster deeper into the corner as if they're going to climb up the wall. And the classroom boat tips to the side and I run to the other corner to balance them out but I carry no weight, I carry no weight. ***Your lack of coherent narrative.***

I have a fever. To have a fever in Japan is a serious thing. I sleep all day and wake up only to switch on the TV. Images of wooden houses mashed into each other, reduced to a mess of matchsticks. Scrapheap towns with power lines twisting through the debris like liquorice strips. A boat on a house. A plane on a shop. People in round white hardhats with chainsaws and picks clearing the jumble of timber and plastic. Ambulances waiting with body bags, search parties ready to dig.

Michael. Where are you in all this? Among the ten thousand, the number that keeps showing up on TV? Yes, you're among them, buried under the rubble, only your dead hand jutting out of the mud. ***Pen dry. End.***

The humidity is insupportable. Autumn's generous hint has evaporated. Why then do I feel so cold? This unbearable hot cold hot cold hot inside outside inside dry throat moist air who what why when how?

The book. The burial. You are gone, you are gone! ***My stone remains me.***

Swim against with against with against the tide. The cement tide that surrounds me. How will I get out of this? What about all the books? The sludge will devour the books beneath. Write its remains into them, drench and destroy their pages. Volunteers in white helmets and doctors' masks will have no chance to find them. What will the children read? What will I read, where will I write? ***Need map, route.***

Milla wants to come over and visit but I say no. I have a fever and I don't want her to come. I'm in Japan. Where am I? I'm swimming through pulverised mud looking for land, for solid land and there is none because the tsunami is here and it's taken everything with it. Dolls' houses and toy cars. Aeroplanes and boats. No escape. No chance to hide the books in sludgeproof tupperware. ***Your flame doused.***

I sleep through hours and hours of cement sludge. I don't want to wake because it's creeping up to my chin and into my mouth and I'm starting to swallow it up. What goes in must come out, be vomited out, like language.

The smell of Ouma's cupboard, the t-shirt scent. I don't want to be here. It is time.

Milla says a group of people from her church are going north during *Obon* to volunteer their services. She's taking the *shinkansen* up with her boyfriend. I can join them when I feel better.

Japanese people are standing in orderly queues inside community centres and schools. The walls look like plasters. Plaster-coloured walls. The people stand with arms open to receive noodles, rice crackers, water. They bow to say thank you, then they bow again. How are they going to bath tonight? To wash the mud off their bodies?

I no longer hold you. You are no longer here to hold. Fires flare up in the scrapheap towns. Blotches eat at the rubble.

Milla texts running commentary of the situation up North. Ten thousand missing, two thousand injured. One thousand dead, too many displaced. She tells me about the queues. The crematoriums that are full. How they're running out of body bags.

"When are you coming?" she asks.

I wake up at ten o' clock on a Tuesday. Don't know how many workdays I've missed or if it's still the holidays. A surge within pulls me out of bed and I get up to phone the school.

"I'm not coming back," I tell the receptionist. "I'm leaving Japan."

"You can't leave now," she replies. "Japan needs you. We must all stand together and help in any way we can. Milla has gone to volunteer. What are you doing? You must stay to help."

I say nothing. She speaks Japanese to somebody in the background. It's Yuzawa-san. He takes the phone and says I must come back to work. Otherwise the school will

deduct fifty thousand yen from my salary for not finishing the contract. I tell him I'm leaving, I'm going back home. I'll come to the school on Saturday to collect my things.

Narita Airport is abuzz with people. Japanese women, their foreign partners and *haafu* babies in prams. Getting out as quick as they can. Back to the States, to France. There's a threat of nuclear disaster, panicked faces pass by. They mean nothing to me. Nothing at all. I'm going back home.

Tuis

“*Liefjie!*” calls mom. We embrace – an island in a river of people at OR Tambo’s arrival hall. Passengers push past, the wheels of their trolleys knock into my heels. The tears that have been building up in the swell of my throat flow freely over my cheeks.

Cannot replace what first was.

“*EK’s bly jy’s tuis,*” says mom when I let go.

There’s an awkward moment when she tries to get between me and the trolley. I step back into the space left by the thinning river of people. ***Chaos inside. Foliage mind.***

My throat is still *kriebelrig* from the aircon on the plane. On the way home, we stop at Menlyn Shopping Mall to get lozenges and do some *inkopies*. Outside Woolworths, I stare at the shoppers going about their day-to-day business. I’m the odd one out – the one who notices the Pretoria *poppies* with highlights in their hair, and men with two-tone shirts. Who sees, for the first time, the space between people.

In the living room at home I sit next to the beige telephone. Carl must be at work. A glass coffee table now stands where mom stepped on my notes during the interview. I can hear her in the kitchen, boiling water, unpacking the dishwasher. Just a few days ago, I was swimming in an ocean of sludge. Now I’m here, and still alone. ***Breaking off your branches.***

Mom comes out of the kitchen, holding the door open with one leg and balancing a tray on her palm. The aroma of rooibos penetrates the stale living room air. Mom gives me the same mug I placed on the book before I left. The coffee stain, now dissolved with the book in the belly of the sea. Gone. Why do I feel so lost? I’m home, but I’m still stained.

Mom says something about the tsunami, and a fire at a nuclear reactor that she saw on Sky News. I reach for a muffin and see elderly Japanese people in queues, waiting for *miso* soup and rice. Outside a turtledove coos. Distant traffic purrs. The sounds of ordinariness, the Pretoria I always wanted to switch off.

“Ma, I’m really tired. I think I’m going to have a *slapie*,” I say a bit later, picking the muffin crumbs off my jeans.

“*Natuurlik, liefie*,” she says and leads me to the bedroom.

The Top Gun poster is still on the wall, but the duvet cover has been replaced with a plain pink one and there’s a clutch of violets on the windowsill. Mom offers to bring me a hot water bottle.

“Before I forget,” she adds, “The library’s been phoning about a book you borrowed. Is that what that letter I forwarded you was about?”

My fingers tremble around my suitcase padlock. ***Cannot control.*** What was the combination? 022 or 138? Two of my favourite pages. Pages that, like part of me, are now drowned and buried. I can’t retrieve them anymore, from my memory, from the sea.

The grass lawn of Magnolia Dal is still a winter yellow. But the flagged willows are a verdant green as they sweep towards the stream. On the way here the purple-blue of an early jacaranda made something jolt in my chest. An unexpected thrill the Japanese must also feel, when they see cherry blossoms after an absence from Japan.

Inside the restaurant, I find a table by the window. I’m glad I’ve chosen this place. Near trees, near water. Outside, a boy pops up at the top of a slide. Hugs his knees to his chest before looking down.

“Bethie!” calls a familiar voice.

I embrace Naomi for a long time before she sits down. She’s wearing a black polo-neck and brown skirt – not as glamorous as before. Not compared to what I’ve seen in Japan anyway. Japanese women, like Michael’s lover. His hand on her petite hips, walking out of the pub. Out of my life. ***Soot coat peeled off.***

“Nice place, Bethie. I’ve never actually been here before,” Naomi says, hanging her bag over a chair.

She launches into a monologue about a wedding on a game farm, and the bride’s Barbie-style meringue. Then she tells me every detail about Jon’s proposal. She’s talking and talking but all I can see is the book swirling around in the saltwater. The pages that can no longer be read because they swim into each other and if you try to read them, you’ll hurt your eyes. There’s a lump in my throat the size of a frog and I think about going back to Japan so I can just save a bit of the book, just one word. But it’s too late. I must move on.

“Okay,” says Naomi, touching my arm. “Now you tell me about Japan. Did you meet any boys in the end?”

Three kids climb onto the swings outside.

“Well, there was one guy. Australian. He was nothing special though.”

“Ooh, I had a few pieces of Aussie beef when I worked in the UK. Good times, man,” she says in a mock Australian accent.

“Not for me. I don’t know what I was doing with that guy. I mean, we slept together twice and I really didn’t feel anything for him, I just sort of let it happen. Still trying to figure out what I wanted to get out of it. Attention, I guess.”

Is that what I got out of it? Is that why I let it go so far? I pick up a sugar sachet and twist it forward and backward. But Naomi’s already onto the next question: emo Japanese boys in their slim-fit jeans and studded belts.

“No, nothing on that front,” I laugh, but stop when I think of the black Toyota. “No, nothing except, well”

“What? What happened?” she asks, eyes wide.

I tell her about Yuzawa-san and the lift home and not stopping him from taking advantage. Naomi says something in reply. Her voice rises, falls, but I don’t hear the

words. I'm in the milky *onsen*. The woman on the bus is walking towards me holding a white towel. I put the book in its ziplock bag under my bum in the water. It wants to come up but I refuse to move. The woman looks past me, as if there's someone behind. My face burns from the heat, but I stay put – I won't let it out until the woman gets up and turns to the steps.

"Bethie? Are you listening to me?" asks Naomi, touching my shoulder.

"Yes, sorry Naoms, I'm not all there, you know."

"I understand, totally. I was just wondering why you let something like that happen?" she says.

"Something like what?" I ask.

"The blowjob. With that man. It just sounds really unlike you."

"I don't know," I reply, rubbing over a stain on the tablecloth.

"I guess I've always been submissive to older men. Never questioned them, you know. Plus, I was new to Japan; I must have thought that's how things work there. And I was just too scared to say no ... it just didn't occur to me." **Cannot be. Me.**

Outside, two swings slice the air. We're both quiet for a while.

"Hey, Bethie, there's a braai on this weekend. Don't you wanna come?" asks Naomi with a new surge of enthusiasm.

I tell her I'm not keen on socialising yet. **Mid-water suspension.**

"Oh, come on," she says, punching my arm affectionately. "You need to get out there again. It's at Neels' house. Remember, the guy who was at News Café before you went to Japan."

"The guy with the chair?"

"What do you mean, 'the guy with the chair'?"

“I mean ... ja, I remember him. The Afrikaans guy.”

“Yes! Please come. It’ll be good for you.”

“Okay, fine, I’ll come.”

When did I last go to a braai? It’s going to feel weird being surrounded by South Africans, actually understanding what they’re talking about. But maybe it’ll help me switch off.

Naomi calls the waiter for the bill, and asks about my mom and Carl. Whether they’ve apologised yet.

“Well, at the beginning it was kind of awkward,” I say. “I mean, I was happy to see her at the airport when I first arrived. But we didn’t really talk about it or anything. Then, the other night, we were in the kitchen having supper, and Carl asked me what I was planning to do workwise, and I told him I had no idea yet. Then he started talking in this African accent and made a joke about me going homeless. I was quite upset because obviously it’s been bugging me, but I kept my cool and told him that I needed some time to adjust. And then I told him straight that I didn’t appreciate the joke, especially after the whole moving debacle. That silenced him. Then mom suddenly blurted out that she’d been feeling terrible about the whole thing and couldn’t get herself to say sorry, even in her emails. I told her I shouldn’t have ignored her for so long either. And then Carl suddenly apologised for his joke.”

Naomi sneezes, digs in her bag for a tissue, and mumbles a nasal ‘Excuse me’. That’s when it hits me. Carl actually apologised. So unlike him, or the him I thought he was. Naomi gestures that I carry on while she stuffs the tissue into her bag, and presents a perfectly clean face.

“Ja, so I realised how stupid I’d been for not confronting them about how I’d felt earlier. But I guess I just wasn’t ready at the time.”

“Well, I’m glad the air’s cleared,” says Naomi, breezily.

She pays the bill and as she gets up, she tells me about something she saw at the library. A sign asking for a volunteer to read to the kids in the afternoons.

I stay in the restaurant for another hour. It's warmed up a little, so I sit on the outside *stoep* overlooking the weeping willows and the stream. This place always reminds me of Eben. I should get in touch with him, give him a call. But first, I need to go the library. Reopen Ouma's cupboard, let the books inside breathe fresh air again. That's what I must do.

Sunflower

I recognise her through the library window. Ms Anderson, behind the loans desk, focussing on a computer screen. She's twisting the same pearl stud between her forefinger and thumb. The tippex I bought at the *kombini*. Her library stamps, erased. Maybe I should come back another day. No, it's time to face her.

As soon as I enter, she rushes towards me and puts her hands over the counter.

"Beth Strydom!" she breathes, right into my face. "Where is it? Where is my book?"

"Ms Anderson, I –"

"Hand it over. Now! Lucky I haven't tracked you down yet."

"Ms Anderson, I'm really sorry, but I don't have the book any more. It's gone."

"Don't think you're getting away with this, Miss Strydom. I have the amount of the fine right here," she says and turns to the computer screen. "Wait a minute," she continues, turning back to me. "What do you mean it's gone? What have you done with it?"

"I can't tell you. It's a long story. But I have the money to replace it. And to pay the fine."

"What do you mean you can't tell me? You were never meant to read that book. No one was. It was destined to me mine." ***Like all women getting on in life. Clinging.*** "Not that someone like you would understand."

"I *do* understand. I'm sorry I can't tell you what happened. Except to say the book got ... irreparably wet."

"Wet? What are you talking about?"

"Look, Ms Anderson, I know that it meant a lot to you. But please let me just pay the replacement cost."

She shakes her head, puts a fist to her mouth, then fans it into the air.

“The replacement cost? First of all, no amount of money will replace the soul of *Brýnstone*. Which, by the way, is out of print. And secondly, it’s your responsibility to replace the book, not ours. And for your information, I haven’t been able to trace a copy since you ran off with mine.”

“Oh, okay, so I have to replace it myself then.”

The book when I buried it: mangled and retaped and unrecognisable even before it came to the water. Ms Anderson watches me with such contempt, it’s hard to stay where I am. But I have to, I have to ask about Naomi’s suggestion.

“Ms Anderson, do you know anything about volunteer reading here at the library? Apparently there was a poster up.”

She pulls her chin in and narrows her eyes on mine.

“What makes you think that you, a blatant book defacer, are in *any* position to apply for a job in the library?”

A book defacer. I smile.

“Look, all I want is some information. Whether I get it from you or not is irrelevant,” I reply, somewhat surprised at my bold reaction.

“Well, you won’t get it from me, that’s certain.”

She crosses her arms, reaches up to her ear and twists the pearl stud.

The volunteer thing can wait. Sitting in my car afterwards, I wonder why I didn’t just tell her why I had to do what I did. She’d understand how a book – especially *that* one – can hold you in its grip. How it can turn you into a hidden part of yourself.

Driving up Rigel Avenue in Waterkloof reminds me of the map. The one I drew from my *apaato* to Mizushima International University. Was that my first picture in pen?

I wonder what this braai will be like, and if I'll want to leave early. The white walls remind me of our Arcadia house, except that they're bare of creepers, and twice as high. At least Naomi's going to be here. And the Afrikaans guy, Neels.

His voice comes like sweet honeybush through the speaker. The dotted part of the surface tickles under my fingers as I get closer to say my name. I hear it repeated back to me: Bef. This time I feel no need to correct. I wait as the sound of his footsteps gets louder behind the wall. Even before the gate clicks open, I surrender to the scent-combination of old t-shirt and fresh firesmoke. Neels. He's not as short as I remember, and the light in his eyes is more playful. He reaches out to shake my hand. For a moment I'm on Mizushima beach, seeing him push the chair back with both hands. My eyes make their way down to his bare feet. I'm walking out of the sea again.

"Thank you for inviting me to the braai," I say, slowly returning to his ever-steady gaze, feeling a slight pulse in my throat. Like when I saw Michael in the staffroom, but different, rooted not in a book, not in my mind, but in him, his presence, real.

"I'm glad you could come," he replies. "It's been a long wait."

I'm not sure how to react to his confirmation, so I ask about the house. We climb up a steep garden path through coiled branches, a trace of jasmine on the air. I want to say something about the red Chinese lamps lighting the way, how they remind me of the *yakitori* shops in Mizushima. How I'd imagine entering one, ordering a plate of *sosaties* and reading the book amid the beer-induced banter of the *sarariiman*. The book. But there is no book. I will never see it again, ever. Neels' soothing voice beckons me back to here, the path, the house.

"I wouldn't want to live in such a big house myself. But you can't say no to a house-sitting gig, *nè*?"

Nè. The two-letter word used in Afrikaans and Japanese, in almost exactly the same way. A bizarre connection between my two worlds.

We enter through the kitchen. Strands of music and laughter drift through the dining room, where a single flower stands on the table. *Himawari* – one of the few Japanese nouns I’ve made a point of remembering. I can never recall the literal translation, though. Something to do with ‘look toward’ and ‘sun.’

“*Rooi of wit?*” asks Neels, his fingers wrapped around the stem of a wine glass. “Or something else to drink?”

“No, white is perfect,” I say.

No waiting for him to choose for me. No hesitation to say what I want. As he uncorks a bottle of sauvignon blanc, I notice his fingernails, cut right to the cusp. Michael’s fingers – what did they look like, enfolding the book in the staffroom? The image cemented in my mind for so many months is suddenly out of reach. ***Breaking off your branches.***

I follow Neels outside to a group of people gathered by the pool. They dip their hands in the water and gaze at the city landmarks below. Neels leads me to another group around a stone-studded table. I don’t really feel like talking to them. But my host is called away by a guy in a rugby top who says he’s looking for firefighters.

“Don’t go anywhere,” says Neels, lightly touching my arm. “I want to hear all about Japan.”

I listen to his friends talk. The stones inlaid in the table are rough under my fingers. I imagine them as zen garden rocks in a sea of cement. Neels drifts in and out of the house, patting new arrivals on the back, bringing out trays of food. I get an sms from Naomi saying that she and Jon can’t make it – they’re stuck at a work function in Joburg. I should be upset, but I’m not. I’m quite enjoying being here, listening, just being.

The air is filled with ash and a spicy boerewors aroma. Francois, a guy in a rugby shirt, sits down next to me. He tells the group about his plans to move to Australia, and how easy life is there. Before long, dirty paper plates with bones and salad bits pile up on the table. The plate dished up for Neels lies near me, untouched. I stare at the chops

and boerewors. I'm back in a classroom, the one with the porthole window. Naked from the waist down, sitting on the desk with my legs dangling over the edge. Yuzawa-san is nibbling at my breasts and licking over my belly. He lowers me down onto the desk, brings my legs up and puts his head in between. I worry about the receptionist who might look through the window. But it feels so good, I forget about her. Yuzawa-san is deft with his tongue. He knows what he's doing.

I can't believe I've just had a fantasy about him. I shake it off, scoop up the plate pile and head for the kitchen.

Neels is at the basin with his hands in yellow gloves, deep in soapy water. Like milky *onsen* water – warm and cleansing.

"Bef ... sorry," he says, beckoning me closer with his eyes. "I really wanted to sit down and hear about your experiences. But it's just been *mal*, you know."

He presses a green sponge into the hollow of a glass and carefully extracts it again. Rinses the glass under the tap, places it on the drying rack, gently picks up another. It reminds me of how my Ouma used to do it. Thoroughly, with care. I ask him about the sunflower on the dining room table.

"Oh, I bought it today. I just thought it would be *gesellig*, you know. You can *gooi* those plates in there, by the way," he says, pointing his chin towards a bin in the corner.

I taste the word '*gesellig*' in my mouth. Cosy? Convivial? No, there's no English equivalent. None that invokes the rough-smoothness of the word anyway. *Gesellig*. *Gesellig*.

"I'm going home soon," I say, looking for something to dry my hands on.

He pulls a dishcloth off a hook on the wall, hands it to me and says, "I'd like to see you again."

I mumble something about Naomi and a get-together, but I can't meet his gaze. He puts the soapy glass down, takes off his gloves and lays them over the sink.

“*Nee*,” he says, willing me to look up. “I mean I’d like to see you *alone*.”

My chest tightens in anticipation.

“I’d like that,” I manage to say, taking one hand with the other.

“When are you free?” he asks. “I’ll pick you up. *Ons kan koffie doen. Of ete?*”

“Yes, that’d be great.”

My cheeks glow red like after an *onsen*. It feels good.

“*Gaaf*. How about next week Friday. Say around seven? Oh, but I need your number first.”

He gives a mischievous chuckle as he fishes his phone out of his pocket. With a raised eyebrow, he enters the number as if it’s a secret code. Then he follows me down the lamp-lit path.

“It was good to see you again, Bef,” he says before opening the gate.

I step away from him, suddenly afraid he’ll kiss me. He looks taken aback, so I touch his arm and tell him to go finish his food. But then he steps towards me and opens his arms. His body is flat against mine, a solid tree trunk. Our heads are close together, a stray curl tickles my ear. The t-shirt, the firesmoke. I breathe in deeply and stand immobile until reason tells me to detach.

“*Sien jou Vrydag*,” he says as I walk towards the car.

I wave silently, get in, and drive away with the window open.

Cavern

Rolling mascara over my lashes, I think of the green dress I wore the night I went to look for Michael. Where did I put it? Did I even bring it back to South Africa?

Tonight I'm wearing a brown dress with a copper belt – something more earthy. As for make-up, I've had none since the last day I taught English. Dusting blusher over my cheeks now feels good, as if it's a special treat. My body throbs with expectation, enticed by the thought of Neels' gaze carrying itself into me the way it did at the braai.

The beep of an sms. Him! 'See you in thirty,' it says, 'Ocean Basket in Menlyn okay?' He's taken the time to write out every word – no abbreviations, no numbers. But I'm a little disappointed that he's chosen the restaurant already, and one in a shopping centre – not my idea of a date. Also, Japan's turned me into a complete sushi snob so I'm not sure if I can lower my standards! There's no time to reply though, mom calls me to take some empty glass bottles outside.

"Jy lyk mooi, liefjie," she says when I walk into the kitchen.

"Dankie, Mamma," I reply.

She takes my hand and squeezes it gently, then points to the crate on the floor.

Just before seven, my phone rings. It's Neels. Something's wrong. He's decided he's not interested any more. He's sensed my dark side. It's clammy under my arms.

"Hi Bef," he says, his voice steady. "I'm really sorry, but I'm going to be late tonight. You remember Francois from the braai? Well, he's gone and broken his collar bone in rugby practice. I have to take him to hospital. I don't know how long I'll be. *Ek's jammer* – I'll call the minute I'm on my way to your house."

I flop down on the couch in the living room. Think about watching TV, decide against it. Scan Carl's meagre book collection, but it's all *skop, skiet en donder*. Come to think of it, I haven't read anything since I've been back.

The cover of the book. Michael to Beth Franklin. What was it about him? I only saw him twice. I guess it started with his provocative writing. And then in real life, not an ounce of pretence. Whereas I've always hidden behind masks. Yet he didn't care a jot for me. But he did teach me to not be afraid of being myself. Whether I'll always put it into practice is a different question though.

The front door opens and Carl enters in his overalls. He greets me and is about to go into the kitchen when he pauses. He turns back, puts down his toolbox, and asks why I'm not on the date. When I tell him, he sits down on the couch and starts stroking his moustache.

"I'm not one to give any advice about anything, but I get the idea you're quite sold on this guy. From what your mom tells me anyway. All I can say is that you should probably not be so hard on him. Give him a chance. Didn't you say he was helping someone out?"

"Ja, he was. I know. It's actually a good thing."

"Ja."

"You're right, Carl. And it's not like he's cancelled the date or anything."

"Exactly."

He puts his hands on his knees to get up, then pats me twice on the back. He's not such a bad guy after all. Why was I so antagonistic towards him?

"Oh, Carl," I say, before he goes into the kitchen.

"Ja?" he asks.

"I never told you this, but when I was small, my dad had a friend named Karl. I couldn't understand why anyone would want to call their child 'Naked'."

He looks confused for a moment, then chuckles and says, "Oh, *kaal*, as in 'naked' in Afrikaans?"

“That’s the one,” I say, grinning.

A bit later I go to the bedroom. Sit on the bed and read the application form for the position at the library. It’s a new project where volunteers read South African literature with children, helping them with vocabulary and pronunciation. Libraries are unable to pay initially, but once they have the Department of Arts, Sports and Culture on board, reimbursement is likely. For this reason, it says, applicants have to be interviewed.

Preferably by a sane librarian.

When Neels arrives an hour later, my body first resists his embrace, then I relax into him.

“*Ek’s jammer, Bef,*” he says. “And Francois says sorry too. He says he was just jealous of our date. *Is jy okay?*”

“Ja, I’m fine. I did feel a bit sorry for myself earlier, but I’m okay now.” ***Trick is to lower expectations to where already met.***

Halfway down Lynnwood Road, I realise we’re going in the opposite direction of Menlyn.

“Hey, what happened to Ocean Basket?” I ask.

“Well, I did want to go there, but Francois said I should try this restaurant called ‘La Stalla’. It was closed for years but apparently it’s reopened.”

“Oh my gosh, I remember it! We used to go there when my dad was still around.”

The bamboo forest outside the entrance, the wind singing through the stalks and drawing on the fishpond. Going inside was like entering a candle-lit cave. Once we’d ordered our food, mom and dad would drink their wine, and Eben and I would go outside and play hide and seek.

“What happened with your dad?” asks Neels.

“Oh, he had an affair with a friend of my mom’s. And eventually he moved out and got remarried. They live in Hermanus now.”

“Do you have much contact with him?”

“Since I left for Japan I haven’t had much contact with anyone, to be honest. Not even my brother in Canada. But ja, I should call my dad some time. Find out how he’s doing. I’ve never had a very good relationship with him and I’ve got a strong suspicion it’s had a negative effect on the way I see men. How about your parents? Still together?”

“That’s an interesting point,” he says, “I’d like to hear your view on men. But all in good time. Yes, my parents have been together for ages. Fortieth anniversary coming up soon, I think. They’ve had some tough times, but somehow they’ve managed to stick it out. Now, tell me about Japan – we need to make up for the braai. What do you miss most?”

It’s too early to tell him about the book, which is the first thing that comes to mind, of course. Instead, I tell him about *onsen*, how you go in naked and how it feels like re-entering the womb.

“Sounds amazing,” he says.

“It is. You should try it one day.”

“Maybe we can go together,” he says, then taps his forehead. “I mean ... what I mean is we can go together to Japan, not to the hot springs. Not that ... *maar jy weet wat ek bedoel.*”

I laugh at his muddle-up, his humanness. But then I go silent. I’m not quite ready to go back there.

When we get to La Stalla, I follow Neels along a stone path past bamboos clicking in the breeze. The fishpond is also still there, and the chirp-chirp of frogs rings through the early spring air. Suddenly, I want to feel Neels’ lips on mine, to breathe him in from close. He turns around and looks at me with his head inclined to the side. Then he touches my fingers lightly with his, and leads me into the cavern.

Affirmation

I can't help but laugh at myself for being with an Afrikaans guy. Especially one who can't pronounce 'th'. And yet Neels is so much more real than Michael, who epitomised my ideal, partly because he was English.

The sourgrapes librarian is nowhere to be seen as I enter the library. Touch of disappointment. I would have liked to tell her she was right about tracking down the book. I pay the fine to the librarian on duty, who accepts the replacement cost. I wonder what book they'll replace it with.

The librarian shows me to an office in the corner I never knew existed. Head librarian's office, apparently. Another of the library's secrets.

"Mr Shadung?" I say, quietly prodding the half-open door. "I'm Beth Strydom. I'm here for the interview."

A bald man ushers me in while chewing on the last bite of something. He wipes the crumbs around his mouth off with a serviette. Then gestures me to sit down opposite him and asks for my CV. His fingers interweave over the pink shirt spanning his boep as he peers over the cover page.

"Okay, Miss Strydom. Thank you for coming today. So tell me, what is your interest in the job?"

He unlaces his fingers and turns to page two. I tell him I've loved reading for as long as I can remember, and recently discovered a passion for teaching. I'm quite eager to combine the two and offer the kind of guidance kids don't get in overcrowded classrooms.

"And what skills can you bring to the party?" he asks, resting his elbow on the table and twirling a pen through his fingers.

"Firstly, I'm slightly dyslexic, and always read slowly as a child. So I'm very patient with kids at different reading levels. Then, my English teaching experience has given me

confidence in gently correcting grammar. And pronunciation, of course. I'll also insist that learners keep a vocabulary notebook."

Mr Shadung puts a loose fist of fingers over his lips and a thumb under his chin.

"Now, one of the librarians mentioned something about you defacing a book of ours. She's concerned that you are not fit for the job. How do you respond to that?"

I shift in my seat and swallow. As I'm about to answer, there's a knock on the door.

"Yes?" asks Mr Shadung. "Come in."

The librarian on duty says someone from the Department of Education is here to see him.

"Tell them I'm in an important meeting," he replies, and turns back to me.

There's a pause before I say, "Yes, it's true. I took a book to Japan, where I lived for about eight months. But the book had to be destroyed."

A curious smile appears on Mr Shadung's lips.

"I know it sounds strange, but it took on a life of its own, and started taking over my life too. Getting rid of a book isn't something I've ever done before, or will ever do again, I think. But in this case it was vital in bringing me back to South Africa, and back to myself, I suppose."

Wow – did I manage to say that out loud, to someone else? Michael would have been proud. That's what I loved about him after all – never afraid of saying something that might create waves.

But Mr Shadung just raises one eyebrow, and writes something on my CV. He thanks me and says he'll email me if my application is successful. Even if I don't get the job, I feel good about giving it a go.

How do we lie on the bed? I lie along the breadth, he along the length, head propped against the pillows. My pyjama legs make a tent over his. It's been a month since the cavern.

"I hope you don't mind," he said earlier.

I was lying on top of him, kissing the stubble below his ear.

"I'd like to take it slow. *Ek wil jou eers 'n bietjie beter leer ken.*"

How did I find someone who doesn't insist on rushing in? I taste the novelty of it on my tongue. But at the same time, I can't help wondering why he doesn't want to have sex yet. Is there something wrong with me, with my body? Something he's not telling me? I decide to ask him. He looks me straight in the eye and puts his hand on my shoulder. In his honeybush voice he reassures me that he *is* attracted to me, but still wants to get to know me better.

"*Stadig*," he says. "*Stadig*," like a meditative chant that stills my foliage mind.

I weave my hands through his curls as he tells me about growing up as a loner. How he didn't fit in because he hated uniforms and refused to go to the *NG Kerk* on Sundays. How poetry consoled him like a good friend would; pretty much what fiction did for me. He speaks Afrikaans, my *moedertaal*. Nurturing in a way the English language could never quite be.

He tells me about his love for Herman Charles Bosman, whom he calls South Africa's Shakespeare. He talks about why he likes the writer so much, but all I want him to do is take me. Tear off my pyjamas and make love to me, right here on this bed. Isn't that what I've been waiting for all along? Don't I get to enjoy the fruits of finally being in a relationship? His undesire is a painful reminder of Michael wanting me to leave him alone.

But then I remember the words about Sophie sleeping with Owen on the first night. How he lost all respect for her because she went straight in. How, since then, he had

the upper hand. Maybe I should cherish my Neels-virginity a bit longer. Maybe it would actually do me good.

Suddenly Neels wiggles out of my tentlegs, kisses my knees and walks over to the bookshelf on the wall.

“I’ve got to read you this story,” he says.

He opens up a collection called *Idle Talk: Voorkamer Stories (I)* and starts reading a short story called ‘Casual Conversation’. I’m fascinated by the black spectacles, white helmets and mosquito nets – novelties a swarm of tourists introduces to the Marico.

When I fall asleep later, his arm’s over my belly, as if both claiming and protecting it. I dream of a book, *the* book, floating on the salty sea. It gets caught in a black mosquito net and is pulled out of the water. It lies on the dock, within the net and still dry as bone. Neels arrives in a black and white striped *hakama* – one of those skirt-like garments the Japanese wear over a kimono. He sees the book, goes down on his knees and tenderly disentangles it. A woman in black spectacles watches from afar. As she puts on a white helmet, I realise it’s the librarian. Neels opens the book and starts reading. Is he reading Michael or me? I can’t tell. I can’t stop him because I am the water surrounding the quay and I can’t speak, I can only be. Then Neels takes the book and walks away from the sea. I never see him again.

Gasping, I jolt upright from where I’m curled up against the trunk of his body.

“Bef?” he says. “*Wat is dit?* What’s wrong?”

I sit up and pull the duvet tightly over my chest. He strokes my hair, waiting for me to speak. I adjust the pillows, shift down, look up at the ceiling. Then I recount the dreamstory about the book and the sea. He laughs when I tell him about the mosquito net, and the librarian with the white helmet. A feeling of urgency rises in my chest.

“Neels, there’s something I have to tell you,” I say, turning to face him.

There’s an acrid taste in my mouth. I need to brush my teeth.

“Wat is dit? Is jy okay?” he asks.

“Nee, ek is nie. I’m not okay. I ... buried a book.”

He smiles mockingly, but when he sees I’m serious, his eyes say bemused, “You’re not making any sense.”

“I buried a book in the sea,” I repeat.

“Wat? What are you talking about?”

He moves away from me. The sting of rejection swells in my throat. He continues to look confused for what seems like a long time. Eventually, he takes my hand and says, *“Jammer. Tell me about it.”*

I swallow the sting and start with the morning I walked into the Mizushima sea. The picture of the Wave. Michael. He listens, stroking the duvet over his legs.

“Wat was die boek se naam?” he asks.

“Brýnstone.”

It’s the first time I say it aloud to anyone and it feels strangely good. But there’s something else I must say out loud.

“I ... I also had a bath once and I sort of ... ag ... I’m just going to say it. I touched myself while holding the book. You know, in a sexual way. And then another time, I sort of moved over it, over and over until I came.”

He pulls his chin back.

“Wow,” he says, quietly.

I knew it. I knew the moment I told him the truth about me, he’d freak out. I shouldn’t have told him. I should’ve kept quiet. I get up and say I’m going to the toilet.

“No, Beth. It’s part of who you are,” I hear myself tell myself as I sit down on the loo.

If I can't accept it, why should anyone else?

When I get back to the bedroom, Neels reaches out to me and I collapse his hand into mine.

"Bef, *jammer*. This is just ... quite new to me. I mean, you doing it to a book and, I don't know, the whole thing of replacing parts and then burying it ... I'm just trying to process it all."

I don't know what to say next. I put my free hand to my chest and we both sit in silence.

"But then I guess you had to do it," he says after a while. "All of it. To become who you are. And you know what? *Mal* as this sounds, I want to know you too. All sides of you: the good and the bad, the ordinary and the kooky."

"So you're okay with it? I mean you don't think there's something wrong with me?"

"Ag, there's something wrong with all of us. We just have our own ways of hiding it. The difference, I guess, is that you've gone deep into that *wrongness*. I mean, you've tackled it. And you've come up to the surface still breathing. Now come here," he says, and folds me into him again. I fall asleep once more, dreaming this time of an empty sea.

Surfacing

Aviwe sits next to me in the children's corner. She's struggling to pronounce the word 'destination'. Her homework was to find one new word anywhere outside the library, and she saw this one on a bumper sticker. I ask if she understands the meaning, break up the syllables and get her to repeat them: Shin. Nation. Stination. Destination.

Then we continue reading from Sello K. Duiker's *The Hidden Star*. The library's busy for a Friday afternoon. Some new schoolchildren sit on the loam-coloured settees, their noses in storybooks.

Aviwe asks to go to the toilet; I tell her of course she can. How strict I was with the Japanese kids, never allowing them to go. Unless they were about to pee in their pants, which didn't happen often.

Japan. How little of that country did I allow to crawl under my skin? Ever since Neels mentioned going there with me, I've been warming up to the idea. Not yet, but one day. Rediscover all that was there. Visit temples and shrines, ramble in the Mizushima hills, taste powder snow in Hokkaido and snorkel in Okinawa. Talk to Japanophiles and pay attention to stories about the ways of the samurai.

A message from Neels says I must pack toiletries and a cozzie for tomorrow. For Gold Reef City? Where we were planning to go? Strange. Then another sms, adding I must bring goggles.

Ms Anderson walks past and ignores me the way she's done since I've started here. Today I've had enough.

"Ms Anderson," I say, raising my voice so she can't pretend not to hear me.

She stops, still looking in the direction she's going in.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She raises her eyebrows and puts a hand on her hip.

"I was just wondering if we could have coffee some time."

"What makes you think I would want to have coffee with you?" she asks dubiously.

"Because I'm finally ready to tell you what happened to the book. I think it will be good for both of us to talk."

Aviwe is back from the toilet and sits down next to me, oblivious of the tension in the air. Ms Anderson strides on towards the loans desk, murmuring "I'll think about it," under her breath.

Aviwe carries on reading about Nolitye's shack in the Phola moonlight, and the bucket of stones hidden under her bed.

"What does 'ajar' mean?" she asks.

I tell her it's when the door's just a little bit open, and ask if she sleeps with her door open or closed.

"Ajar," she says, and reads on.

There's a floating bridge on the Groot Marico Eye for pulling yourself across the water. Neels and I sit on top of it, with *Idle Talk* between us.

"This place is incredible," I say, peeling off the wrapper of a chocolate egg. "Thank you for bringing me here."

"Well, it was kind of selfish," he grins. "I had to see where Herman Charles Bosman wrote most of his stories, and I thought you would love the Eye."

Neels opens his book. I let the October sun filter into my being as I lie with a shirt over my face. Then I'm walking by the river, along its concrete path, snaking towards the Mizushima sea. Monsoon raindrops start to fall before I drift away.

When I wake up, Neels is snoozing under his khaki hat. I pick up his book and read a bit. He wakes up as I turn a page and reaches for my bare arm. Strokes it with the back of his stubby nailtips and triggers a swarm of goosebumps. Some divers appear on the other side of the Eye and start shedding their gear.

“Are you going in?” asks Neels.

“For sure,” I reply.

I savour the last melty bit of the chocolate egg and pop the foil in my bag. How many times did I dig in this bag for the book? It was my companion for so long.

“Well, I’ll leave it to you then,” says Neels, picking up *Idle Talk*. Then suddenly, he takes my hand as I stand up, gets up himself, and pulls me closer. *Adam en Eva*, his book stuck between us. Our lips almost touch. The sun fills the space between our profiles, and a shudder of pleasure takes me over. I want more, now. But manage to detach, kiss the hand holding the book, and tell him I’m having a skinny dip. His face lights up like that of a boy who’s been given a toy car. I turn towards the edge of the bridge and reach behind my back for the string of my bikini top. Sit down and dip my legs in the clear water. Then I wiggle out of my bikini bottoms and lower myself inside. It’s cold. Too cold, but I go in.

Neels is forgotten as the underwater world unfolds. The plant life and debris lure me deeper, I eel my way through the lilystalk forest. The sun fans out into the water and the diagonal streaks dazzle every time I come up for air. I’m in an underwater fairytale. Little red riding hood, swimming along an unseen path through the forest. But the wolf has been killed by the axe, I am safe for now. When I reach the centre of the Eye, a mythical blue light emanates from beneath. I want to swim down and touch it, become one with the blue light. And then, as I come up, somehow I do.

In the afternoon, we go into a second-hand bookshop. Neels explores the non-fiction section. I go to the back, and peruse the schmaltsy paperbacks. My fingers run over the weatherbeaten *hygromans*; they remind me of the ones in the library. They

remind me of the book. Suddenly Michael comes from behind, reaching over my breasts, his iron breath on my neck. He spreads my arms against the books, the bulge hardens against me. I have no way of turning around. But I shake my head, shake it off, and stride to the sunlit corner with the children's books.

I sit on the floor and page through an old copy of *Where the wild things are*. Then I feel a kiss on my neck. I turn around, and it's Neels, holding his hand out to help me up.

Later, in a hotel in the town centre, we sit opposite each other on a flowery couch. He's reading from volume two of *Idle Talk*, and I'm finishing off Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. We were meant to go to a B&B on a farm outside town. But when Neels told them we're unmarried and planning to share a room, they refused to let us stay. Neels wasn't bothered, and brought me here.

I peep over my book and watch him. His chest rising under a white t-shirt with every slow breath. His eyes scanning the page from left to right, drinking in every word of his South African Shakespeare. Watching him like this makes my body swell with yearning.

But I stretch my toes onto his lap and continue reading my book. The protagonist is making a dry-leaf lair, into which she curls to sleep. I glance up at Neels and our eyes meet before I return to my world, and he to his.

Minutes later, I feel his eyes on me again. I pretend not to notice, enjoying the sensation of my heart beating suddenly faster. He puts his hand over my bare foot and lifts it lightly.

"May I?" he asks.

I give him a sceptical look. What does he want to do with my foot? But the curiosity builds deep in my belly; I give him a single nod. He raises my foot to his mouth, flexes it vertically towards me, and kisses the inside arch. Then he lowers it, bows down, and brushes the side with his stubbled cheek. It's ticklish, and I hover between the *grillerigheid* and *plesier*. Then he brushes his lips over the heel and licks towards my calf. A quiver of pleasure crawls up my thighs.

“Neels,” I say.

I close my eyes, exhale. He brings his mouth over the tips of my toes and breathes onto them. Slips his tongue between big and second toe: a tingle down my spine.

“Neels,” I gasp.

Unhurriedly slides his tongue into each and every gap. Extracts it as suddenly as it enters. My head falls back against the couch arm. I’m paralysed by the tickly thrill that each lick invokes.

Then he folds my foot into both hands, and puts his warm mouth over my big toe. He sucks at it gently, then hard, then tenderly again. My whole body tenses, I feel for the couch, and press down into its firm fabric.

“Neels ... fuck”

I move forward to kiss him. He stops me with a gentle hand, takes mine, and heads in the direction of the bed. But I let go and wrap my fingers firmly around his head. I pull him right up to me and kiss him so hard that he cannot but relent.

Japanese glossary

konnichiwa – hello

sumimasen – sorry

gaikokujin – foreign person

onsen – hot spring

oofuro – bath

sube sube – smooth smooth

Yuzawa-san – Mr Yuzawa

apaato – apartment

terebi – television

o tsukare sama desu – thank you for your hard work

gaijin – foreign person (common but not politically correct)

sarariiman – Japanese corporate businessman (from the English ‘salaryman’)

o namae wa, ~ desu ne – your name is ~, isn’t it?

hai – yes

kombini – convenience store

omiyage – souvenir

pasokon – personal computer

sashimi – raw meat, usually fish

ima – now

doozo – please

eeto – an expression of hesitation, like the English ‘um’

chikatetsu – underground train

doomo arigatoo – thank you very much

chotto matte – wait a minute

yatte – do it or give me (may have a sexual connotation)

saikoo – the best

obachan – auntie

kanji – Chinese characters

rotenburo – open air bath

o hayoo gozaimasu – good morning

keshigomu ga nai – I have no eraser

onaka ga suita – I’m hungry

tako – octopus

tabetai – I want to eat it

haroo – hello

kawaii – cute

eikaiwa – English conversation

nomihoodai – all you can drink

sake – alcohol

tachinomi – Japanese style standing bar (literally ‘standing drinking’)

haafu – someone who is ethnically half Japanese, from the English word ‘half’

seppuku – ritual suicide by disembowelment originally reserved for the samurai

chonmage – traditional top-knot hairstyle

hanami – a cherry-blossom viewing picnic (literally ‘flower see’)

umeshu – plum liqueur

karaage – deep-fried food

chuuha – strong fruit-flavoured alcoholic drink

ima chotto ii desuka – do you have a moment?

sensei – teacher

hontoo ni gomen nasai – I’m really sorry

kore de owari desu – I’m finished

dame – bad/wrong

boosozoku – Japanese subculture associated with motorcycle gangs

Obon – a summer festival in honour of the ancestors’ spirits

shinkansen – bullet train

miso soup – soup made from soybean paste

yakitori – grilled chicken on a skewer

ne – tag question similar to the Afrikaans ‘nè?’ or English ‘hey?’ or ‘ey?’

himawari – sunflower

hakama – long pleated culotte-like trousers worn on special occasions

MA CREATIVE WRITING PORTFOLIO

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

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of

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by

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MA Creative Writing

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Co-supervisor: Silke Heiss

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Description

This portfolio is chronologically ordered and encompasses creative writing and a reflective journal. The writing comes out of the coursework element of the MA as well as independent work. It includes short fiction, poetry, plays, reviews, monologues and dialogues. The reflective journal comprises sections selected from a 100 000 word document written from February to November. It aims to show my progress as a writer and the development of the long project from concept to completion.

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COURSEWORK PORTFOLIO

The test pattern

SABC. 1984. When gremlins were at the control of the TV, three vertical lines appeared. Sophie and I sat on the green carpet of my grandmother's living room, hoping they would go away, and take with them the sound stinging our six-year-old ears.

The night before, after dinner, we took turns to kiss the TV. The newsreader was good looking, and the closest we would come to a living, breathing boyfriend. The room was dark, but we had to be quick in case my grandmother came in. She was in the kitchen washing our *boterham met kaas* dishes, but we knew we could never be too safe.

Sophie tried to teach me how to masturbate. She would sit astride the back of a couch and move her slim body back and forth, blonde curls – blonder than mine – wisping through the air. "Try it," she said, looking at me in earnest. I could feel my eyebrows join as I pulled my chin back into itself. "Why should I try it? It looks weird."

I did try though. My legs were not as long or as thin as hers. But I climbed on top of the couch and tried to imitate the movement she had made so gracefully. It felt uncomfortable, I felt uncomfortable, as if someone was watching me. "I don't like it," I told her as I got off the couch. "Why do you have to do it?"

I didn't get it then, I just didn't get it. Was it because her mother was an alcoholic? Mine wasn't. My family was normal.

She's pregnant now, Sophie. Soon she will have a little girl of her own, with long legs and blonde wisps behind her ears. I remember the twinge of envy I felt when I met her husband. Half a head shorter than her, but gentle, with engaging green eyes and a hypnotic voice. The twinge dissolved when I was invited to their house for dinner. "My love, can I get you a glass of juice?" he'd say. "Do you mind if I make some cheese sauce for the broccoli, my love? I can't really eat it without." If I had to hear the words "my love" a third time, I was sure I'd vomit all over the broccoli.

But I guess that's what Sophie needed. A husband who would be the mother she never had. A man who fulfils her sexually, so that she, a reborn Christian, will never have to masturbate again.

The TV came back on again, that morning after we kissed the newsreader. The stinging sound stopped. We watched whatever was on – Wielie Wielie Walie or Nils Holgersson, while my grandmother made pancakes in the kitchen. There in front of the TV, we didn't give any thought to what our bodies would be one day.

13 February

Teachers: Robert Berold and Paul Wessels

Charlie

Bastard. I mean, what a bastard! And oh my God, what a coward. I mean, I had to wait for three weeks to hear it from him. Three weeks! And he couldn't even initiate it. No, no no. The boy had to be asked.... I mean, I had to actually invite him out on a date. So that he could tell me in all his nonchalance that no, actually, I had misunderstood: we weren't really going out at all. So much for my big American dream.

Coward. Sitting there with his beer and his rare steak, forking the chips two by two. Only he would choose a fast food joint with plastic seats. I mean, I practically smsed him every day for three weeks. He always had some kind of excuse: work or friends, friends or work. I mean, it's not like I haven't been here before. It's just that....

I wonder if he remembers Valentine's Day. I put a note under his door early in the morning, like four am, middle of winter. I remember not being able to find his house, and asking at the convenience store if they could help me. I wrote in the note that he must go look under his car, where I put the box with chocolates I made by hand. And do you know what happened later? He smsed me to say thank you, nothing more. On Valentine's Day!

The plastic seats in the restaurant. The red and white lamp shades. Jeez, for three weeks I put up with his silence, his silent rejection. Three weeks! Just so that I could say I had an American boyfriend. The day after it happened, I emailed all my friends. I've an American boyfriend! Finally! It was such a feather in my cap, oh my gosh. Ah, and mom was so proud. She just wanted to know all about him. She was hoping for more. And to be honest, so was I. The American dream, right? The American dream boy: tall, square-jawed and just a little rough around the edges. Jeez, and he just sat with his beer and his bloody rare steak, cutting into it again and again until the only thing left on his plate were three pink chips.

I remember when he told me that his girlfriend had broken up with him. Ah, I was so happy. I mean, I was sad for him, of course. Like any friend would be. But oh so ready to console him in his time of need. He'd always known I adored him. Men are so

transparent in that way. He knew I was game. And then, when we kissed, I was like, at last! At fucking last! It's my turn, ladies. The boy's mine!

Ag, and then the comment he made about me eating all my salad first, then all my chips, then my tofu burger. You know, as if I'm some kind of freak show with no dining etiquette. What does he know about saving the best for last anyway? Jeez, and when I finally gathered up the guts to ask him what was going on, he said I was not the kind of girl he'd want to take home to his parents. What kind of girl, I asked – I had to know. The kind of girl who has one night stands, he said.

6 March

Teacher: Anton Krueger

High Street

Outside the tourism office

a small boy pees against the tree.

He watches the silver track dribble

over the end of the pavement

and onto the road

where his mother stands

talking to her friend.

He looks up at me watching him

and gives a toothless smile.

13 March

Teacher: Mzi Mahola

Request

Oh, do you have any old newspapers? he asks

Sure, I say. What for?

We are standing at the bakery counter

I'm buying a *Grocott's Mail*,

a chocolate coconut square for me

and a cream bun for him.

What for? I ask.

You don't want to know, he says.

I've some, I say, but they're all cut up.

It doesn't matter, he says.

We eat our sweets in silence.

13 March

Teacher: Mzi Mahola

Gmail chat

When you coming to Cape Town? he asks.

She's heard He's single again.

She strokes the keyboard with four fingertips:

Spring, maybe.

You're enjoying the bachelor life I hear,

Ya betcha, he replies.

She signs out with an x

and receives an email after she's logged out

with one more x than hers.

13 March

Independent writing

Wildebeest

Hurtling plunging

pushing shoving knocking

over getting

up,

horns heads hearts heartbeat faster

faster through the Serengeti dust

hurtling plunging upping and overing

and coming to a dead standstill

at a crocodile of cars

on a road Made in China.

17 March

Independent writing

Connecting

A late morning beam in the classroom
is a weave of dust-scrap that joins
the window and the desk in the front row
where I knit red, yellow and blue.

Five inches down I notice
a gap in the link
where red and yellow connect.

I remove the needles
unravel the red
it zigzags to the floor
a maze of wool.

The hand in the air
is mine, and so is the quiet voice

“Can you do it for me, Mrs D?

I can’t remember how.”

Someone in the third row sniggers.

Mrs D died the night of the dance.

I went home to dig out the mothballed scarf

it was all I had of her, Mrs D:

the connection she'd made

between my yellow and red.

20 March

Teacher: Brian Walter

The coelamaid's journey

Kailungu the coelamaid was the strongest man in underwaterland. His body was the colour of gold and his hair was green. He was so beautiful that he could have had any woman in the kingdom. Any woman but Umkao.

In the seaveld where Kailungu and Umkao lived, chameleonfish moved along the hills and swimmingbirds passed over aloes anchored in the red sea sand. In the aloes rested tridents which had lost their use. They had been tossed aside by the coelamaids, who had the fins of a coelacanth and the upper body of a human being.

Despite Kailungu's magnificence, Umkao paid him no attention. Her only interest was in swimming to the shore every night when she couldn't sleep. On a rock she had found close to Sea City, she would sit and watch the neon signs reflecting on the water. All she wanted was to be there, surrounded by the lights, in and among the colours.

One day, she went to Kailungu's palace of mud and stones. She waited outside the gate and called on Isigidimi, Kailungu's personal chameleonfish, to grant her an audience with the king. Isigidimi moved towards her with slow but deliberate strokes, and opened the gate. She followed him into the hut, where Kailungu reclined on a leopardshark divan.

"And to what do we owe the pleasure?" asked Kailungu, as Umkao entered, head bowed. "Isigidimi, pour our guest a saltglass of sour milk and offer her some fresh fatcakes from the kitchen. Umkao, please have a seat." The coelamaid floated down on a low driftwood stool and looked at Kailungu's trophies: a seariverrabbit, a mizufox, a hawkeel.

"What beautiful trophies you have," said Umkao, gazing into his eyes.

"My, thank you. I caught them all myself. The hawkeel especially was a challenge, but I got him in the end."

"I'm not surprised, dear Kailungu. You are, after all, the strongest man in the seaveldt."

"What are you doing tomorrow evening, Umkao?" Kailungu asked. "I want to meet with you."

"I've a blanket-sewing class."

"Well, skip that class."

"On one condition, your Highness. Bring your trident along. I want to see its ornate beadwork, I want to ride with you and experience the source of your power and strength." Kailungu watched Umkao's hair wave in the water.

"I shall meet you after sunset tomorrow and I shall bring my trident. And threescore three swimmingbirds and a school of leopardfish to accompany us. The underseas have not been safe of late, with piratefish on the prowl."

And so came the next day. Kailungu's dugongwagon drew to standstill outside Umkao's shellhut just after sunset. Isigidimi crawled lightly to the door and knocked twice with his split claw. Umkao replied from within, "I'll only come out if Kailungu collects me himself!"

"What nonsense is this?" asked Kailungu. "I'm not a chameleonfish. I shall wait here until she comes out."

"If you don't come and get me yourself, I'll take it as a sign that you do not care for me," Umkao called back. Kailungu was growing impatient. But from where he was with the swimmingbirds were circling overhead, he caught the scent of her seabreeze perfume. He put down the trident he had brought along with him, swam to her door, and knocked.

There was no reply, so Kailungu swam around the hut and looked through the driftwood window. Inside he could see bonsai seaweedtrees and cowrie shells along the aquamarine walls, but Umkao was nowhere to be seen. Kailungu turned around in

one angry twist and swam back to his carriage. The swimmingbirds were nowhere to be seen, and the beadwork trident he had left in his dugongwagon was gone.

By the time Kailungu returned to his mud palace, Umkao was sitting on her rock overlooking the shore. If it had not been for Isigidimi's help, she could not have succeeded. He had tempted the swimmingbirds away with soddenmielie crumbs and sorghum.

Kailungu called all the mammalfish in the kingdom and told them to find his trident. The coelamaids too competed with each other to find the source of Kailungu's power. But none was as eager as Teppa, a coelamaid with half a missing fin, who had always dreamed of being part of Kailungu's harem.

Umkao looked from the neon lights on the beach to the trident in her hand. Then she said to the trident, "Oh, trident, grant me one wish. I want to have human legs for just one night." And so Umkao found herself in a black dress stretching over her curves, and a small elephin leather purse around her shoulder. She placed the trident in a crevice of the rock and swam to the shore with both legs together kicking up and down, as she was used to doing with her fin.

Teppa had watched Umkao every night as she sat on the rock, the reflections of the neon signs playing on her face. In Kailungu's harem, there was never an imperfect coelamaid like herself, only attractive ones like Umkao. But as she retracted the trident from the crevice, she knew she had found luck.

Umkao walked out of the water, wobbly on her legs. At a bright sign saying THE PINK FLAMINGO, she followed women with dresses like hers inside. The space was dark but in the dim light she could see bodies moving. A woman with red hair and a gold necklace came up to her and took her hand. She followed the woman to the dancefloor, where they stood, locked into each other's eyes and swaying gently to the rhythm of the music. They did not touch and they did not speak, but Umkao thought of the trident again.

Teppa arrived at the gate to Kailungu's mud palace to see Isigidimi being speared. She had left the trident in a large antbubblehill and now swam towards Kailungu, who was sitting on a green pumpkinshell. "Kailungu! I've got something for you." Kailungu turned his head in her direction, noticed her fin and turned his head back to where Isigidimi's body was being buried in the red sand.

"I'm not interested," he said.

"Then I shall keep it, and I shall become the ruler of the seas," replied Teppa.

"Where is it?" he said, turning around violently and getting up from the pumpkinshell.

"I'll give it to you only if you spend one afternoon with me in your goatskinbed." Kailungu was impatient with the coelamaid with the broken fin, not to mention repulsed by her defect, but he wanted his trident more than anything.

An hour later, Teppa led him to the antbubblehill. Kailungu grabbed the trident from her hands as she pried it out, raised himself up and pointed it at Umkao's hut. As he struck it, the ground beneath it split open and the ocean got sucked inside. The water returned as a giant wave, which crept slowly but surely towards Sea City.

Umkao was still in the nightclub when she got an uneasy feeling in her stomach. She squeezed the hand of the redhead, pretended she was heading for the bar, and slipped outside. In the distance in the before-light, she saw the wave coming. But she could not speak mantongue. How could she warn her redhead friend?

In the meantime, Teppa returned to her hut and sat in front of her mirror. She sat for a long time, just watching. When she could make out her face in the dark reflection, she lay on her bed and closed her eyes. Her dream had come true at last, she has shared a bed with the most powerful man in the seaveldt. Then why did she feel this empty?

As water entered THE PINK FLAMINGO, people rushed out to see cars lifting themselves off the tar and houses raising themselves from their foundations. The neon signs became part of the grey sludge which was climbing higher and higher up the palm tree which Umkao had started climbing in desperation. She felt the cold cement

circling her feet, then ripping her away from the tree. A strong hand grabbed hers, a hand that pulled her out of the sludge, back into the blue ocean.

Umkao woke on a bed of hand-sewn blankets. She sat up with a jolt when she realised she was not at home. She looked down over her coela-fins – she was a coelamaid again. Then she looked up to see Teppa, sewing a table-cloth of orange and brown.

“Why... why did you help me?” she asked. Umkao’s voice was hoarse from the sludge she had swallowed. She looked at Teppa, whose broken fin was twisted awkwardly to one side.

“Because I realised that the one thing I had longed for since I was a little girl, was not the right thing for me.”

“Kailungu.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry I gave him the trident. I made a mistake...”

“One that can soon be fixed. We can get the trident back. Both of us. If we work together.”

“We?”

“Yes, you and I. We deserve it back.”

Teppa looked down at the needle in her hand, and then out of the window. “No,” she said.

“No?” asked Umkao, rising slightly from the bed.

“No, I’m not helping you.”

“But you just said...”

“I know what I said. And I don’t know why I cannot help you, but that’s how I feel.”

“Fine!” said Umkao. Although still fragile, she was filled with anger and swam out of the hut. Teppa watched her as she swam slowly to where her shellhut had been. Then Teppa closed the door and resumed her sewing. As soon as the sludge settled, she would swim far, far away, find her own trident and work her own beads into it.

20 March

Teacher: Brian Walter

Collection day

THE CHARACTERS

- MRS BLANCHARD: A woman in her late fifties, wearing a white blouse and black work slacks with opaque skin-colour knee-highs.
- VUMILE: A man in his forties digging for food in the rubbish bags on MRS BLANCHARD's street, dressed in dirty grey trousers and a brown jersey with holes in it.
- ALFRED: A student in his mid-twenties who lives opposite MRS BLANCHARD. He's wearing jeans and a t-shirt.
- HANK: MRS BLANCHARD's golden retriever.

SETTING

The action takes place outside on the street of a traditionally white suburb in Grahamstown. Faint traffic sounds can be heard in the background. It's around 8:30am, as shown by a clock on the wall in MRS BLANCHARD's living room. The action takes place in less than an hour.

MRS BLANCHARD sits on an off-white sofa in her living room eating All Bran flakes. There are two photos on the mantelpiece, one of a young man and his wife in front of the Eiffel Tower, and another of a young woman on top of Uluru. There is a Business Day on the coffee table and the TV is on. When the curtain rises, the eNews channel jingle can be heard. HANK comes into the house through an open door with an empty KFC bag.

MRS BLANCHARD: Hank! What's that in your mouth? Give that to me!

MRS BLANCHARD gets up and puts the cereal bowl on the table, spilling a bit of milk.

MRS BLANCHARD: Hank! Where did you get this? Naughty dog!

MRS BLANCHARD removes the paper bag from HANK and smacks him on the nose. She goes into the garden and sees rubbish all along her fence. Some of it has blown into her yard. The two black bags next to her driveway are open, and overflowing with empty milk cartons, chicken bones, banana peels, chocolate wrappers and two Debonairs Pizza boxes.

MRS BLANCHARD: Bloody bastards! Hank, come inside! Come here. Come HERE!

Hank ignores her and he starts sniffing in the torn black bags. Then she sees VUMILE scratching in the neighbour's rubbish bags. She looks at her watch, then opens the gate and struts over to him.

MRS BLANCHARD, *furious*: Excuse me. I'm sorry but I just can't believe this. You know, you people. You come here and open our rubbish bags and don't bother putting it back, and then this is what happens! You know, seriously. I don't mind you digging in my rubbish if you're hungry, but for God's sake, why can't you just put it back in the bag? How hard can it be? I mean, I don't come up to your house and litter your street. It's as if taking isn't good enough for you – you have to go and trash the place too!

VUMILE, *nonplussed*: Sorry, madam?

MRS BLANCHARD: Did you hear a word I said? Are you deaf or something?

VUMILE: No, madam.

MRS BLANCHARD: I said, the nerve of you people! Hank! Get away from there! Come here, boy!

VUMILE: Which people, madam?

MRS BLANCHARD: You... you... you garbage collectors. You won't even admit it was you. Now who's going to clean up this mess, hey? Oh, I bet you'll be happy to do it if I pay you. Ja, don't think I don't know you

people. I'm not stupid, you know. That was probably part of the plan.

VUMILE: Which plan, madam?

MRS BLANCHARD: Don't think I don't know how your mind works. You come here and trash the place so you can ask to clean it up and make a quick buck out of me. Clever, hey. Very clever. Well, I'm not going to fall for that one, you hear? You people –

VUMILE: Which people, madam?

MRS BLANCHARD, *in a high-pitched voice*: Stop asking me that!

MRS BLANCHARD starts picking up bits of rubbish one by one. Then she looks at her watch and smells something. She looks suspiciously at Vumile.

MRS BLANCHARD: What's that you've got over there? In the Pick n Pay packet? It smells revolting.

VUMILE: It's nothing madam.

MRS BLANCHARD: Is that from my rubbish?

VUMILE doesn't answer. He continues to sit, looking at MRS BLANCHARD.

MRS BLANCHARD: Come on, let me see.

VUMILE: No, madam, it's nothing.

MRS BLANCHARD: Look here, I wasn't born yesterday, you know. I can smell that from a mile away. Come on, show it to me!

She tries to grab the Pick n Pay packet out of his hand while he gets up and staggers back.

VUMILE: No, madam!

He turns away from her but she's too quick and manages to grab the packet. She opens it up at arm's length and drops it on the floor. Inside the bag is a pack of rotten lamb chops with maggots crawling over them.

MRS BLANCHARD: Ag sis! Sis!

MRS BLANCHARD waves her hand in front of her nose very quickly.

MRS BLANCHARD: That's disgusting! Where did you find this? Gross!

VUMILE: I don't know madam. It was just –

MRS BLANCHARD: Well, this must have been thrown out a week ago, if not more. What were you going to do with it? Cook it? I'm sorry but that's seriously disgusting. You can die from this stuff! Can't you smell how bad it smells?

VUMILE looks at her but says nothing. MRS BLANCHARD spots someone walking towards them and when she realises it's ALFRED, she raises her hand and starts walking towards him.

MRS BLANCHARD, *shouting*: Alfred! Hi Alfred. Listen, can you just help me out here for a second?

ALFRED: Sure Mrs Blanchard. What's up?

MRS BLANCHARD: I've got this man over here digging in our rubbish and he wants to take this meat with maggots in it. It's not from your rubbish, by any chance?

ALFRED: No, Mrs B. I'm a vegetarian.

MRS BLANCHARD: What? I didn't know black people were vegetarians. Anyway, I'm just trying to explain to this man that you can die from this stuff, but he doesn't understand English so can you just translate for me please?

ALFRED: Translate what, Mrs Blanchard?

MRS BLANCHARD: Just that that meat is dangerous for him and please can he just put it back in the rubbish.

ALFRED: Mrs B, I'm sorry, but I don't speak Xhosa.

MRS BLANCHARD: What? Why not? Are you one of those coconuts?

ALFRED: No, Mrs Blanchard. I'm from Ghana. Xhosa is a difficult language to learn, as I'm sure you know.

MRS BLANCHARD: Ghana, did you say?

ALFRED: Yes.

MRS BLANCHARD: Oh.

ALFRED: I'm just curious, Mrs B. I mean, I hope you don't mind me being a bit forward here, but just out of interest... if you had to choose between dying of hunger or dying from eating rotten food, which would you choose?

MRS BLANCHARD: Excuse me? That's a bit forward for you, Alfred. I just asked you to translate here, not to give an opinion. You students can be so smart, hey.

ALFRED: It's just that I think –

MRS BLANCHARD: Think what? What do you think?

ALFRED: I just think you've never had to make that choice before.

MRS BLANCHARD: What do you know about me? Just because we live on the same street, doesn't mean you know me!

MRS BLANCHARD hears Hank coming closer.

MRS BLANCHARD: Hank! Hank! Come here. Hank!

She slaps her knee to call him to her. When he comes, she grabs him by the collar and looks at her watch again.

MRS BLANCHARD: Oh my God, I'm going to be late for work. Alfred, I'm going to have to go now. And I'm just going to have to leave this mess behind. Seriously, I feel like phoning the police. Please won't you just tell this man to throw that meat back into one of those bags. It's so gross!

ALFRED: Okay, Mrs. B.

MRS BLANCHARD digs in her pocket and produces a ten rand note, which she puts back in her pocket. She feels around a bit, then hands VUMILE a two rand coin. She then hurries to the house, leaving the two men standing on the side of the road, staring after her. She puts her shoes on in the living room, looks at the clock and grabs a bottle of water before getting into the car. As she pulls out of the driveway, she notices VUMILE walking along the pavement ahead with the Pick n Pay packet in his hand. She pulls up beside him.

MRS BLANCHARD, *furious*: Excuse me. I don't believe this! Didn't that man tell you to throw that meat away? I asked him to tell you! Seriously, I seriously don't understand it. And he claims to be a vegetarian! Just give it to me. I'll throw it away myself.

VUMILE: No madam! What am I going to give the children?

MRS BLANCHARD, *beside herself*: The *children*? You were planning to give that vrot meat to *children*? I'm sorry, but that's taking it too far. Didn't I just give you money? Why can't you buy them something with that? Or were you going to spend it on booze?

VUMILE: No, madam. It's just that –

MRS BLANCHARD looks at her watch. Then she leans over to the passenger door and pulls up the button.

MRS BLANCHARD: Come on, get in. No, wait. Can you please just put that meat by the rubbish bag over there? Please.

MRS BLANCHARD points at a rubbish bag next to a telephone pole and VUMILE tosses the packet onto it.

MRS BLANCHARD: Okay, thanks. Now, get in.

VUMILE gets into the car hesitantly while MRS BLANCHARD moves her handbag from his foot space to hers.

MRS BLANCHARD: Where do you live?

VUMILE: Extension Nine, madam.

MRS BLANCHARD takes her phone out of her handbag while VUMILE stares ahead.

MRS BLANCHARD: Hello, Jennie? Hi, hi, it's Kathren. Listen, I'm going to be a bit late this morning. I just have to take this man to Shoprite and get him some frozen chicken or something. No, no, I'll explain later. Okay. Okay, see you just now. Bye.

VUMILE watches MRS BLANCHARD as she puts her phone back in the handbag by her feet.

She looks right as she turns a corner.

MRS BLANCHARD, *muttering to herself*: Over my dead body will a child I know eat meat with maggots.

END

27 March

Teacher: Joan Metelerkamp

***Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer (review)**

It started when I requested you from the library. You became too loud. Extremely loud, and I was afraid of you because the two of us, sitting on the bed, were becoming incredibly close.

I knew that when the only thing that separated us was writing. You made me laugh, you made me cry, you made me write. I stopped listening to your story – the one about the grandfather as a boy, making love to a girl behind the library where her father was drinking with his friends. If her father took out one of the books, he would have seen the lovers. With a red wax crayon, I wrote about my first time in your margins: the awkwardness, the afterness. I stopped listening until you talked about the animals that escaped the zoo in Dresden and how the zookeeper told the grandfather-boy to shoot the carnivores. He shot all of the animals – he shot all of them. With invisible strings, you tied it to the Oskar's *National Geographic* later: "When an animal thinks it's going to die, it gets panicky and starts to act crazy. When it knows it's going to die, it gets very, very calm."

You said love is what anyone wants to know from anyone else. Oskar's grandfather said about the wife he didn't love, "...she wants to know if I love her, that's what anyone wants to know from anyone else, not love itself but the knowledge that love is there, like new batteries in the flashlight in the emergency kit in the hall closet..."

I took the scissors out of my pen-holder and cut the shape of a falling man out of page 130. I tried cutting around the quote, but some of the word-ends came off. I stuck the falling man without word-ends on my wall with Prestik so I could look at him every day, even though I knew I wouldn't.

Your story is mine: a story of love and death. Neither of us were there for 9/11 or Dachau, and yet here we are there now, co-creating a narrative.

With a blue wax crayon I write around the picture of the elephant on page 95. I'm a nine-year-old boy who owns an answering machine, a walkie talkie and a string-and-

tin-can attached to the house of the girl next door. There is no space around the elephant and the crayon is getting thick, so I go onto the next page, mixing tenses and not crossing out mistakes like I usually do. The pink library stamp says, "Pencil, ink marks and highlighting ruin books for other readers," but I'm not writing in pencil, ink or highlighting.

Before I met you, reading was reading and writing was writing. Now reading is writing and writing is reading. Where have you been all my 32 years?

I tear out page 140: "You're being crazy. You're going to catch a cold" and page 141: "You're going to catch a colder". If they were back to back, I'd only have to tear out one page. It's a reminder from the pink stamp.

I scrumple up the cold/colder paper and throw it in the wastepaper basket next to my bed. Then I return to the blank pages to rewrite your dialogue from page 126:

A: What do you do?

B: I don't do anything

C: Don't be so modest

B: I want to be a sculptor

B: I'm trying to be a sculptor

A: In your case, trying is being

Does that count for writing? Trying is being? I try, therefore I am? Under the door knob of page 134 I write: "It's not about wanting to become. It's about becoming. I'm a writer. It's not a case of trying."

What the? I tear out the page and cut off the uneven edge and fold the page into two and I make an origami crane out of it, then bury it in my bottom drawer.

Last Saturday, I lost you. You were not in the drawer. You were not under my to-do list, or next the Mail&Guardian, or under my pillow or between the duvets or

anywhere in our space. I wrote, on a piece of paper that wasn't one of your pages, "What am I going to read? What am I going to write? Can you see how incredibly close we had become? Can you see that now?"

I found you squashed between the wall and the bed. The black R.U. LIBRARY stamp on the width of your pages said in black caps BE CAREFUL WHEN PRYING HIM OUT. But it was too late. Your dog-ears from the back-and-forth between the library and the bed were already clearly visible.

I write down all the sentences with words from the title. "I didn't like him looking at me... it made me feel incredibly self-conscious" – Oskar meeting his grandfather for the first time without knowing who He's. "It's hard to stay close without making yourself known" – Oskar's grandfather meeting his grandson for the first time. "There were incredibly beautiful views out of the windows, which dad would have loved," and "That's true. He had an incredibly discerning eye...he was extremely thoughtful." Who allows extremely thoughtful people, like Oskar's father, to die as he did, in 9/11?

The love story also has the word 'close' in it: "I can forgive you for leaving," says the grandmother, the one who was not loved, "But not for coming back." Her estranged husband continues: "She walked out and closed the door behind her... she didn't look at me, but something was happening, we were getting closer and closer or further apart, I took a chance, I asked her if she would pose for me, like the first time we met..."

He sculpts her, and it's a love story, one I couldn't finish in one go. I renewed you three times because your words were incredibly loud and I had to put my hands over my ears to write down my own words so that they became not-you words. It was because we were extremely close and I was afraid of your writing being mine and my writing being yours and I had to remain me while we were we.

But tonight, I'll let you go. All I'll have left of you is the falling man on the wall, the cold/colder pages in the wastepaper basket, and the origami bird in my bottom drawer. "So many people enter and leave your life! Hundreds of thousands of people! You have to keep the door open so they can come in! But it also means you have to let

them go!” an eccentric old man shouts to Oskar on page 153. I’ll push you through the metal lips of the box outside the library and it will be over. I’ll leave the wax crayon notes about my first time in the book to ruin it for the reader who owns you next.

29 April

Teacher: Robert Berold

Spinach and feta quiche

Tanya sends me the sms at six o'clock. It says, "Larissa and my mom and I are making quiche and watching movies tonight if you wanna join 😊." I don't feel like spending time with Tanya's mom or her best friend Larissa, but I want to see her, so I go.

She isn't around when I get there, so her mom invites me to sit down on the flowery furniture in the lounge and tells about their move to Joburg. "I can't wait to go," she says. "I mean, I like Stellenbosch. It's just that it's such small town and it gets so boring here after a while."

Tanya comes in eventually, back from the Pick n Pay, wearing a white t-shirt with a black bra underneath. She ignores me and goes straight to the kitchen with Larissa. They start making the quiche. When I go into the kitchen, I see the ingredients spread out over the table: fresh spinach, feta, eggs, pastry and some other things I can't remember. I sit down at the table and watch Tanya.

She cuts the spinach in a way I've never seen before. She takes the stalks in her left hand and with her right hand, she cuts a v-shape into the part where the leaf begins. She tosses the stalks aside. Then she goes to the oven where Larissa is standing and they talk about old school friends. I wash and chop the salad, which is the job I've been given.

Tanya's mom comes in with three home-made recipe books that she's made from Tanya's old school books. The recipes include one for carrot cake, butternut soup, classic coleslaw and cheese and onion tart. The spinach and feta quiche is also in there somewhere.

Her dad is also there so we all sit around the kitchen table and eat together. The quiche thick and spinachy. I feel guilty because I'm the only one who has seconds.

After dinner, Larissa says she's tired and goes home. Tanya and I go to her bedroom to watch the movie on her laptop. I forget the name of the movie but It's very boring. The

cat comes and lies between us and Tanya tells it to go away but I say it's fine, I don't mind. Then I kiss her and the cat gets off the bed and Tanya puts the laptop next to the bed and she takes my shirt off.

An hour later, her mom opens the door to put some clean t-shirts on the dresser. We quickly grab the duvet and pull it over our heads so she can't see us. The crocheted blanket which was over the duvet falls onto the floor.

I ask Tanya why she didn't lock the door. "I never lock the door," she says. She doesn't want to talk about what happened so I tell her I'm going home, and she opens the front door for me.

3 April

Teacher: Paul Wessels

Swimming pool wedding

“We are all gathered today...” rises the voice of the priest. The fifty guests attending the wedding of Alma Patorno and Victor Cruz raise their heads in unison. In a Teresópolis garden, they sit on white plastic chairs spread out over a turquoise swimming pool, covered in thick glass. The platform looks like a glass boat in the Caribbean. The sky above the party is clear, the surrounding trees are green, the children are quiet.

Teresópolis would be an insignificant town 200km outside Rio de Janeiro if it weren’t the Brazilian team’s national soccer training ground. One evening, eight months before the wedding, a truck pulled into Teresópolis. The town, which had become a popular tourist destination, would attract even more visitors during the 1996 World Cup in Germany. The truck was heavy with green and yellow souvenirs shouting BRAZIL!

Victor parked the truck at the Petrobras service station just outside the town to get a snack before offloading the goods and returning to Rio. As he entered the shop, a black-haired woman walked out. Their eyes met for a second before she, in grey slacks and a hoodie, trod over the tar. Victor followed her, and before she could reach the dark beyond the service station lights, Alma felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Meu caminhão,” said Victor. Alma turned around and looked up at him.

“What about it?”

“I’m driving one. Would you like a lift home?”

Alma looked at this man with his red check shirt and slight paunch. She liked his simplicity, she followed him to the truck. They started talking and continued for hours, sharing little basic information other than their first names.

Seven months later, Victor returned to Teresópolis. He longed to see the girl who had pulled him through the gap between the boxes with keyrings and pencils and inflatable soccer balls inside the truck. The girl who had emptied the bag of scarves over herself

when the warmth of his body was not enough. Who had crept out, in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye. When Victor asked at the Petrobras snack shop if anyone knew Alma, the man behind the counter pointed him to the rectory. He laughed. What was she? A nun or something? The priest's niece, said the man, not smiling.

*

The path leading up the rectory was dark. Victor tripped over something on the way to the front door – the root of a tree? A half-buried soccer ball? He got up, walked on, and knocked on the door. The priest let him in without saying a word. He led him down a dark passage to a candle-lit living room with white curtains.

"So, you are Victor."

"Desculpe?" asked Victor, deciding that the man must be her uncle. "Yes, I'm Victor."

"I've been waiting for you," said the priest, candle-light playing on his eyes. Victor wondered where Alma was. He wanted to hold her, to speak to her, to take her away in his truck, now empty of a new batch of football scarves and keyrings. But she was nowhere to be seen.

"You will take Anna's hand in marriage," said the priest.

"What do you mean, Padre? What have I done?"

"You will take Alma's hand in two months' time. I've told her already."

*

The stage is set. Victor, in a moment of weakness, puts his hand on Alma's stomach. She looks away.

The priest is about to do the exchanging of the rings. "A circle is the symbol of wholeness, perfection, and unity..." he says. *Krrrrrk krrrrrk*. His voice is interrupted, he falls silent. Along the length of the thick glass, as if through ice, runs a crack. Before the guests realise what is happening, the glass collapses under their weight. A hundred

pieces shatter under the feet of the white chairs which collide into each other and surge down and rise up, their covers waving like football scarves. White flowers are suspended in the air, then scattered over the chaos. The guests tumble into the water and come up again, hankering for air as their feet negotiate the glass shards that have settled at the bottom of the pool.

Alma is swimming, swimming away, her stomach, like a football, encumbering her. Her dress is a meringue all around her surrounding her, choking her. She's scrabbling her way to the edge of the pool, clutching the water but not getting anywhere. She's caught between aunts and uncles and splattering children, between wet flesh and cloth and water.

"Alma, meu amor!" shouts Victor. But It's from him that she's trying to get away. The frantic guests surround her. Not to help her but to help themselves out of the water as quickly as possible. "Alma, meu amor! Onde você está? O bebê!" shouts Victor, desperate to reclaim his bride, who has somehow slipped from his side. Alma puts her head under the water where Victor cannot see her. Where no one can see her. She closes her eyes and hovers, just below the surface, feet pushing hands pulling, scratching all around her. She hovers, still.

Her head re-surfaces and a silent scream echoes in the tremors of the leaves on the trees. Some of the guests have clawed themselves out of the swimming pool, others are still struggling. Alma is screaming and screaming but no one is listening, no one hears. Her face twists in pain, the meringue bunches up around her arms, around her shoulders, around her neck. Red escapes from inside her below into the water. Red spreads around her and through the turquoise and seeps into the garments of the guests who are still thrashing about in the water. Something starts to surface, pulling itself to the skin of the water, something solid and soft. Something attached to something that hurts so much she wants to draw it back down under the water where it came from so that it will just not hurt so much.

She's about to pull the thing back down under when she sees Victor looking at her. He's not shouting at her. He's not telling her what to do. He's just watching her,

watching to see what she will do. Something screams the way she screamed. The way she screamed. She pulls it up to the surface and for a moment it hurts where the bellybutton connects to the thing. But as she keeps her eyes on Victor, who is moving towards her, the pain becomes inconsequential. Victor moves forward, reaches out his truck-driving arms and picks her up. She feels him lift her like a child to the surface of the water. He lifts her onto the green tiles next to the pool, a journey like that to the warmth of the womb.

No one is left in the water, everyone has scrambled out, saved themselves. Someone, a mother, has taken the screaming child away. Alma turns her head to the side and opens her eyes. The white floating flowers and the chairs are gently bobbing up and down, up and down. Victor puts his hand on her stomach. This time, she does not look away. She puts her hand on his.

10 April

Teacher: Silke Heiss

The toilet paper thief

How many wads can you make from one big roll? I don't know. I've never tried to steal a whole one before. How long it would take to sit there, tugging at the beast, using your hand as a bobbin to wrap the thin grey film around it? Until there's nothing left?

They say the further removed you are from the actual cash, the simpler it's to steal. So it's easier to steal stationery at work than to pocket a little something from the kitty. You feel less guilty with stuff like that, where money itself would be a big no no.

I've never stolen stationery. Well, not that I can remember. I can remember the first time I stole toilet paper, though. I was in Holland. My mother had come to visit me while on exchange in Belgium, and suggested we spend the weekend in Maastricht on the border. It was neutral territory – away from her family in the north and from the host family in Liège. I'd just had an awkward moment with the waitress, who stared at me when I asked her for a Coke. "Cola," my mom corrected. We laughed about it, which was a good distraction from the thought that we were about to part, and that I had to return to my host family.

When I got to the station toilet, there was a woman at the door. She told me I had to pay a guilder to enter. I went back to my mom to ask her for some change; she gave me a two-and-a-half-guilder coin. The woman at the door was not happy about having to give me change. But I stood my ground, and once I got the go, I went in and closed the door. On the loo I sat down and started yanking at the toilet paper. It was the kind you get in squares, so if you pull them out one by one and put them on top of each other, it looks like a wad of tissues. I took as much as I could stuff into my jean pockets without the woman noticing. It was easy to hide it from her, but when I got back to the café where my Coke and my mom were waiting, I couldn't not tell her.

"Mamma," I said, "Ek het 'n bietjie toiletpapier gesteel. Ek was so kwaad dat ek vir die toilet moes betaal!"

"Wat? 'n Bietjie?" asked my mom.

“Ja, mamma. Ek weet dis verkeerd, maar ek was net so kwaad...”

“Jy moes nie ’n bietjie gevat het nie, liefie. Jy moes baie! Nou gaan terug en kry nog!”

“Maar Mamma, dan moet ek weer betaal,” I reminded her.

“O ja,” she said, and we both looked down at the red check tablecloth between us.

Half an hour later, I was on the platform, seeing my mom off as her Amsterdam train left ten minutes before mine. Standing there, waving goodbye, felt like that moment when you decide now it’s time to stop milking the beast. That final tear.

The good thing about those squares, as opposed to rolls, is that when you use them in public, people don’t notice. Whereas people always notice when you use toilet paper as tissues. I know, I’m one of them.

The wad I’m rolling up now is not for me. I’ve been at it for so long, my bum is getting sore. Sometimes the paper twists and I’ve to stop and correct it. Especially now that it’s for someone else.

Sandiso asked me for newspaper once. I wanted to know what it was for. I thought he wanted to read it. He didn’t answer. I asked again. When he didn’t answer the third time, I kept quiet. The next time I saw him, I gave him all my old Mail&Guardians, a clump of tissues and a roll of Baby Soft from my own supplies at home.

I remembered the afternoon I went to visit him in the township and asked if I could go to the loo. I squatted over a bucket in his aunt’s room, trying my hardest to relax. When I was done, Nombulelo handed me a roll of toilet paper with lavender motifs on. “Wow, where did you get this?” I asked, unable to connect the lavender with the bucket I had just peed in.

“Oh, I stayed at a B&B last week,” she said. “I stole it from them.” Wow, no qualms about that one, I thought. And a whole roll. I mean, I’m a regular at this, but it just seems wrong to help yourself to a whole roll. Especially since it’s so glaringly obvious that you’ve stolen it. That’s why I prefer taking from large rolls – no one notices, and I include myself in that.

I guess in that way I'm like my mom. She's proud of her kleptomania nowadays. To an embarrassing degree. I'm not there when she raids aeroplanes of blankets and pillows, cutlery and earphones - not that you can use them on an iPod anyway. But when we come home from the restaurant and she takes the saucer out of her bag, I just want to die. A saucer. I mean, a whole saucer. And then a cup: a set! I can't believe she has no qualms about taking stuff in full view of other patrons at the restaurant, and staff. It doesn't seem to occur to her to be scared of getting caught.

I don't really want to keep giving my old Mail&Guardians to Sandiso, and I'm too stingy to give him any more of my Baby Soft supplies. So my solution is to steal toilet paper for him. Because it's easier to justify stealing for someone else than stealing for yourself.

17 April

Teacher: Robert Berold

Abongile's dream

On the coffee table in the living room is a bottle of full cream milk, like the ones the milkman used to deliver at home when I was small. Next to it are three bowls of mielie pap that Abongile has prepared for us. The red and pink sugar bowl, cheap retro bric-a-brac, is not something I'd expect to see in a township house. Abongile pours milk and adds sugar for her daughter Khaya, then I help myself. I put in lots of sugar.

"Oooh, yummm!" I say to Abongile. "I haven't had pap in years."

"I hate it," she says.

"Why? It's so yummy."

"Because we eat it every day. I'm so sick of pap." She's trying to get a spoonful into Khaya's mouth. Khaya has found her plastic pink chair and is sitting far from the table. "Sondela itafeleni," says Abongile. I write it down in my notebook and then ask her what that means. When it looks like Khaya won't eat any more, I say, "Sondela apha, sisi," but she only looks away.

We spend the whole of Saturday indoors because it's raining. While we are watching a Steven Segal movie on eTV, the electricity goes off. Abongile says she has to go to the petrol station. "Why?" I ask.

"The electricity's finished. We're on pre-paid," she says.

Abongile's mom has a little spaza shop in their kitchen, but the only people I've seen come in are kids wanting bombi for 50c a piece. Abongile goes out and I try in vain to teach two-year-old Khaya how to write her name. The only thing she does by herself, without my hand guiding hers, is the cross bar of the H. Ten minutes later, the electricity comes back on.

There's no toilet in Abongile's shack. I don't know what else to call it - the walls are real brick walls, but it's the size of a shack. I'm dreading the thought of getting up in

the middle of the night tonight, walking through the mud to the end of the garden just to go to the long drop. I haven't been in there yet – they wouldn't let me use it the last time I visited. It was in the afternoon and I had to use the blue bucket in Abongile's room. I peed while she and her mother chatted away in Xhosa while folding their own washing . Was it then that I asked her if I could sleep over, just to feel how it feels?

At 2am I wake up and I can't pinch any longer. The back door to the garden is locked, and I don't know where the key is. So I climb out of the iron window, which doesn't have any burglar bars. I don't even want to know what my sloffies are looking like after walking in this mud. Halfway through my visit to the long drop, I kick myself for leaving the toilet paper behind. By the light from my phone I see there's nothing to wipe myself with, not even a scrap of newspaper, so I drip-dry instead.

For brushing my teeth the next morning, Abongile gives me a mug of water and a bucket to spit into. She puts the bucket under the table in the kitchen and leaves it there. It already has some liquid in it. Not a lot, and I can't see what exactly it's, but it's enough to gross me out just a little.

While Abongile is sweeping the living room floor and dusting the wall unit, I ask what her dream job is. Her real job, in addition to cleaning our house, is supplying birthday cards to news agencies – something she's dead bored of. "Deco," she answers, after a moment of thought. "That's what I love most of all."

"Art deco?" I ask.

"No. Deco. As in decoration. Inside the house."

"Tell me about your dream lounge. How would you decorate it?"

"Oh! It would be big! It would have white furniture. Long white chairs, those flat ones, with wooden feet. And an orange wall unit, and a black and white rug in the middle, with a rose on it. But no coffee table. Just the space. And one big window, where the sun would come through every morning."

Teacher: Mxolisi Nyezwa 24 April

The hole

In the middle of the land there was a hole into which fathers disappeared. It was a big hole, and no one knew what was at the bottom, although some people had their suspicions.

One disappeared father's daughter was very worried. Her name was Mali, and her mother didn't seem concerned even though she was the one who told Mali about the hole. It was the day that her mother was planting sunflower seeds in the front garden.

"Why can't I go and look for him?" Mali asked her mother.

"It's dangerous. Anyone who finds the hole will have their heart broken."

"But why?" asked Mali.

"I can't tell you that, my child. I'm sorry."

"Please mommy, please can we go find the hole. I want to see daddy."

"NO! It's dangerous and you will get hurt!" shouted the mother, and returned to their one-room house.

Mali loved her father. He always lifted her up into the air when he came home from work. He took her to the moon, and then put her down, and tickled her until she couldn't laugh any more than she was already laughing. On Fridays, he would bring her a Strawberry Swirl – her favourite chocolate. He loved her. He loved her! She didn't care what her mother thought. She was going to find him and bring him home.

And so, before daybreak one Saturday morning, Mali got up and lit a candle. She put her favourite river stone in her pocket, found some bread in the kitchen, wrapped it up in a red handkerchief, and started walking in the before-light. She walked down a dirt road leading to the river. A great open field stretched to the left, covered with white plastic bags, bottles and birds' feathers. She knew that if she followed the river, she would find the hole. All the fathers must have been thirsty on their way there, so they

would have wanted some water to drink. When Mali arrived at the river, she started running up along the stones.

The sun came up over the hill and revealed a world of droplets on plants that grew near the river. Mali was far from the township now; there were no more bags in sight. What would her father say when she found him? He would lift her up into the air and take her to the moon and laugh! He would take a Strawberry Swirl from his pocket and say, "My child, this is for you. Thank you for coming to find me." And they would walk home together, and he would embrace her mother who would shake her head smiling, and put the kettle on the stove for tea.

At the top of the hill, the earth flattened out and Mali saw a gap in the grass ahead. The hole! Could she really have found it so soon? She ran towards it, sure that she would find her father now. The gap in the earth was dark, and she knew she had to be brave. There was no ladder, no rope. What do you want more than anything in life? she asked herself. Then she ran from a short distance and jumped into the hole. It swallowed her into itself and she fell and fell down down down until she thought she had reached the bottom. But she was falling more and more until she landed on a soft bed of feathers which rose as she fell and then fell as she rose, slowly, dizzily from their downy bed. When the feathers had all fallen back to their place on the ground, she looked to see what she could see. She expected to find missing fathers walking around and around in hats and suits, giving a nod to each other as they passed, and walking on. But there was nothing like that.

In every corner of this cavern-like space, there were double beds. There were long round mirrors with intricate golden frames and antique pieces of curved and velveted furniture. Standing in front of the mirrors, sitting on the chairs, and reclining on the beds, were women with long feather boas around their necks and sequins on their dresses. They had sparkly stilettos and on their feet, they wore wigs of every colour under the sun.

Mali stared in wonderment at the women. Despite the beautiful colours of their dresses and wigs, they seemed not alive. They looked at her with empty eyes. She

wanted to ask them if they had seen her father, but she was scared that one of them would come up to her, touch her, or bite her. There were even more women, reclining on leopard-printed couches. They were smoking cigarettes and drinking from long brown bottles. One of these women looked at her, and smiled from under her fake black eyelashes.

“Can I help you, luvvie? Looking for someone in particular?”

“Yes, I’m looking for my father.”

“Well, you won’t find him here, hun. He’s moved on.”

“So you know him then?”

“Sure I know him, luvvie. Know one, know ’em all, if you know what I mean,” she crowed. Mali looked at her with big eyes and wanted her to stop laughing, but was afraid to say anything. What if the woman really did know her father? Then the woman said sombrely, “He’s moved on, luvvie. You won’t find him here.”

“To where? Where will I find him?”

“Where do you think?”

“I don’t know! I thought he would be here, but I can’t see him anywhere. I can’t see any of the fathers.”

“That’s because He’s moved on. They’ve all moved on. They come here once, each of them come once, and then they leave.”

“Where do they go?”

“To the next hole, further up the hill. And then the next one, and the next.”

“Does that mean I’ve to go to each hole to find my father?” asked Mali.

"I wouldn't be as stupid as to do that," replied the woman. "He doesn't want to come back, you know. He has found something else now. He doesn't want to be with you." She lifted a cigarette to her orange lips and fumbled in a red handbag for a lighter.

"That's impossible! My father loves me! I'm his angel. He always says he wants nothing more than to be with me!"

"Then why is he not home, sweetie? Why is he not there, playing with you, sitting at the dining room table after dinner, helping you with your homework."

"Because the hole swallowed him up. It's not his fault. He went walking one night and the hole swallowed him up and he couldn't get out. I've to help him get out."

"Oh, the hole swallowed him up, did it? It's the hole's fault then, is it? So your precious daddy did nothing wrong, it wasn't his poor fault. It was the fault of Belinda over there, or Cherice over here, or me?"

"I just want to find my father."

"Well, you won't find him here. And believe whatever you want to believe, sweetheart. So innocent, so young! I'm getting a drink. You want something? Or are you too young for that?" laughed the woman as she turned on her heels and walked away, not waiting for an answer.

Mali did not know what to do. She had to find her father. But where? There had to be an exit to this hole, because otherwise how did the fathers get out? Then, in the dim light, she saw a blue neon sign saying EXIT. She ran to it and, without hesitation, followed the dark tunnel leading to the heart of the hill. She felt along the walls and as her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw a light up ahead. It was a bright light revealing a fork of two tunnels. Above one tunnel she saw a sign saying MEN. She chose this tunnel. That's the one her father would have chosen.

She walked, feeling her way along the smooth wall and guided by the dim light. Then she stopped. The woman on the leopard-print couch was talking to her, in her head. "Then why is he not home?" she said. "Why is he not there, playing with you, sitting at

the dining room table after dinner and helping you with your homework?” She put her hand in her pocket and felt the cool touch of the smooth river stone. Then she felt for the tunnel wall and looked back in the direction she had just come from.

When she reached the fork again, she turned into the other tunnel. She struggled over sharp rocks that cut at her knees. Every time she heard scuttling noises or felt the flapping of a bat past her face, she put her hand into her pocket and squeezed the stone. There were weed-like traps and slippery parts in some places, but eventually she saw a glimmer of blue twilight in the distance.

The village lights glinted in the early evening, she could hear a dog bark. When she arrived at the house, her mother ran to the gate. “Mali! Where have you been?” Her mother held her against her generous breast without waiting for an answer. She held her close as Mali felt one warm tear, then another, roll over her cheek onto the dry earth where the sunflower seeds lay buried.

29 April

Independent writing

Lena in the kloof

Lena prepares lunch – stokbrood with a little bit of konfyt that her mother-in-law made before they left Port Elizabeth. It's delicious – she wants to eat more and more. But there is a long journey ahead over the mountains to the north, and her husband is keeping an eye on the food supplies. She's washing the stokbrood sticks in the stream when Jan announces that He's going to have his middagslapie now. She tells him she will sit by the fire and prepare supper.

There is no path leading up the kloof, but Lena follows the river, hugging it so that she will be able to find her way back before dark. The shrubs tearing at the layers of her white dress do not bother her. All she wants to do is to get as far as possible from this man she has been calling her husband for three months. Since the wedding, she hasn't had a moment alone with herself. She's up all day, standing in the kitchen, cutting the meat into strips, hanging them up on the line. She's awake all night, unable to sleep after her husband pushes himself into her on the hard double bed, leaving her raw. This is not what she heard about marriage. No one told her about this part.

She brushes past a khakibos and a large patch of blackjacks attach themselves to her dress. She must remember to pick them off later. Then she strides on, looking behind her as if Jan is right there, following. She has to get as far as possible before he wakes up.

The shrubs along the river are getting too thick to negotiate. She steps onto a large flat stone in the stream, and then onto some smaller ones. Her foot misses the next stone, she loses balance, her boot splatters into the tannin-stained water. Let me drink a bit, she says to herself. She bends down, puts her other booted foot in the water and scoops some of the clear brown liquid into her cupped hands. It runs down her throat slowly. Then she continues, the bottom half of her dress dragging behind her over the stones.

Deep in the kloof now, the late afternoon sunrays trickling through the trees above, Lena hears a noise. She stops. Maybe she just imagined it. She continues, walking on

stones along the river rather than in the water now. Then she hears it again. A rustle in the bushes. A monkey?

A week ago, there was a moment like this. She was standing in the kitchen of her mother-in-law's house, overlooking the sea, kneading the dough for beskuit. She froze for a moment, thinking Jan had come into the kitchen. She turned around. Her mother-in-law was standing behind her, watching her. Her mother-in-law said nothing, just stood there with dark eyes on her. Then she returned in silence to the sitkamer.

She treads over the stones more quietly, the golden rays of the midday sun in the kloof around her dwindling with each step. Where am I going? she asks herself. She sits down next to the river, on a large stone, and takes her boots off. And that's when she sees him. His face, jutting out from behind the rock. Just a face, no body. Watching her.

She gasps. His face is dark, black. She stares ahead, imagines him working through the white layers of her dress. What if he wants to attack me? The face stays, suspended in the air, unmoving.

Something in her wants to go up to him, get a closer look. But she's frozen to the rock, her boots flopped over their sides where she has left them. What happens next? How does she remove herself from this place? How does she move?

"Lena!" calls a voice from downriver. Like a saw through wood, echoing through the spaces between the trees. "Lena!" Lena looks for the dark face, but it has disappeared. "Lena!" She twists around to where her husband is struggling over the rocks, his trousers splattered with water. The closer he comes, the more the terror rises in her chest. The closer he comes, the more her head sags towards the wet dress, the limp boots.

"Lena! How dare you? You lied to me!" the voice saws through her head, the hands grab her shoulders and shakes her uncontrollably. "How dare you! You get back right now. You get back with me!" One strong hand grabs hers. The dread in her chest does not subside, but she does not resist. He pulls her behind, dragging her through the

shallow water, barefoot. When his arm grows tired, she follows him without a word, downriver.

*

Lena gets up before the sun has risen. She makes sure Jan is still asleep – He's. She finds the flint and the candle, which she lights so that she can search through his koffer. It's not there. She holds her breath as she moves to the leather satchel on the other side of the tent. There she finds it. The cold metal warms quickly in her hands. She buries it against her chest – cold again on her skin, and then warm.

Deftly, she opens the tin her mother-in-law gave her last week on the condition that she bring it back to Port Elizabeth if they meet again. From it, she retracts two pieces of beskuit and quietly pushes them into her pockets. She blows out the candle and waits outside the tent. When her eyes have adjusted to the dark, she sets off along the river.

The forest around her materialises leaf by leaf. As she treads carefully on, the birds twitter above her, around her, deafening. Before long, she finds the rock. It has been easier to get here in the dark than in the mid-afternoon light. She looks around her. There is no one. She sits on the rock and closes her eyes. Then she feels in the upper layers of her dress for the revolver. She opens her eyes, and nostrils, breathes in the first light. She closes her eyes, she shoots.

Jan jerks awake. Die geweer. My vrou. Daai vrou. He gets up from the mat in one violent move, fumbles for his boots, and, in his white long-johns, strides through the shrubs along the river. He moves past the khakibos, over the stones, in and out of the clear brown water. "Lena!" he calls as he approaches the rock. "Lena!" He looks down at the body and grabs it by the shoulders. "Aaaaaaarrrrrrgh!" The echo through the tree-spaces, the saw-sound. With all the force in him, he shakes her with both arms. Her chest is red, her shoulders are red, it's staining his hands. "You... you... Lena! How dare you! Jy gaan betaal hiervoor! Jy gaan..."

A noise. Did he hear a noise? A rustle in the trees? A monkey? Jan keeps still, looks around, through the trees. It's a noise. He grabs the gun from the hand of his wife, her fingers fall limply to her chest. He gets up and strides over to where the sound comes from – a rocky outcrop just up from the kloof. Then he hears it again, moving away. Then he sees it – It's a man. A black man, running ahead of him, back bent as he ducks into the undergrowth. Jan runs forward, pushing himself over the rocks and forcing his way through the bushes. He catches only a glimpse of the man, but he points the gun and shoots. A cry escapes from the undergrowth. Jan surges forward, with new energy, he hears his own heart throbbing in his head, nothing else. A branch catches the hollow of his left eye, he flails blindly to push it away, staggers forward, hits the earth. The smell of decaying leaves overpowers him as listens to the sound of the man running away. He lifts his head to the sky above, glints into the sharp white sun, then lets his head hang down, dead leaves caught in his hair.

1 May

Independent writing

The finger space

A finger. A word. A finger. A word. The classroom was dark, the windows didn't let in as much light as grade one classrooms should. She wrote slowly with her black and red HB pencil. Her dad had sharpened it for her this morning with a knife.

She pressed hard on the page. She didn't want to get it wrong. But a capital cursive 'L' was hard. She couldn't remember from which point to start. Then there was the 'E' – even harder. Too many loops, too much detail. The only letter she could write with full confidence was 'M' – M for Micah. Small L's, small E's were no problem. She liked their simplicity – one simple loop and done.

Years later, she would watch Japanese children trying to print in English. They could already do the whole *hiragana* alphabet, with its soft flowing lines, like cursive A's and T's. But *roomaji*, which can be translated literally as 'Rome letter', was another story. "Finger spaces!" she'd call when the kids copied words from the board with half a page between each. Or wrote them on top of one another so they could save space. She would demonstrate on the board: a finger, a word, a finger, a word. If they could concentrate, the children were quick to obey, and carefully copied the movement of her ink-stained finger.

One thing she found impossible to get them to change, however, was the way they crossed their t's and dotted their i's. The horizontal line on the t would always come first, or the dot of the i. "You always go from up to down, she'd say, or make a huge pimple of an i before drawing the meagre reed hanging off of it. They would do it once, and then forget. The Japanese writing law of Horizontal First had been drilled into their brains from the moment they started learning to write. Just one more opposite between Japan and South Africa.

Finger spaces. Pencil, sharpened by knife. Blue-lined paper with a red margin. Control control control all her life, struggling with the cursive L, not getting it right, just like she can't get writing right now. A failure again. Where did all that confidence go? Of the

teacher, performing on a stage in front of Japanese children, singing finger spaces
finger spaces finger spaces!

1 May

Independent writing

The cricket

At night, the crickets watch over me, and remind me that I'm not alone. To remind me they sing through the night. That's what they do. They accompany me through the warmth of the night along the edges of my dreams, something I never noticed till this summer.

'Can I clear this space?' Tilana asks, about to get onto the kitchen counter. I nod, watching her bare knees move onto the marble-white surface. She places her lidless Melrose jar over the living body of a cricket. "Oops, something came off," she says. I stare at the black leg on the white counter. "It will die soon," she says, screwing on the yellow cap. "I put ethyl acetate into the jar."

Long after she's left, I still see the leg on the counter. The disembodied cricket, one among last night's choir. Who entertained me endlessly, serenaded me to sleep. I led her to him. I gave him over to the purposes of science: to the pinboard of 150 families, part of Tilana's insectology project.

"Don't worry," she assured me just before she left, "I should be able to stick it back together."

For the rest of the day, I can't write. It's not because I'm still thinking about the cricket that I've betrayed. It's because now, with one death done, I get up from my desk every time I hear a buzz, a zoom or a flutter. I hold the plastic cup and yellow cardboard out, and trap the guilty party. A bee, a mosquito, a moth. A fly that's too quick for me. I rush to close all the windows. Usually I shoo flies out of the room. This time I try to keep it inside, but It's too late.

I've caught at least seven insects this morning, but I've done almost no writing. Why must I write when I can catch a red ant or a wasp? The acacia tree outside my room is teeming with insects. I never knew it. I was always too busy to look. Now I can't stop looking. Insects all over the place, waiting to be caught by me. So I can bring them back to Tilana.

“I don’t think my parents are taking this seriously,” says Tilana. “I think they see it as a bit of a joke.” She has asked her parents to collect insects too. I heard her speaking to her dad on the phone this morning. “If it was 150 insects, that would be okay. But it’s not, dad. It’s 150 *families* of insects. For June, dad. So we have to start collecting now.” That’s when I call her, to come collect her cricket.

I’m killing insects for a good purpose, I tell myself. For science. Who knows, maybe Tilana will become a world-renowned entomologist one day. But the killing need is in me too. I enjoy it. I enjoy the power I’ve over something not my own size. To watch it struggle and squirm to escape, but to know it will not. The cruelty is addictive. Why write when you can kill?

1 May

Independent writing

Boa Noite

Boa noite a minha amiga

words a friend gives me

just before bed.

I hold them close to my skin

a feathered hot water bottle.

Boa noite a minha amiga:

Good night my female friend.

3 May

Independent writing

The graveyard visitor

Beryl married at the age of 18. The first Monday after their wedding, while Frank was at work, Beryl started going to the graveyard. She sat on the grass, leaning her head against the only tree, and looked out over the graves. She read the names and started memorising them. Then she walked home to prepare lunch for Frank. Creamed spinach, boiled potatoes, roasted lamb. Pumpkin fritters, green salad with parsley, trifle for dessert. Frank ate in silence, thanked his wife, went back to work. The same routine repeated for forty years, until the day Beryl died.

After her death, Frank visited the graveyard every day. He came up and sat across from the empty space next to Beryl's grave and thought about her. One day while sitting there, he noticed a piece of paper in a small plastic bag sticking out of the ground. He would normally write it off as litter, but the fact that the paper was inside the bag made him stop. He got up from where he was sitting and tugged it out of the hard ground. It had been torn from a ringbound notebook and was moist within the plastic, but as he opened it up, he could still make out the handwriting.

Dear Esther

18 October 1960

Last night was my first time. We were too tired after the wedding. He did not kiss me, the way they do in the movies. It was dark in the room but I could hear him take off his pyjama pants. He slipped in next to me and found the hem of my nightie, lifting it up with one hand while the other pulled my drawers down to my knees. Then he pushed himself into me. It hurt, but I kept quiet. When he fell asleep I went to the bathroom and washed between my legs. I couldn't sleep after that.

What happened your first time?

Beryl

Frank stared at the letter in horror. He stood up, his body pounding with shock. Then, to the left of Beryl's, he saw the grave: Esther Marion Hobson, BORN: 7 January 1918, DIED: 2 November 1955.

Frank shook his head. As he looked down, he noticed the corner of another piece of paper peeping out of the ground. He tugged at it, took it out of its bag, and read it.

Dear Avis.

29 September 1975

I found her lipstick in his jacket pocket today. When did you find out about your husband?

Beryl.

Frank looked at the date on the letter. 1975. Fifteen years after the first letter, after their wedding. He strode along the graves, reading the names one by one. At the end of the row he found Avis Millicent Dickson. He put the letters in his pocket and went straight home.

In the phone book, he found the number for the municipality. How can you neglect the graveyard like this, he shouted at the person on the other end of the line. The place is a mess! Weeds growing out of the cracks, creepers crawling over the headstones, litter half-buried in the ground. If you don't give a damn about the graveyard, which you clearly don't, I'll go and clean up the place himself. Suit yourself, said the voice on the other end.

The next day, Frank arrived at the cemetery while the dew was still hanging off the grass. He walked past his wife's tomb with the shovel from his toolshed and found a spot near Avis' grave. There he started digging up a clump of devil thorns. He discovered another letter, and over the next few weeks, many more, buried in small plastic bags all over the graveyard. He didn't read them there. He put them into the pockets of his overalls and emptied them out over the kitchen counter, where he and his wife ended up eating in the later years. She was tired of moving back and forth between the dining room and the kitchen, she had said. He didn't like eating in the kitchen, but he gave in.

Frank is with Beryl now. They are together in a grave big enough for four people. When Frank's body was lowered into the hole, the letters accompanied him down, as was his dying wish. That's where they remain now, in a box over his heart, for no one else to see.

8 May

Teacher: Hazel Crampton

Come and witness the power of muti (dialogue)

What happened to your penis?

I went to Dr Mukisa and he made it big & strong permanently.

Wow. No more weak penis. This is going to solve all your marriage problems.

I'm not married. I just went to bring back lost lover.

How did you lose her?

She was too busy because she got a promotion at work. Which meant business attraction 1 more customers. But I think she was bewitched.

By who?

One of her customers. She mentioned him once or twice.

Well, when she sees your big & strong penis, she will forget about him for sure. There are women who can't ejaculate during sex, but she won't ever be one of them.

8 May

Teacher: Hazel Crampton

What happened to Roy Blumenthal? (review)

Roy Blumenthal, the writer. What happened to him? And what's it to me, only having come across his name a week ago in a now defunct literary magazine?

Well, it's quite simple, really. If a short story is long, I mean longer than three pages, it usually gets the flip-over. But the title 'The undertaker's hand' in the 2003 September issue of *Donga* caught my eye. First line reads: "Beano told me that there was this chick who wanted to help me with my publishing venture." Third paragraph: "There's something in her voice... I'm fantasising about her, goddamn it. Twenty minutes into a phone call with someone I'm sure I don't need to meet." With a start like that, you can't skip, or skim the 12 pages to follow.

So, who is this Roy Blumenthal? Among other things, a poet, copywriter, art director and screenwriter. Blumenthal tried to popularise poetry by distributing 20 000 copies of poems by five local poets for free in the early nineties. In the early noughties, he came up with *Raggedlines*: printing poems onto table cloths in order to "save poetry from exile" as reported by the Northcliff Melville Times. Blumenthal also runs Barefoot Press, "South Africa's first dedicated poetry website and home of free poetry."

The seeds for this website were sown back in the day, when Blumenthal compared his 1991 photocopied poetry collection 'Sweatland', to *samizdat* – literature secretly published and distributed in the Soviet Union. "This is not secret," he says in the introduction, "but if you like, you are welcome to photocopy it." And if you've read the poems, you will want to photocopy them. Or, if you're not willing to pay the 50c at NELM, you can copy an entire poem into your notebook, as I did with 'Let the games begin'.

This is a particularly powerful poem about two people having sex. Like Allan Kolski Horwitz and Gary Cummiskey, Blumenthal explores the inner conflict between desire and love. A man is lying on the bed, about to have sex, but his analysis of the situation gets in the way of pleasure: "A fleeting thought: 'She's beautiful,' / her mouth comes close to his. / The kiss he hates but tolerates / because she'll let him in." His giving in is

also demonstrated in the final two lines: "So he comes back to her, he always does / he needs her tender love." The reader however, is left with the uncomfortable feeling that this has nothing to do with love.

But let's get back to his prose, which is what I'm really interested in, and which is why I want to know what happened to Blumenthal the writer. The awkwardness of sex between two people who either don't know or love each other in 'Let the games begin' is just as poignantly addressed in 'The undertaker's hand'. Eric is a writer-publisher who goes to meet a potential editor, Juliette, at her house. Which turns out to be the house of an undertaker – her father. Eric and Juliette end up sleeping together, before Eric finds out, to his horror, that she's not only a virgin, but a Jew-converted-Christian. Even before this, he goes down on her in the undertaker's lounge, wiping his beard with his "hand-shaking hand" minutes before meeting the undertaker himself. The reader cringes at the words, "But I can't shake the man's hand with his daughter's juices all over me, can I?"

It's this cringing feeling throughout the story that makes it impossible to put it down. Not least during the sex scene, where the image of the undertaker, sniffing his hand, flashes through the speaker's mind. The characterisation, particularly of Juliette, is spot on. The mixture of her wannabe worldliness and lack of self-confidence are evident in lines like, "I'm really, really hairy, and it's the biggest turn off in the world," and "We're going to News Café. We're going to your house to fuck." A hesitation. "We're going to fuck." And even more jarring than the sex scene are Juliette's words to Eric as he drops her off at the undertaker's afterwards: "I want to make love again. I'll call you. And I'll pray for you." Why, he wants to know. "It will be good for you, for us. God loves you, Eric." Blumenthal has perfected the art of showing, not telling. This is how I'd like to write.

Alas, prose no longer seems to excite Blumenthal, as I found out when I emailed him recently. He now focuses his energy on being a visual facilitator, and admits, "I became a twitter addict. I find 144 character witticisms way more attractive to write than turbid verse or deathless prose." Pity, I'd have liked more of where Eric and Juliette came from.

But there is no need to despair. We haven't lost Roy the writer. He has just caught on to new ways of bringing his message, the thing that makes him tick, to the world. A message that, like the undertaker's hand, will be a difficult one to forget.

15 May

Teacher: Robert Berold

Doubt

Something into. The white page is so white it swims in itself. Swims in and out of whiteness, in and out of itself. Then it returns to its white selfness.

It didn't happen it didn't happen it didn't. Why should it have happened? And how?

Something out of. The page swims with words that swim through each other like hoops. Children holding legs open for the other children to swim through. The first goes in under through legs legs legs and comes out at the other end.

It never happened. It's a dream. You never happened. It's wrong. I don't want to return to your house today. I don't want to know that it happened because it didn't happen. I was alone I was strong and then what happened? You happened. Now I'm none of those things and you are all of those things and we are like black and white and there are no dots of each other in the other. We are a write page a black and white page how can we ever be like each other?

You took my words so that there was nothing left to read and too much left to write. I'm white you are black I'm empty you are right I'm wrong.

Black white swan swan swam swam swim swim into out of past past past each other. It did not happen. It was a dream. Nothing changes no change I'm not coming to see you tonight. How dare you do this It's enough I'm going home now.

Swimswamswum we are two become one come one come one. Through and through you be who I be and I be who? You? Impossible! Possible madness craziness understanding? Impossible! It's what It's, which is exactly what it isn't. You are what you are, which is exactly what you are not HOW DID THIS HAPPEN AND WHY NOW? I don't like to have my words rearranged but you have rearranged them in such a way that they cannot be put back into order. How dare you? How dare you? How dare you call me inhumane?

Don't attempt anything without the gloves without the gloves without the yellow kitchen gloves.

Who bought colour to our pages? And why yellow? It's too yellow for me the yellow swimsuit with the big black dot – Hang Ten sister.

Colour to our pages how dare you, who gave you? Permission. Not me. Innocent now I'm the white one. Guilty now you are wordy with your yellow words sprouting from Who Knows Why and all that and there's more where that came from and STOP NOW I'LL NOT ALLOW YOU TO ENTER THESE PREMISES unless you shut up. Shut your mouth now you are words and I'm white and you enter me and I swallow you and we are two and we are one. One?

How come?

How. Come?

Come. Go. Uniegebou. Waar die dominee sit en. Chappies kou. Geel chappies. Yellow mellow is it banana milkshake or is it a scratch of sunshine in crayon or is it a lion on a matchbox? What is it? It's what It's, which is what It's. Yellow. Stop asking. Questions. (Questions: stop asking them.)

No no no you are not real. Twas but a dream, surely, and I'm trying to sound coy. I'm a boy you are a girl who knows too much we are children touching why oh why did I let you why oh why did we kiss when all I wanted was to not move? How did it happen that black swam into white and white swam out of black and the two pages became one page for one night. One night only! Everybody, Terrible News! Pumpkin Jack is missing. Orange has left the page.

Was it ever there? The orange lion the bank the country the soccer team the city you lived in the cousins the connection the NO NO NO GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM: there is no us. There is me and you. You hear? Me and you not meyou. You and me and not us, not us NOT US no no NOT NOT NOT.

Don't speak to me your words. You convince me your books are all right and are all. My. Books. Our books they are our books HOW DARE YOU? What gives you the right? I'll never let you be me. Who are you anyway? I said who? I said it was a man you are a man you said thank you I said It's not a pleasure can we get this over and done with so I can go home now? And just forget that the dream is blue now, with you swimming your swimminglessness into it. You swim in out in, out in and you stay there till dawn on the yoga mat which is blue and I love you and no, sorry, that was a mistake I'm an island and will forever be.

No more new colours no more new nothing no one, goodbye. Please do not leave me alone out here. Calling and calling in the white snow calling the colours and telling them they can come in now. Please do not. Leave me. Leave me! No no no no no. You are, yes, and you are not .What you are we are not? Are we? We are. You and I are I and you is. Not? Is is is. Promise.

Words and wordless whiteness are and are not. Each. Other. Love is love is love and is not love when It's words. When It's white It's only love you are white I'm words we are love. r. s. Are we?

15 April

Independent writing

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

FEBRUARY

3 February

Introduction Day

Professor Laurence Wright made me realise how lucky I am to be one of the chosen eight who get the chance to do this course. To spend a year reading and writing intensively. And to *finish* something. I'm looking forward to reflecting and reflecting and reflecting – that's my soul food. Reading too. As for writing – that'll be the hardest. But I'm being guided every which way, and I'll take full advantage of this once in a lifetime opportunity.

5 February

Introduction seminar with teachers

Today I understood for the first time the importance of belonging to a community. Of writers who share a passion for the craft, as well as troubles that go with it. Who can talk openly about their problems with writing. Like Paul Wessels who says sometimes he looks at his writing and thinks it's 'disgusting', or Anton Krueger who says he doesn't suffer from writer's block. HUMAN BEINGS with the same issues that I grapple with every day. Robert confirmed this later: "We need communities, we need friends. I need writers around me."

Poet Joan Metelkamp, in her contribution to the question of what to write, said that sometimes not knowing anything is the place to start. "I want to quote a line by [fellow poet] Robert Berold... When you really don't know/ an angel arises." This comment corresponds with a lesson I've learned recently from the Tao – that it's better to be empty and *not* know. This came as a relief to me, who always thought I *had* to know.

7 February

Seminar One: The teacher does not seduce

I'm waiting for the teacher to impregnate me. To tell me when to write the first word. So I can start the process, allow the baby to grow inside, to finally be given a chance at existence. But the teacher says no. "Read now." Not a word, however, about writing. Not a flirtation, not a wink, nothing. WHY CAN'T I JUST START? Why do I need to be told? Why can't I just initiate the process myself? By myself? Trying to stall the adventure of being impregnated for as long as possible, because the thought of it requires too much effort? It's a bit of everything, I decide.

"Your reflective journal is anything that's not your writing," said Robert. But my reflections *are* what I want to write about. My struggle with writing *is* my writing, is material for my novel.

9 February

First meeting with Prof Wright

Wow. To say I was blown away by today's meeting is an understatement. I gained so much from Prof's insight. Basically, he said I must bring my journal to our meetings and tell him about it so I can *listen to myself*. Also, writers or researchers feel they have this BIG THING to write. But all you have to do is write the next few words related to the thing that's growing inside you. TRUST that the thing you're bashing together already has a shape. Resist the urge to edit yourself too much. Keep it raw, KEEP IT ALIVE! There are two Ruths: the secretary and the writer. Ruth the writer writes chunks of raw stuff and gets the essence down. Ruth the secretary is important but is only allowed to come in wayyyyyyy down the line, in case her tidying up strangles the creativity.

10 February

Initial ideas on book plot

Okay. I'm ready to commit to a theme. An inter-racial relationship. I just think it's something I can deal with now, and something I can get material for from my own

experiences. Also because I've, as a white woman, never had a relationship with a black man, so I feel that I can write about it fictionally. I feel the need to separate my experiences from the novel so that I don't end up writing memoir, alienating the reader, or getting too involved in my own therapy!

I also want the protagonist to go to Japan for a bit, and possibly have a homosexual relationship so I can deal with the gender theme too. I need to relax about it though, I'm already stressing about having too many themes. (Later: I now realise the theme grows organically out of the raw material, not the other way round. Also, there's nothing wrong with writing from experience – it makes the text all the more genuine).

11 February

Feedback session week 1

A quote by Gail Sher from Liz: Four noble truths for writers. "Writers write. Writing is a process. You don't know what you're writing until the end of the process. If writing is your practice the only way to fail is not to write." I absolutely love this quote. It's something I want to put on my wall so I can remind myself of it every day.

11 February

Writing about writing

I think my book will have two parallel stories drawn from my experiences. One is a story about a writer struggling to write her novel, and the other is the story she's writing. It's reflective and looks at the difficulties of writing (motivation, laziness, fear of failure and rejection) while dealing with issues like the search for identity in the narrative part of the novel.

13 February

Free writing dilemma

I realise I need to do what Prof suggested: to write and not stop where my experience stops. To go where I'd never go in real life, where I'm too afraid to go. Every time I do a free writing exercise, I find it really hard to commit myself to writing a story, even if it's three pages long. However, the feeling of satisfaction afterwards is indescribable. And it really helps to get positive feedback and suggestions from the group. Now I just need to get into a daily free writing routine.

14 February 2011

The penis of life

I'm disappointed. I had the plot all worked out, all ready. All I needed to do was write the novel now. But then today, my sub-conscious interfered. It came in the form of free-writing. It came, and once the tap was open, it just flowed and flowed. And stuff came out... childhood experiences, desires, fears surrounding sexuality. And I realised I can't control the story, I can't even try to. I need allow it to change completely if necessary. I must open my legs wide to let the huge penis of life enter. It has no limits to its creativity, no standards, no inhibitions, no morals, no fears and no restrictions. It just is.

16 February

Sexual output

I've to admit, I'm a little disturbed by the amount of sexual images, ideas, thoughts, fantasies, admissions, acknowledgements that come out in my free writing. I mean, clearly it has to come out. And I assume it's just something I've (been taught to) repress all my life. Now I don't have to censor myself at all, I can let go. It's hard beforehand, before I write, to allow myself to go there. But then, once I've done it, I feel immensely fulfilled. And, dare I say it? As if I've just had one phenomenal orgasm.

I couldn't put down Paul Wessels' *My ghost in the bush of lies*. It's been months, no, years, since I last read a book so hungrily. It made no sense to me, and I don't think it

makes sense to the author himself. And yet it was coherent in its own incoherent way and engaging and impossible to put down. The mixture of prose, poetry, scriptwriting, musings, notes, reflections, truth, fiction, experience, fantasy, philosophy, and sexual exploits were phenomenal. I'd love to experiment with this style.

17 February

First meeting with Robert as creative supervisor

Robert's advice today was to keep being a beginner, EMPTY THE MIND so you can experience the world afresh. Allow yourself to not know. It's okay to let the seeds manifest down the line, this year is not about publishing the great novel or even just an ordinary novel. It's about exploring. He pointed out that I'm in danger of doing what I'm told, especially if someone gives me a recipe for structure. I need to allow time to let my writing ability grow.

18 February

Feedback on 'Flight home'

I tried something new today – using meta-commentary in a text, about the text itself. Neither Robert nor Paul Wessels liked it particularly, but it was good for me to give it a go. And they said I could apply the same technique to another narrative. I also misunderstood Robert's advice about giving an uncensored version of 'Flight home', the portfolio story I had to edit. I automatically assumed he meant I should add sexual content. But with 'uncensored', he meant I was too polite in my writing – I didn't describe the male character well enough and the narrator's responses to him were not believable (she didn't show anger when she should have). I realised that I need to become aware of how I avoid using real emotions, especially negative ones, in writing.

19 February

Four reasons why I'm happy

I'm writing every day, without censoring myself. I'm writing about sex and sexuality and religion and love and hate and repulsion and attraction and everything I feel like writing about without worrying about the content. I've time to read books and reject

books and to let the words on the pages open taps in my subconscious. My family is not here. They are not in the back of my mind all the time, censoring my work. I get feedback on my writing. I can't ask for anything more. Amen.

19 February

Meta-narrative idea

I like the idea of writing a parallel narrative with a story and then meta-insertions by the editor and author, so that the meta-story becomes the real story. This idea really really excites me, because it's the process I'm going through now – dealing with 'editors'. Essentially I'm pretty sure the book will have some form of self-reflection and self-critique contained within its pages.

21 February

Sending free writing to Prof

Embarrassed. For what I'm about to send Prof Wright. My free writing is wild and uncensored and I'm mortified about everything I admit in there, even embarrassed to admit it to myself. But I must accept that this is part of the exercise, part of the process, and I need to go through it before I can start writing the novel.

The Writer's Life and Storytelling with Paul Mason

The crux of the readings and today's class is that all stories should have an exposition, an inciting moment (the HOOK; a happening that sets the plot in motion), rising action, complication, crisis or climax, falling action and resolution – often coming back to the hero's ordinary world). I'll really need to apply this somehow because I struggle to naturally use these elements in my work.

23 February

Michael Rabinger on documentary film

SHARE with colleagues – solicit their reactions and intelligence. Don't keep your work to yourself: associations have power, individuals don't. You are an individual, but you are also a leaf on a great tree with the same branch as others, sharing the same trunk

and the same roots. This is one of my biggest problems. I'm so used to keeping my work to myself, but I realise the importance of sharing for my own growth.

24 February

The downs of memoir

I've started reading two books recommended by two teachers. One is Chris Kraus' 'I love Dick' and the other is Jeanette Winterson's 'Written on the body'. Both writers focus on themselves, shutting the reader out. I can't get excited or engaged because I can't relive the experience of the narrator. It's problematic for me at this stage because all my own free writing is very me me me I I I. At some point, I'm going to have to change something because as a storyteller, I want to SHARE what I write in a way that's engaging for the reader.

25 February

'Writer's life and storytelling' feedback session

Robert said that 'The leather satchel' needed emotional energy and asked what was my core emotion while writing the plot, so I can put it into the story. Again, that writing about emotion problem! Despite the good feedback, I tend to take criticism personally and when I feel as if I've failed, and don't want to go back and improve the piece I've written. But as Robert stressed: the writing is in the re-writing.

27 February

Rewriting

I can't I can't I can't rewrite. Why must I? It's so haaaaard. I feel like an eight-year-old girl who got a maths problem wrong and has to go home and solve it now. With no one to help her. She must figure it out all by herself. I can't do maths! I can't rewrite! How must I? How do I apply the instructions without exact advice, like put in another character, or make the character do *this*. Please please please give me exact instructions. I'm going to fail my first assignment. I'm going to fail the course. I'm a failure failure failure. I don't deserve to be here.

28 February

Creating characters

After a really bad morning I found today's class inspirational. Anton Krueger got us to write a character sketch from notes that people found lying around (sourced from found.com). This showed me that you can create a character out of ANYTHING. I always have this thing against creating characters – I don't want to set them in glue or commit to actually creating someone solid. My fear of committing to *anything* I guess. Based, of course, on my fear of failure. But today I feel inspired to create new and unique personalities – whoop whoop to that!

MARCH

1 March

Writing at a set time

Brilliant start to the day thanks to Anton Krueger's suggestion to write for a certain amount of time at a set time. Got up at 5:30, meditated, and wrote from 6-7.

3 March

Short story writing

Robert said sometimes I tackle issues that are too big for a short story, like incest or weight issues. I need to put that stuff into a longer project. For short stories, you need two or three characters only (two major and one minor), and one CONTAINABLE incident. What fantastic advice!

Anton Krueger feedback session: characters

A wonderful session. With my piece, Anton didn't start off asking the class what the inciting moment, climax, conflict and resolutions were, like he did with the others. He started discussing it as if it were a piece of literature!! Commenting on the subtext, plot development, hints at characterisation, combination of humour and tragedy, and that it's clear what the character want and what's standing in their way. I feel bad mentioning this, but you know what, today I needed that little boost, so for once I'm not going to feel guilty about it!

Breakthrough with the book

I'm really excited now. Robert said I can turn all that stuff I wrote about you-know-who into a short story. I mean, I can actually use that bizarre mushmash of words and make it into something! He said short story, but added I may be able to develop it into a novel. So, without further ado (I'm so excited, I'm starting to talk like a *seremoniemeester*) these were his comments and tips: First and foremost, I need to FICTIONALISE the story. Second, the main theme is obsession. This girl is obsessed with someone who is able to express their transgressiveness through their work (explicit sex etc) whereas she's unable to do so. Other men appear in the book – men that

adore her, but who irritate her. These men don't touch the main narrative, but do demonstrate how she gains a sense of power. Thirdly, the obsession is sparked by his book. In the resolution he rejects her, or she really starts hating him (really really, as opposed to 'fake hate' originating from her jealousy of his brilliance). Oh I'm so excited, and I just can't hide it....

4 March

Michael Rabiger on narrative structure

The most important thing I learned today was that *somebody somewhere* in the story must DEVELOP. This is linked to HOPE, which is the trajectory (selected path) of the story. Also you must always be completely aware of WHAT THE STORY IS ABOUT so you can give the premise in one or two lines.

8 March

Prof's observations on my book

It's about relationships in the protagonist's mind versus relationships in real life. I must ask myself how they relate to each other. Do they come together? Also, setting is not vital; the story is more about the relationships and interaction than place.

10 March

Mzi Mahola feedback session

This is what I learned a lot about how I can improve my own poetry: Only use run-on-lines if the line stands on its own and has a strong end. Clarify who is speaking through italics or 'he said', and make clear the setting. Watch tenses and double-check the meaning of words and their connotations. Finally, cut down on adjectives!

10 March

Bali versus Japan

I've decided to use Bali as a setting for the obsession short story that I'm writing for Anton's supervision session. But following Robert's suggestion, I've decided to use Japan for the novel. As an industrialised country where people live in their own little

worlds, it fits very well with the protagonist's isolation. Also, I've decided the love interest must be an Englishman. I guess it boils down to my inferiority complex as an Afrikaner, always putting the English on a pedestal that they probably don't deserve, but which remains there somehow. Yay – I'm feeling so good about this! I'm feeling like a real writer at last!

14 March

Brian Walter on looking to myths for inspiration

Now we all know that I've become a total fan of free writing. But Brian pointed out that the editing afterwards is NOT crossing out or cutting away. It's allowing the image to grow. As for my own writing, today was just one huge reminder of how I really need to look outside myself for inspiration. It's okay to write from personal experience, but I really need to enhance my writing with stories, myths, ideas, nature – anything OUTSIDE myself! He said this often comes with the rewrite though.

16 March

Supervision session with Anton Krueger

I'm soooo happy! I've just had the most amazing session with Anton. He has given me so many ideas for the book. In fact, he has basically changed my (fucked up!) short story into a book with plot ideas, character suggestions, things to research – wonderful wonderful stuff!

With regards to character, he said I should bring in her past, she needs something to do, and her obsession should gradually be revealed. Also, I need to vary dialogue between characters so that it's PERSON SPECIFIC.

My ideas about the protagonist after the session: she studied journalism and then worked as a journo in SA. She goes over to teach English in Japan. She aspires to be like the man she's obsessed with, and learns Japanese to impress him. He's a failed writer who published a book she read long ago, and who comes to Japan because he didn't make it in England. The story ends with the earthquake and tsunami, and changes from individual to social (there are little hints along the way) so that it doesn't

end being all about her. Her obstacle is that he doesn't love her. In the climax, she gets what she wants and changes OR she doesn't get what she wants and changes.

18 March

Thoughts following Anton's session

I've been thinking a lot about Anton's suggestions and feel very positive about the potential story. I did, however, discover the importance of NOT KNOWING what is going to happen yet. If I know what's going to happen, I'm going to get bored of my own work.

21 March

Joan Metelerkamp on perfectly useless concentration

I'm always struggling with the question of who gives me the right to call myself a writer, and she addressed this, and the issue of writing for others so well: "On what authority do we write? Breyten Breytenbach: I can't do anything else. Manzini Kunene: I get the authority from God. This question will come up again and again in your life, and every time you have to find new ways of answering it for yourself. Believe in your own structure when it's completely arbitrary, as arbitrary as 'where did my authority come from? The pain of writing is when you're writing with other voices in your brain. Allowing those voices to edit what you write is self-abuse."

25 March

Beth's back story

After a conversation with Ollie, I decided to have Beth come from a broken family, which is why she wants to escape to Japan and why she has an obsession with an older man. Her dad cheated on her mom and moved out. Then her mom gets a boyfriend and decides to sell up and move in with him, leaving Beth effectively homeless.

APRIL

1 April

Paul Wessels' expressionism feedback session

Something Paul said today really stuck: "If I write something serious, something I want to invest time into, I write it. Then I type it." I'm considering doing the same because it means I'll think before I put the words down (although laziness may still take over – typing is so much easier!) (Later: I have found that the combination works well, but in general, typing is good for getting ideas out, and writing by hand for quality work).

Robert on obsession

After looking at my text on crickets and commenting on the book, Robert told me there are no counter-balancing voices in obsessive states, like the ones I included to balance the story. He added that erotic desire is not rational. It doesn't expect itself to end, it doesn't see itself in relation to love. You go overboard, you want nothing else. Love is irrelevant. He told me to get into obsessive mode and eradicate fairness and get rid of Clever Ruth's 'standing back philosophical statements'. Little bit ouch, but ultimately great advice, because I do tend to philosophise quite a bit (and always feel obliged to balance the story).

2 April

Afrikaans reconciliation in the book

I was thinking about what Robert said yesterday – that I need to end the story with a real love relationship between two people. And today I thought maybe the love interest can be an Afrikaans speaking person. Because by getting into a relationship with an Afrikaans-speaking person, she's accepting the part of herself that she perceives as Afrikaans: conservative, rational and controlled.

4 April

Silke Heiss on narrative

Silke's seminar was phenomenal. The bit about the premise (the nerve of the story) really made an impression on me. Awareness of what your premise is, will really be valuable to your writing; it's *why* you're writing, she said. I really need to figure out the premise for my novel. She also gave us great tips on creating characters (such as making lists about them, including their greatest disappointment and hope) and encouraged us to use and superstitions which connect to the primal stuff in ourselves. Finally, she set me at ease when I asked her if it was okay to write from experience: "How can you not write your personal experience? How can you not let your imagination use your experience as it sees fit?"

Silke for supervisor

Silke's going to be my supervisor! It happened so quickly. Paul Mason mentioned the idea, because I'd told him at the start of the year she was the only person I got a good feeling about when I did my research. It was in my gut feeling all along, and clearly fate that she gave her seminar on the day we had to make a final decision. (Later: I will never regret this choice. Silke has been the best supervisor I could ever have hoped for, and a million things more.)

6 April

Silke on setting

Today I got my first taste of Silke as supervisor. It was a bit hard for me, to be honest. I guess I've not been taking the book too seriously up to now, simply because of so many other distractions, the least of which is the coursework. So when Silke questioned my apathy towards setting, I was a bit taken aback, because, as I explained to her, no one has pointed out the importance of setting thus far. But I guess I just have to get used to getting honest feedback from her – that's what she's there for after all.

7 April

First supervisory session with Silke

I was quite nervous for this. Not only had I only just met Silke three days beforehand, but I felt awkward about the email she'd sent. Then I felt uncomfortable about having to read my erotic writing to her – out loud! It turned out to be easier than I thought though, and she gave me some great advice: with texts that sound like prose, pay attention to silences, punctuation and make sure repetition is used only if really necessary. Every word must be there with your full conviction and presence. Trust your faltering! If you struggle to read something, look at it again and try other options. Also, the rhythm needs to be perfect for what is being described. (Later: this advice has been incredibly useful during the final editing stages of the book, especially with regard to getting the rhythm right. Vocabulary can still use some major work!)

About the plot, she said relationship with the protagonist's parents is the CONTEXT that thrusts her into the story. The characters are not completely like me – they're based on reality but also distinct from it. Distancing tools include describing their hair, skin, clothes, choice of make-up, how they walk, where they are born, childhood traumas and highlights, hopes and fears.

She suggested making a chapter outline (because constraints facilitate the writing of the novel). BUT I don't have to stick to the scaffolding. Alter the story if it takes on a life of its own. Lastly, she said: don't be put off by having to think before, during and after writing. With a novel, you can't afford to be spontaneous. You have to be aware of what you are doing. It's a collaboration between the conscious and unconscious minds. (Later: when I started writing the chapters of my book, I would meditate on what I was about to write on, and this worked really well. Still, I feel there is an important place for spontaneity too).

Here is the rough plot outline I gave Silke: Beth is young journalist whose divorced mother, with whom she lives, decides to sell up and move in with her boyfriend. Beth decides to move in with her dad and his girlfriend but it doesn't work out, so she goes to Japan to teach English. She meets a fellow teacher who is a failed writer and

develops an unhealthy obsession for him. She has several relationships with men who don't satisfy her. An event, such as a tsunami rips her out of her private problems and into the real world. Something happens in SA – her mother falls ill or something, so she returns home. She meets a man/woman and starts a fulfilling relationship. Possibly a break up occurs and they get back together? The end! As Silke said: this is only scaffolding to facilitate me in moving forward, but it feels great to have the bones down.

11 April

Resistance

I've got the *thing* again! The thing where I don't want to work on the book at all! I don't want to think about it, I don't want to look over what I've written before, I don't want to plot or plan or anything. In a way, I think what Robert suggested was right. I need to write and free write and get it all out now. Then, when the coursework is over, and when I've gotten all this stuff out, I need to sit and write the novel within a month. Work on it every morning, first thing in the morning, write it bit by bit and then spend the rest of the year with Silke and Anton shaping it into something legible.

I'm thinking that when I *do* start writing the book, from start to end, I'll write it in a notebook, then type out the whole thing. I like the idea of slowing down to capture QUALITY, not QUANTITY.

15 April

Robert on using short pieces in the book

Robert said today that the two relationships (one obsessive, another real) that Beth has, are two good turning points. I should include a scene with the guy in the plane in my short story 'Flight Home' (minus the sex scene!) and my book review about *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Beth defaces the writer's book because that's the only way she can interact with him). Over the vac, I should map out around 30 chapters for the scaffolding so I can get the book in its entirety. That'll give me the freedom to write at different points of the story and will help to avoid getting lost in the details and stick to the plot. And finally, since I've got this problem with

fictionalising, his about constraints will always come in handy: “Once you’ve got the rabbit, you can forget the trap.”

18 April

Prof on the three-part structure

Prof and I discussed the three-part structure (SA – Japan – SA). Part one has to be about the discovery of Beth wanting to be free. Part two is about her want for love (which turns out to be obsession and is really about wanting to write). Part three is about finding balance and dealing with real issues. Prof said to work especially on the first part which sets the premise for the novel. The reader has to warm to the character and see her as a human being before reading the vibrator scene (otherwise it’s just porn!) If the reader doesn’t care about her, they won’t care what happens to her. All valuable input!

29 April

Mxolisi Nyezwa feedback session

In my story ‘Abongile’s dream’, consistency was my biggest problem, said Mxolisi, because I changed between my ‘white’ world and Abongile’s township existence. His advice was this: If you go into an alternative world, acknowledge it and *stay* in it; it must happen as if by accident. Immerse yourself in Abongile’s world, and find stories within that world. Comparison with your world is cowardice. Choose one philosophy – don’t have two feet in two different places. Songe added that the comparison takes away the dignity of the subject; it comes across as anthropological. I was so glad he made that comment, because it’s something I was completely unaware of, and something I’d like to avoid in my writing. As for Mxolisi’s idea about not comparing, I am not sure I can do it. Surely comparing a new world to yours is natural? I guess it depends on *how* you do it. The comparisons shouldn’t be obvious, they should be neatly embedded in the text, not blurted out to the reader.

MAY

1 May

Plot outline One

1. Retrenchment

Beth, a Pretoria News journalist, gets retrenched. In the same week, she finds out her mom is going to sell her childhood home and move in with her boyfriend.

2. Coffee with Naomi and meeting Neels

Beth plans to discuss the retrenchment and family issues with her closest friend, Naomi, but an old school friend (Neels) runs into Naomi beforehand and takes over the conversation, which really annoys Beth. He does plant the idea of going to Japan though.

3. Moving in with dad

Beth moves in with her dad and his second wife. They end up having a huge fight and she decides to teach English in Japan.

4. Phone interview for Japan

She's extremely nervous about the interview but gets the job.

5. Flight to Japan

Her apprehension about going, her first introduction to Asians, and Asian-Western couples in particular.

6. The blowjob

On her first day at school, Mr Yamamoto, the school manager, makes her go down on him. She's passive because she's petrified of saying no. Also describe her apartment and Beppu.

7. Beth meets Michael

She goes to a museum where there is a special exhibition of Hokusai's Wave – which she has had on her wall ever since she was a kid. She strikes up a conversation with the writer with whom she will become obsessed.

8. Obsession starts

She has a long monologue after reading the book.

9. Lover One

She's romanced by a Congolese man whom she despises.

10. Vibrator scene

After going out to a night club one night, she uses her vibrator and describes the scene, imagining the writer watching.

11. Lover Two

The second guy who's interested in her hints at it at a mixed *onsen* they go to as a group of friends, but she rejects him.

12. Book defacing

She interacts with Michael's book by tearing out pages, writing in the margins, etc.

13. Lover Three

She goes on a date and ends up sleeping with an Australian entomologist but keeps imagining being with Michael.

14. Solo trip to Okinawa

She gets a bit of distance from her obsessive life by going on a trip alone.

15. Lunch with a student and her mother

She gets invited to lunch with a young student and her mother. She gets irritated with the way the mother treats the daughter, which represents Japanese people for her.

16. Tsunami happens

Not to Beth, personally, but it makes her see outside herself and her obsessive world. She donates blood, she donates money, and her obsession starts dwindling.

17. An episode at school or with a friend

Something happens at the school or with a friend to demonstrate her continued irritation with Japanese culture.

18. *Onsen* scene

She's alone, a woman comes into the *onsen* and ignores her.

19. Beth's mom gets cancer

Beth decides to return to SA to help her mom. She leaves some of her stuff behind, signifying that she hasn't totally cut herself off from Japan.

20. Flight home

Beth meets an expat returning to SA to see his son. She finds herself in the position of defending the country she had previously rejected.

21. Looking after her mother

She finds out her mother's boyfriend broke up with her, and her mom has now moved in with her brother and his girlfriend. They all stay together in a small flat but unlike before when they were always fighting, they co-operate here.

22. Lunch with Naomi

She tells her friend about all her experiences and manages to shed some light on them for herself. Naomi invites her to a braai.

23. Her mom gets taken to hospital

24. Braai: she meets Neels again

She initially ignores him but eventually gives in to his flirtations and agrees to go on an old-school date with him.

25. Date with Neels

She falls for him and they end up sleeping with each other (to contradict old-school date!) They start going out.

26. Break-up with Neels

27. Lesbian fling

She has a fling with another woman (her first) but it ends when the woman's mother walks in on them.

28. Return to Japan to fetch stuff

She goes back to Japan and manages to put Japan, which she had started to love, behind her.

29. Back to SA – she contacts Neels

They have a long conversation and end up in bed together. They decide to resume their relationship.

30. She decides to write a book

While teaching English in Pretoria.

3 May

Prof on sex, identity and resolution

Specific suggestions Prof made today include the fact that Beth should break up with Neels rather than the other way round. It's her taking control of her life. It's good that she can't explain why she's breaking up (similar to obsession which she doesn't understand), but only if this is clarified later. Also, there shouldn't be too many lovers (because each lover teaches her a different lesson, and how many lessons can she learn!?) and why not connect the *onsen* scene to the lesbian lover, make her one of the three? I agree with him that both parents should definitely be Afrikaans (if one is English, it's less dramatic) and that her mom's cancer should not be what brings Beth back – she must CHOOSE to come back.

Then her antagonism towards Afrikaans must also be balanced with what attracts her to it. Also, the reader must have a sense of what she's reacting against. Show her attraction to English (don't say it, SHOW it). She should move from an Afrikaans bubble to a space where she discovers the freedom of English (which represents internationalism, liberty).

Prof's added a bit about narrative positioning because it's still something I struggle with. He said there are two selves: the narrating self and the experiencing self. The narrating self is lucid, is looking back, understands, has mastered who she is now, is able to tell the story through distancing, KNOWS THE STORY, and is trusted by the reader – all essential to the first person narrative. The experiencing self is unaware, doesn't know why she does things, doesn't know the story. The two should be distanced, for instance by something the narrating self says at the start of the novel. I'm glad he raised this point because I'm definitely confusing the two (but not sure I can be the narrating self just yet.)

Finally, he said the resolution mustn't be sickly sweet. It's more about her own integration. Hope at the end is contrasted with the obsession which, if continued, would just end up in despair.

2 May

Joining the dots: Hazel Crampton

Hazel's class was a reminder to me not to wait for inspiration, but to write, just do it! Know where you are going, start from what interests or motivates you (your driving force). Come back to it. Rewrite it fresh, but stay true to your writing. Be prepared to rewrite a sentence 16 times if one word doesn't gel! This will come in very handy when editing my free writes on the novel!

6 May

Feedback session: Hazel Crampton

REWRITE TO ENHANCE. This is my biggest problem – I think I'm enhancing when I add things, but usually I'm making it worse 😊. I was reminded that rewriting is about getting the rhythm and the flow right. It has to be an intuitive process.

This was a good week in that it has finally sunk in how important it is for me to UNDERSTAND what my writing is about and what I'm trying to say. Writing notes in red to myself when rereading the text really helps. Asking myself questions, and making suggestions the way I'd do with someone else's work. And I think it'll come in handy when I focus on the novel only. (Later: it did!)

11 May

Silke requests writing

Silke asked me for 'lots of writing' yesterday. Freak out. What did she mean? Should I send her the raw and so-not-in-order stuff I've been sending Prof? Or should I start editing. Isn't editing meant to be reserved for the second draft? Yikes bikes. It's frustrating because Stephen King said no one should see your first draft. Which I totally agree with – how can you let anything YOU haven't looked at, out of your door. BUT again, this is the structure of the course, so I've got to be prepared to let it go.

12 May

NELM research

After spending a whole day at NELM yesterday, I realise how important it is to read fellow South Africans' work. Stephen King's comment about needing to know what is being written so you don't work out of ignorance also applies here. I must admit, I was discouraged in a way, or felt threatened, rather, by the vast amount of writers out there. Silly – I should feel encouraged that I'm not the only one doing this!

13 May

Hope and despair

Yesterday was the worst day of this year so far – I spent the whole day crying. I just felt I'm useless, why the hell do I think I can publish a book, ever, never mind finish one? I'm pathetic, I'm a loser. How can I write a happy ending into my novel when my life is a whole series of unhappy ones? Am I going to be the pathetic kind of woman who gets her only pleasure from the happy ending of her creation and not her experience?

Paul Mason gave me some great advice, though (unrelated, but still). He said I shouldn't write the book while we're wrapping up all the coursework. I should plot, plan, make notes, and think about it, but not write. The opposite, again, of what Prof has been saying. But now that I've, in effect, written *something* on each 'chapter' of the 30-point plan, I think it's a good time to start thinking more seriously about the plot.

14 May

Rough draft one

Today, my PVA (*plan van aksie*) is to put all stuff I've written for the book into one document. I'm not going to read it yet, but I think it's necessary to see what I've written as a whole so I can think about the gaps and reflect on my core message, why I'm writing this, and what I hope to get out of this experience.

17 May

Needing not to know

“You’ve got to know what you’re doing,” said Silke, about writing a novel. But the source of anxiety has been forcing myself into a structure when I still need the wild animal that roams with its mouth open, devouring everything in its way, just being. The wild animal has died a temporary death – I need to revive her. She’s a wolf, she needs to howl at the moon in order to survive. She stopped howling because someone was looking over her shoulder. No longer. She must work on the novel every day. But she must *not* know what she’s doing yet. Now, at this stage of her writing, it *will* kill her.

17 May

Prof on structure and gaps

Since I’m stressing so much about structure, Prof advised to allow plotting to grow only at the *back* of my mind. When the story starts to fill itself, you know you have lift-off with the novel. The plot outline is a DEAD THING. THE REAL THING IS THE WRITING.

He also pointed out gaps in the book: we need more of a sense of Beth’s longing and hints about previous sexual conflicts. Also, we must *like* her - she must be a winning person, not a boring little quip with a sex hang-up. (Later Silke contested this notion: she says the character doesn’t necessarily have to be likeable, but she must be interesting enough for the reader to want to read on). As for Neels, he said Beth must despise him for being ordinary and grounded when she isn’t. The fact that she goes out with him in the end is a cliché but I can work around it depending on his characterisation. (Later: I realise how many of Prof’s ideas initially got integrated into the book, and how little I actually questioned them, which I think I should have done more actively).

Email from Silke

“Regarding your feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction - these are to be treated as waves that you must ride. You will be dumped at times, at times you will fly. Either

way, they're going to keep coming and you're going to have to keep up those emotional surfing skills as you write. Do you think you can do that?" What wonderful words of encouragement! To be aware that it's okay to be dumped, and to know that the wave will pick me up at some point again.

18 May

The excitement's back

I feel goooooood! I mean, compared to last week, when I was sitting in my hole, deep in the ground. Yesterday was such a great day in terms of the book. I got fantastic advice from Prof, insights about my character that made me see the novel in a different light and brought out new exciting developments.

Plus, this morning, I reread yesterday's notes from Prof and it really helped me to think more about Beth's character. There's a lot to be said for rereading notes (and my own free writing) the day after. Maybe I should give it a shot once I start working more intensively on the novel? Either way, I feel as if the story is back in my mind, the excitement is back. Not forever, but that's part of the deal, and when Ruthie climbs back into her hole again, she must both accept it and *do something* about it – go for coffee with a friend who can listen, figure out what's going on, *deal with it*.

21 May

New plot ideas

Paul Wessels suggested yesterday that I tell my whole story to a friend I trust, and then ask them to tell it back to me. I did this with Richard, and developed my ideas about her history with men. At the start of the book, she mentions two short flings, both with men she hoped to have a proper relationship with, based on her childhood dream of having a stable, nuclear family. Both experiences turned her sour, and skewed her idea of sex.

Following the advice of her friend Naomi, Beth applies for a job at a more serious newspaper (M&G?), which she doesn't get, and which she blames on affirmative action. This, together with family stuff, leads to disillusionment with South Africa. She

ends up in Japan, which offers freedom to *gaijin*. Having dabbled in sexual freedom a little, here she goes *bos*. Also there is little religion in Japan, which is great for her because she feels liberated and not judged. At the same time, however, Japan is a structured and largely conservative country, in which she feels comfortable because it reminds her of her Afrikaans background.

With the tsunami, the morally right thing to do is to stay in Japan and help. But for the first time in her life she doesn't do as is expected, and takes her destiny into her own hands. She decides to return to SA with the idea of applying for the M&G again. She doesn't get the job but deals with it much better than the previous time. She meets Neels. She's now interested in his *Afrikaansheid* – integral in the integration of her Afrikaans side.

20 May

Final feedback session of the course

Today was the most difficult feedback session for me. This is what I wrote during the class:

I compare myself to everyone. Every compliment to Reneilwe or Liz is a criticism of me. "Your text was great" to them, and the absence of those words to me, means, "Your text was crap, Ruth. You're not good enough." It reinforces everything I feel in my private thoughts: that I shouldn't write because I'm not good enough. I feel tears build up in my throat. I'm not head girl any more. I'm not going to get a First again, like last year. Someone else will, I won't, why can't I just accept that it's an ego trip? STOP CRITICISING YOURSELF! JUST ACCEPT.

I must accept criticism: it's part of being a writer. But also remind myself that this is not a race or not a competition. I'm here to learn how to improve, not to be the best in the class.

22 May

Book report: Books on Writing

If only we could survive, emotionally and financially, on finding reasons not to write. I'd be happy and rich, safe in the knowledge that it's true: I'm not good enough and I don't really have anything to say. When others confirm these words upon reading my writing, I can say yes, thank you – it's *not* all in my head!

Life would be a lot less complicated, but I certainly would not be happy. Because this is the path I've chosen and it's the only thing that really makes sense to me. So what do I do about it? I read books on writing. Books that inspire and books that provide advice on aspects of the craft I can improve on. Because as much as being a writer has always been a dreamy ideal, it's also damn hard work. There should exist a balance in questioning and befriending my writing on a daily basis (Mosley 2009: 76,81 and Goldberg 1986: 110).

Practice, practice, practice is probably the best advice I've garnered from the four books I've read for the purpose of this assignment. Daily practice is as invaluable as honesty is indispensable (King 2000: 231). Practice not to be perfect, because books represent humanity and are therefore flawed (Mosley 2009: 95). But practice is the only way for my true voice to come out and to sing. For the intuitive writing that has been suppressed by self-restraint to find its way to the surface through my pen (10).

Sex is a theme that I especially need to practice. This is evident in my story 'Spinach and feta quiche' which is awkward to the degree of sounding fake. In order for my writing to sound more natural, more me, both daily exercise and restraint from over-editing are required.

Revising is a major problem for me. I can see now in pieces like 'Abongile's dream', 'The graveyard visitor' and 'Graduation: what a sham' how premature correcting, particularly by adding more text, has been detrimental to my writing. Even with writing this book review, I killed the original voice through focusing on what I thought was expected of me: lots of quotes and references. I sorely neglected trusting my original voice. King recommends a six-week break after writing the first draft of a novel

in order to allow the dough time to rise (2000: 248). Although not possible for the coursework, I need to let the writing for my novel rest under the feathers of my body and come back to it much later with new eyes and new energy.

And when I do, I can consider technical elements that are naturally missing in my writing: characterisation, narrative and a consistent point of view. Then it's time to go through the first draft idea by idea, chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, word for word and character by character (Mosley 2009: 76,81).

In my fantasy tale 'The coelamaid's journey', I can use more conscious work on characterisation. What does the protagonist want? What stands in her way? And how does this drive the narrative? These are questions that both Michael Rabiger and Anton Krueger deemed vital to plot. Burroway affirms that the central character's yearning for something they believe defines them is what generates the plot and drives the conflict-crisis-resolution cycle that makes the story worth reading (2010: 251).

This cycle is often missing in the work I've done on the novel because my main character is passive and reflective, which makes for a non-story. All the reader really wants to know, after all, is what happens next (Burroway *et al.* 262-3, Mosley 56 and King 184). The reader should care about the central character, be intimate with her limitations, and wonder what is coming (Burroway: 247-8, Mosley 2009:45). The only story in which I felt confident about getting the plot right was 'Swimming pool wedding'. This is because we were told to consciously include two turning points and a resolution. Applying this simple narrative recipe should become a natural part of my reworking process.

What I must also become more aware of is the importance of sticking to a single point of view throughout the novel. If done convincingly, the reader effectively *becomes* the central narrator (Mosley 19). Among other techniques, the thoughts and feelings of other characters can be channelled through dialogue, which also reveals things she doesn't know about herself (89-90). If the reader is compelled enough to want to get

to know the central character while trusting her single point of view, s/he will not cancel the reading contract (Burroway 2010: 216).

Still, there is the fear of making the novel about me, and thereby losing readers that look for themselves in the story. But it's not the life of the narrator that makes a story interesting or boring, it's the way the life story has been put together. Ultimately, there must be development in the novel. In my novel, I need enough perspective on and distance from the central character, who feeds off my experiences, emotions, dreams and desires, to stop her from stagnating in self-pity and blame (Burroway 314). Just as in real life, when I get critiqued on my work, I must not assign blame to others, or allow their response to confirm what my ever-critical internal editor has convinced me of: that one negative comment defines me as a person. One poem or story doesn't matter one way or another. "It's the process of writing and life that matters," says Goldberg (1986: 12).

What I need to do is to find inspiration daily to convince myself that yes, I am a writer, and yes, I make mistakes, but it's all part of the learning curve I'm on now and will always be on. Silke Heiss, my long work supervisor, reminds me that emotional surfing skills are essential when riding the waves that will both dump you and allow you to fly. Goldberg's advice is also particularly useful. She stops self-pity in its tracks: "Kill the idea of the lone, suffering artist. We suffer anyway as human beings. Don't make it any harder on yourself" (1986: 81). Her advice on how she encourages herself to write when in a destructive or lazy space, is just as useful: "Nathalie," she says to herself, 'you know what you need to do. You need to write.' If I'm smart, I listen. If I'm in a destructive or very lazy space, I don't, and the blues continue" (1986: 110).

Finding reasons to write can be as emotionally lucrative as finding ones not to. I only need to convince myself that this is true. And apply it daily. Because as Mosley says, the process of writing is like taking a journey by boat. "You have to continually set yourself on course... it's not like highly defined train tracks or a highway; this is the path that you are creating, discovering" (2009: 14).

So that when my good old friend Self-doubt comes along again with, "Why are you wasting your time? Why do you write?" I'll dive into the page and write my heart out

without trying to justify why. I'll repeat Goldberg's words on page 116 of *Writing down the bones*: "I do it because I do it. I do it because I want to improve my handwriting, because I'm an idiot, because I'm mad for the smell of paper".

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23 May

Bernat on the book

I had a long conversation with Bernat about the novel. He pointed out that the book is still very much about me. I'm not allowing Beth to tell her own story. And the reason is because I'm a): too caught up in the experience and b): I don't think anyone thinks it's worth listening to. If I write for myself, then the book is not interesting for the reader. If I write with the reader in mind, the book has potential.

He says I should tell the story, in a first person narrative, stick to the scaffolding as a guideline, but let it essentially write itself. Use all I've written as fertilizer, but not edit it. Rather rewrite the whole novel. I like that idea. But once again, it's another voice I'm giving in to. I'm like a friggin' weathervane. But I guess it's part of the process, part of getting closer to what I really want to do (or the book, rather, not me!).

Bernat's plot suggestions include the story ending with Beth ceasing communication with Neels (because she cheats on him?) and him trying constantly to get in contact with her. It leaves the ending open, yet hints to hope for the future. Tomorrow morning I'm going to try write the first scene of the novel in the way Bernat described: as if to someone who is hanging on my every word. Might help with confidence!

25 May

Writing as if to a close friend

Aaaaargh! That was terrible! I just wrote the way Bernat suggested and ended up telling, not showing. Now I'm totally confused and unable to convince myself that this 'friend' is genuinely interested in what I've to say. It felt forced and fake. It felt like someone else's voice. I guess I need to read the Burroway book again to get help with this. Bernat's comments just confused me now. I mean, they were good, but I feel lost again.

26 May

Too many voices!

I don't know how to do this. How do you balance sharing your story with many people, getting ideas from them, and then listening to your own voice? It seems like a contradiction to me, one I'm really struggling with at the moment. Each voice has its own wisdom, but also its own agenda. How do I choose okay, that piece of advice is good, but the next isn't for me? Why can't I just choose? Am I so programmed to please others that I've completely lost my own voice? I really hope not, because I want to be able to speak, dagnammit! (Later: Silke advised me to, from now on, only listen to her and Prof for guidance, but the main narrative must come from within).

On the up side, I'm realising how good it is that we were told to start thinking about the book from the start of the course. Because even though I still feel very lost, at least I've been thinking about it for months now and that lays a good foundation for things to come.

27 May

Stream of consciousness reflection

Ah, I see what it is! You've been told to separate yourself from your writing. Now you feel you can't write any more. About yourself, I mean. No more diary entries for you, hey! No more soul searchin' stuff. It's all about Beth now. She she she, no more me me me. Jealous? I do believe so. So whatcha gonna do about it? Nothin'? Thought so. Just suppress it the way you do with all your problems. Just eat it off, eat it away, eat it out. Not gonna help, you know. Silly girl. When you gonna grow up and realise this is it. Me-she is it. And that's okay.

(Later) Rereading my notes, I realise that I have improved and progressed a lot – something I continually overlook. If re-reading this journal is not evidence of that, then I don't know what is.

28 May

Me versus Beth

Silke tells me I must sit on the couch and start growing my own baby. No more voices except hers and Prof's. No more voices? Just when I've found the recipe? Beth's problem in the first third of the book is exactly what my problem is now. She hears all these different voices and feels she must listen to them. But she must find her own voice – find it and listen to it and BE it. OWN it. Go RuthBeth!

29 May

Where I started

I found a postcard from my mom from last year November, when I heard I got into the MA Course. It says, "My dearest girl, YOU MADE IT!!" And I realised how I've been taking the course for granted, having forgotten the privilege of being in this position to write for a year, through good times and bad. And I realised that I've learned a lot, and it has been hard, but I'll continue with the support of my supervisors and friends, and with the earth below and the sky above, and the knowledge that I'm in the right place at the right time.

Also, I feel ready to finally start writing the novel. I'll spend a day rereading everything I've written (without editing!) and then rewrite the plot outline and then start writing. Whoop whoop – the beginning of the novel focus is nigh!

JUNE

1 June

Reading Overkill Draft 1

Spent the whole day reading the entire first draft of Overkill. The good thing is to see what I've managed to scrape together in the first four months of the course. My plan of action the following six is to read the notes/chapters I've written on a specific part of the book the night before. The next morning, write whatever part I feel I can work on without trying to control what I'm writing or make it fit into the plot. Keep the plot as a rough guideline, but allow the story to tell itself. That evening, type the text into the computer. Leave it for a week then edit and send to Silke and Prof.

Last session with Prof before the June holidays

Great input from Prof about various points: I need to balance the first person narrative with good descriptions that resemble omniscient narrator ones. Japan should be a refuge for Beth, but it crumbles after the tsunami, and she realises she needs to return to her birthworld to make that world better. Beth starts off as controlled and disciplined but the book reveals a more deviant side of herself. Finally, the possibility of a romance with Neels should be hinted at through a subtle but a powerful image early in the book or/and in Japan.

7 June

Writing to typing

I'm really finding the notebook writing useful – it slows me down and encourages me to think about what I'm about to write, rather than dive straight in, which I tend to do with free writing (which I've decided to combine with the new hand-written parts).

Chapter One – exciting editing!

I'm so excited about chapter one now! I've just realised how I can bring in narrative tension: by making Mrs Jenson, who has bought Beth's mom's house, watch her while she's looking around her old home, reminiscing. Now I can see why Robert says the writing is in the re-writing!

8 June

Worries about first chapter

I'm worried about the silliest things: not having edited enough, over-editing, whether it makes sense, whether I've killed it the way Robert always says I kill my texts when I over-edit them. But I'm just going to have to accept that this is what I can do and submit.

13 June

Confidence and drive

I'm feeling very despondent and uninspired about what I've written so far. And I worry about not writing enough. And I worry about integrating what I've written already (or typed rather) and what I'll write. And I worry about the Obsession bit because what do I do – do I change the overt sexual references (make them subtle) or leave them as they are? I've different voices inside me conflicting. And I'm perpetually scared of not staying in the dream of the book. But I guess I should be encouraged by the fact that I work on it every day, even if just rereading what I've written. Also, I've been consistent in verbal expressions and quotes that can feed in my writing, which is exciting.

The clue, I guess, is to be more patient with myself, and to encourage myself about being capable of doing this. After all, I've come this far! I need to find a way to create a positive path in my head about my writing, otherwise I'll never succeed in fulfilling my dream of completing a novel. It's my own mind more than anything else that's standing in the way.

First draft feedback from Silke

It's wonderful to receive such encouraging comments from Silke, even though I'm sure that she could have given me more criticism. But I guess her way of responding is by letting me find my own way, which is the best way, of course! We have agreed for me to send a chapter each week, I'm sure the weekly 'deadline' which will keep me focussed and motivated. Silke also said that to some degree, we are both a slave to the

book. I need to remind myself of this when I stress about making it all come out perfectly. The book is telling itself through me, not the other way round.

22 June

Gotham Writers' Workshop: Writing Fiction on Rereading

I think I should do as the book recommends and print out the first draft and edit it on paper first, then go back to the computer, which will definitely enhance the quality because it will create more distance between myself and the writing. (Later: I can't believe what a difference this makes! Sure, computer editing has its place, but things just seem to jump out much more on paper!)

Silke on Chapter 2

Positive comments: good link with first chapter, energy in the piece, suspense with librarian engaging. Things to improve: avoid clichés, make the conversation a bit more succinct and add actions (but remember: more literary devices develop with re-editing). Also, decide WHAT IT'S THAT BETH LOVES ABOUT THE BOOK – I can't pretend, I've to write it from the heart. This means looking at books/authors I've been captivated with because they are transgressive, bold and daring.

Low self-esteem

Every time I send Silke a chapter, I think it's going to be worse than the preceding ones. She's finally going to come out and say it: YOU SUCK, RUTH! Give up now – you're wasting your time. Because that's still, to some degree, what I say to myself every day. I mean, obviously I won't give up while I'm in a structured system – that's the advantage of a course like this – you have people to answer to! But what about when I'm on my own again? What's going to motivate me? I'm just going to have to remind myself that it's true: I am a writer and what I have to say can be interesting if I work at it hard enough.

JULY

1 July

Overkill

I've decided *Overkill* is the name of the book that Beth reads, and it's like an extra character in the story. The book is distinctive, seductive in its style, and must stay in her consciousness for a long time.

2 July

Supervision session with Silke

A wonderful session! The first since we first met, and it was great just to meet in person, which, after all the impersonal long-distance emailing is such a blessing! Silke assured me that despite my fears of the first person narrative cutting out the reader, it's the 'red thread' that the reader needs. She also said I should stay true to the story at all times. It's a foetus and needs to be cared for, but ultimately I can't decide what my child (book) will be. It has to decide for itself. With regards to editing, I should avoid over-explaining (which Robert has pointed this out before, and which is good to have heard from two sources because it brings the message home!) Also, metaphors will come naturally with the second draft. I'm so fortunate to have a supervisor with such insight, whereas I keep thinking everything has to be perfect right now!

With regard to the sex scenes, Silke says it's normal to be afraid when you write about things that make people uncomfortable. I need to let myself go when writing them, enjoy the unknown, and offer the reader experiences they wouldn't necessarily go into. Great quote: "You're plucking your own feathers to make a duvet for others to keep warm".

Ideas on Michael's book: it's provocative, sensual, bold, unafraid and full of sexual intimacy and taboo. Books to reread for inspiration are *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, *Ghost in my bush of lies*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, *The Undertaker's Hand* and *The Story of Forgetting*.

4 July

Writing about sex

There have been several 'signs from the universe' recently to remind me that I shouldn't be afraid of writing about sex (part of the reason I've been slacking with my daily writing) Brendon Robinson, a friend of mine, said, "Whatever you do, write with integrity. When you feel you're not going the right way, go back to what feels right." Shannon Hope, a singer at Fest, sang: "It's not brave if you're not scared." And finally, a Shona artist at Fest said, "I just do what the artwork says I must do. It's not difficult to give in. You just do it." I'm inspired afresh!

7 July

Back to the Fear

Silke said I'd reach a place where it would be difficult to generate text, and I think I'm there. Probably because I'm approaching the bits of lovers and sex, and intensification of the obsession and I don't really want to go there. But I must! I must just do it.

12 July

Overkill plot ideas

The book is about a man who struggles with writing, yet confidently writes letters to three ex-girlfriends in which he mostly attacks them. Beth is attracted to the book because she admires the protagonist's fearlessness in expressing himself freely and not censoring himself with regard to sex. Her problem, however, is that confuses the writer, Michael Franklin and the protagonist. In her mind, they are one and the same person. When confronted by Franklin's disinterest, she ends up defacing the book.

Third to second person

Before she meets Michael, she talks about the book and what she reads and does in THIRD PERSON. After meeting Michael the second time(?), she talks to him directly, telling him what she does to his book, what she writes.

13 July

Supervision session with Silke

Another inspirational session with loads of encouragement from Silke. She reminded me that nitpicking will come with the second draft, and that I should focus on completing the novel. I agree – my gut feeling says I need to get the whole thing down in rough and then go back and fiddle. About *Overkill*, she said I shouldn't write out a whole book within the book, just include snippets relevant to my novel. I should also have goalpoints but remain flexible about the conclusion. And finally, she reminded me that writing *needs* struggle and always involves a fight, but that I MUST TRUST IN THE PROCESS. DH Laurence quote: "In the tension of opposites, all things have their being".

14 July

Beth's relationship with men

She wants something in them she doesn't have in herself: confidence, audacity, bravery, nerve. She doesn't realise that she needs to find them in herself first, and not in a potential partner (even though she ends up with Neels as a bonus!)

15 July

Rereading chapters 1-6: thoughts

I just realised that I don't want to have a vibrator scene. It's much more interesting showing her isolation and desperation through her interaction with the book.

17 July

Struggling to integrate

I'm struggling to integrate *Overkill* into my book. The whole idea of the *Overkill* plot is so new to me, and I don't want to force it, so I think I'll let my subconscious work on it for a bit. This is a significant lesson I've learnt this year but still need to remind my controlling mind of its importance!

19 July

Change of direction

I need to change the trajectory of the book. Seriously. And not wanting to, is what's been making me extremely anxious the last few weeks. Sticking to the scaffolding that has given me so much security. Now it's clear that the obsession with the book has become its principal focus (later: ultimately, it's the combination of book and author that drives Beth's obsession). Her defacing is a sign of her helplessness, her inability to reach out or be accepted by other people being she wishes to be in contact with, her frustration at being misunderstood and in a society where she feels alien and unwanted, which leads to even more to isolation. It's frustrating to be back to square one, but the most important thing is to do what FEELS RIGHT, and what the book requires.

Climax

Thinking about it again, during the climax, she actually needs to lose the book. She has to let go of it, which will be liberating terrible at the same time because of the creative energy she's invested in the book. But the book must be destroyed in some way, preferably by WATER, which is a major theme. Before this, however, the book consoles her in every stressful situation.

Barthes on Bataille

Reading Roland Barthes' commentary on George Bataille's *The Story of the Eye*, I realised the book within my book is a metaphor for something and I need to find out more about its symbolism so that I can enhance the story. Also a good reminder of how important reading is to feed my ideas, no matter how bizarre the material!

25 July

Writing after a break

I went to Hamburg for the weekend, did no work whatsoever and realised how important it's to take a break from writing once in a while, otherwise I can't see past the speedbumps ahead! It's also helped me plot the defamation part, which will move

from a fantasy in her head to physically touching the book, then masturbating to it, and finally ripping out its pages and replacing it. This will be followed by the tsunami chapter and finally the road back home. Feels good to have a new plan, something I couldn't have done without the breather!

30 July

Title

I'm soooo happy! Last night's performance of *Wreckage* at the Drama Department inspired me to do a whole bunch of free-writing and I already know where I'll put it – in the replacement chapter! I've also realised that I need to do lots more free writing, something I've stopped altogether, since I've been writing the chapters in their chronological order. Which has been good for routine and all, but has killed my original writing. Also, the fact that I've been avoiding obsessive mode because I don't like that part of myself is something I now really need to deal with. I must go there if I want to finish this book – that's what the book is about, after all.

Masturbation scene

Instead of describing the masturbation, she tears out the papers in the book describing a sex scene and replaces them with her description of her own masturbation.

31 July

This quote from *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott speaks to two of my biggest problems – being compassionate with myself and aiming for a perfect product:

"If you don't believe in God, it may help to remember this great line of Geneen Roth's: that awareness is learning to keep yourself company. And then learn to be more *compassionate* company, as if you were somebody you're fond of and wish to encourage... In any case, the bottom line is that if you want to write, you get to, but you probably won't be able to get very far if you don't start trying to get over your perfectionism... [which] will only drive you mad" (pages 31-32).

I need to continue to experiment, let my mind go free, and to stop the secretary from taking over when the creative side should still be in charge.

AUGUST

8 August

Session with Prof Wright

I feel like I've been winded! I wish I had had this discussion with Prof sooner because I got so much overwhelming input, and I don't know how I'm going to integrate it all. I guess I need to separate what I agree with from what I disagree with. Prof agrees that Michael's book deals with one woman, not three. Beth really identifies with this woman, in the way that many readers identify with the characters. Beth should also rewrite the woman's response to the letters, defending her and pointing out the weaknesses in the protagonist's so-called water-tight argument. In that way she's sort of subverting patriarchy and finding her own identity.

9 August

The conclusion

Instead of Beth and Neels rushing into sex, Neels insists on them taking it slowly. It's the opposite of what Beth experienced with the obsession: love is treated as a slow and beautiful thing that unfurls in its own time. I feel good about this idea, admittedly influenced by current personal experience. Ah well, if I can't use it in the book, where can I use it?

18 August

Session with Silke in Cape Town

Silke has reminded me that the voice of the book (Beth's antagonist) must be heard throughout, and the reader must get a sense how it hooks her. With regard to characterisation (an ongoing challenge), she says I'm in every character I create. They're all points of views confronting Beth and making her who she becomes. Regarding advice from others, I need to separate my voice from the voices of others inside me and make my choice.

SEPTEMBER

7 September

Critical feedback

I'm so frustrated!! Up until the last few chapters, Silke's given me positive feedback. But since Chapter 14, it's been quite critical and with the added pressure of wanting to finish the rough draft of the book by the end of the week, I'm pulling my hair out! She's absolutely spot on: I'm not integrating the themes properly and I'm externalising instead of going right into Beth's internal processes and showing how she has changed after her experience. (Later – Silke is satisfied that I've managed to get this right with the editing changes).

Working draft 1

Ended up sending all my final chapters to Silke. Now I'm making notes on future changes, as suggested by Silke. I really like the idea of a 'working draft' – it means I don't have to finalise anything yet. While rereading though, I've to talk to myself very nicely not criticise continuously, as the tendency goes, but feel positive about what I've achieved, a week before hand-in.

12 September

Hook

In order to hook the reader, perhaps I should start the book off in the library where she finds and reads Michael's book. Either way, the beginning needs to be much more attention-grabbing. Also, she needs to be more obsessive about keeping the book on her at all times.

Denis Hirson on the writing process

"Don't be impatient with yourself. There's a difference between wilfully wanting the words to appear and being in a state when they willingly appear...." Another reminder to allow writing to balance my daily routine.

24 September

Brýnstone plot ideas

These wouldn't have come about without a break after our first draft hand-in, and the fact that I'm seeing Silke on Monday. Yay for breaks and deadlines!

Brýnstone is old English for 'brimstone' (sulphur) and literally means 'burning stone'. The flame represents the female protagonist, an editor called Sophie, and the stone is Owen, a struggling writer and the book's narrator. Sophie figuratively burns his (the man; the stone's) skin, but is unable to get to his core, which, in the resolution, he decides to reserve for art. The book is a combination of erotic passages and ones where Owen openly criticises his girlfriend, especially when she becomes dependent on him. I feel so relieved to finally have a plot for Michael's book! A big weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

26 September

Final session with Silke

Silke was very happy with my new first chapter and said it set up the erotic content of the book well. She also responded positively to my plot for *Brynstone* and suggested I make Michael's voice different from Beth's by working on the rhythm through shorter sentences (subject verb object), no sub-clauses, using many consonants, deleting any unnecessary conjunctions, articles, etc. Then I must delete Beth's expressions like 'I think' and 'I feel' because she must just BE HERSELF. The plan of action is to work on the list of ten priorities I've made (having done the first one – written *Brýnstone's* plot).

OCTOBER

5 October

Title found at last!

Finally, I have decided on a title! Because it is a book about a book, *Brýnstone* has to be in it. And I decided I need to have the word 'touch' in the title too, because it has so many connotations that are relevant to the text. 'Touched by' could also work, but it isn't an active verb, sounds preachy, and overlooks Beth's active role in interacting with the book. So, without any further ado, I present: *Touching Brýnstone*!

10 October

Bad day, good day

Yesterday was terrible. I tried to do too many things at once – couldn't decide between prioritising my list of the foot/endnotes or the ten-point priority list. But I had a good conversation with my boyfriend and realised that I need to do one thing at a time. I've added bits of Michael's text in the free writing, and edited it down slightly. It seems impossible to connect the two books, especially in such a short period of time. As useful as this course has been for getting me writing, the time restriction is really a limiting factor. I'm realising however, that what I hand in at the end of this year will far from the finished product. All women suggest years and men suggest months to leave the book alone before rereading with fresh eyes to create the best possible product. And I maintain that if it wasn't for this course, I'd never have had the discipline or confidence to complete this mammoth task!

14 October

Second draft in

Handing in the second draft feels like quite an anti-climax, but at least I can take a few days off while waiting for feedback to dribble in. Yay!

18 October

Liz and Paul feedback

Paul and Liz gave me such encouraging remarks about my second draft. Paul said he started reading and couldn't stop. I was happy to hear it from a man – the first to give me feedback on such a complete draft (which is significant for me because I was afraid it would only appeal to women because of the love story element). Paul says he thinks the first draft is done. I disagree, but it does help make me feel more relaxed and confident about what I've achieved.

19 October

Last session with Prof Wright

Probably the hardest thing to hear was that Prof still thinks the Arcadia house chapter should be at the beginning of the book. His reasoning makes sense: the book is about a homeless woman who ends up finding a home. I agree with him but still feel the reader needs to be gripped from the start, and that since the book plays such an integral role in the story, the relationship between the two is more gripping and would get *me* to read on. I'm the first reader, after all!

20 October

Session with Robert

Robert has made some great suggestions for the book. I agree with most of them, and feel they're quite doable. He said Beth's obsession needs a lead in – just a hint that she has been obsessed with a book or two in the past, and a lead-out – not just a straight forward romance that ends on an empty white bed. I agree – Beth has come in touch with her shadow and the book and its effect on her (as well as Michael's) cannot completely disappear.

He added that Beth is the kind of person who would research Michael, and that her meeting him co-incidentally in Japan is too far-fetched. Ironically, this was Prof's idea, whereas Anton Krueger originally said she must go to Japan *because* of him. I'll discuss

with Silke before I make any decisions. Too many voices again, but I feel much better equipped to handle them than I did at the start of the year, so there's progress!

He also suggested that Ms Anderson should remain faithful to the book to the end, even though her own obsession with the book isn't nearly as intense as Beth's. I like this idea and am thrilled to have been a recipient of Robert's insight, even though I won't use all his changes. Which is how it should be.

21 October

Dealing with Robert's feedback

This morning I decided that I'm going to look at Robert's 'creative challenges' first thing every morning when I'm fresh and creative. Already I started thinking about books I've been obsessed with, embarrassingly all by JM Coetzee. But at least I can base Beth's imaginary experience on my real one, which is vital for authenticity. Putting in the bits about Beth knowing Michael's whereabouts shouldn't be too hard, but I'll save the 'darkening' of the romance with Neels for when I get to editing the final chapters – let me 'subby' work on it till then!

25 October

Routine

I'm in a good routine at the moment: editing two chapters a day and going over each again before bed. The only problem is integrating Robert and Silke's suggestions, which is not coming naturally. Again I've decided to leave them for when (if!) they do. The fine-tuning is going better than I expected – I've been able to delete a lot of unnecessary words and phrases. Some parts of the text still make me cringe for their blandness, but I've to accept that a perfect hand-in is an impossible goal, especially in such a short period.

29 October

Chapters 1-10 to Silke

I sent Silke my reworked chapters from 1-10. I've added the bits suggested by Robert, and I'm hoping to get feedback from her because it's still too new for me to judge.

NOVEMBER

1 November

Feedback on Chapters 1-10 from Silke

Got thorough feedback from Silke on added bits yesterday, which was mainly about tightening them. But the biggest suggested change is that Beth knows, *before* she meets Neels, that Michael Franklin is in Japan. This will add suspense, and make it obvious that the red thread of the book is Beth's search for Michael. I'm happy with the suggestions, but have to now go through those chapters with a fine toothcomb so it all makes sense.

4 November

Going through my journal

I've just gone through my June-November journal and realise how I've overlooked the progress I've made this year. Not to mention everything I've learned about writing. I guess the bottom line is to stay positive and patient with myself. With the support of others, anything is possible!

8 November

Using experiences in writing

I'm just thinking back about how I've been able to use my experiences, particularly with men, in my writing. How I've been able to create and recreate situations, and in so doing deal with their emotional impact on me. The most exciting part has been the fictionalising, which makes the novel more universal and less focussed on Ruth as a person. Still, this course has made me realise that I *can* and *must* use my personal experiences. And that, with the input of others (notably Robert and Silke this year) I've been able to both heal myself in a way, and create something that others might relate to.

The fact that I've chosen the novel as genre also contributes to that feeling of completion, of creating one big whole. I like the unity that's created, as opposed to short stories, which remain somewhat disjointed. (that's why I don't enjoy reading

them, I think – you can never quite get into the dreamworld unless they're connected in some way.)

9 November

The dream

Another reason why I like novels is because I like to be lost in the dream. And keep it vivid and continuous, like Anne Lamotte says. Writing a book is like reading a good book – you remain in that world even when you're not reading. But writing a novel is even better because I'm actively creating that world while drawing on actual experience. Very narcissistic, of course. But it's a way of making sense of my life in a way I've never done before, and will now never stop doing.

Oh, another thing – I just wrote a (very rough) plot outline for my next novel! Sooooo exciting! This makes me feel like a real author: not someone who stops when the first book is done. Which, I suppose, is the whole point of the course – to get us on our feet. Whatever I do next year, work or study, writing will be my premier occupation, my main focus. It might not bring in money, but it's vital for balance. Yipppppeeee! Good to feel so positive about it! Maybe nearing the completion of the MA novel has something to do with it?

Aargh, frustration! Am doing the last edit and finding inconsistencies that I feel are too big to fix at this stage. Firstly, some of the quotes from the book really don't match the rest. And most of them can do with more editing. Then I don't know if I should make *Touching Brýnstone* shorter in terms of 'pages' because I have 250 at the moment, which doesn't correspond with the bullet point style. (Later: changed it to 152 pages)

12 November

To do list

These are the things to work on when I look at the book once I've given it a few months' break: get rid of, clichés, 'dead phrases' and unsuitable vocabulary. Edit Michael's text, paying special attention to rhythm. Make an Afrikaans glossary (include unitalicised South African English words). Check for inconsistencies in dates, time of

year, etc. See if I can enhance my characters in any way. Continue to write ideas, quotes and observations in my notebook so that when I go over the book again, I might be able to enhance the text. All in all, the book ain't finished till the Ruthster publishes!

13 November

Overview of the year

Rereading my entire journal has been wonderful to get an overview of this year. One thing that struck me is that my attitude towards my writing goes in cycles. Or as Silke would say, it's a wave for which emotional surfing skills are vital. So the reality of remains: there will always be ups and downs. But after having completed this course, I feel better equipped to deal with them, not least because I have a finished product in my hands to prove that I *can do it*. Similarly, there will always be different voices in my head because I need to share my ideas with other people. But whereas I found it overwhelming at the start, I feel now I'm better able to find my own voice in the chaos (even if it takes a bit of distance or meditation to get there).

And the thanks go to...

Reading my journal entries and seeing all the ideas that I got from teachers, family and friends (notably Jamie, who has read the book four times!) also made me realise how writing a novel is never a solo project. I've had the enormous privilege of sessions with Prof Wright in which I've been encouraged afresh each time, and reminded of the question/answer, "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." Robert's input with regard to linking seemingly random ideas and bits of text has been invaluable. I cannot describe Silke's guidance as anything less than saintly. She's never imposed her opinion or tried to steer my project in any one direction. Instead, she's actively encouraged me to let the book take its own course while providing consistent insight. Dan het my ma (lees 'editor'), die hierde hele pad saam met my en Beth geloop. En selfs na ure van editing, nie entoesiasme verloor nie. Dalk is dit om dat sy, soos ek, 'n bietjie verlief is op Neels☺.

Concluding thoughts

What a privilege to share my dreamworld with living, breathing people, without whom I would not have been able to fulfil this aching ambition. I cycled to the university this morning thinking, “If I die today, at least I will have done the two things I’ve always wanted to do: travel the world and write a novel.” And whereas I always thought publishing was the ultimate goal, I now know it’s the *writing itself* that matters. Because, regardless of quality or quantity, it is the only thing in my life that I can’t *not* do. And, with the completion of this MA, which has given a kick-start to my writing life, I cannot but continue to ride the Wave.