

Between Blue and Light

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Abstract

My novella follows a narrator observing her life, as she struggles with what it is to live in a world that she finds simultaneously frightening and beautiful. The story touches on the limitations of human connection and with loss in various forms. Set in both Cape Town and small town South Africa, the story explores the inner life of a woman detached and adrift.

Sometimes my mother would call me her Friday Flower, for the day I was born in early spring. She would brush my hair in the evenings, and tell me about the day of my birth. The story changed often, becoming a little more nostalgic and beautiful with each passing year, but over time there were some details that remained the same, and they stuck with me like a painting that hung at the back of my mind. The day was always freezing cold, frost coated the pink and white blossoms on the trees outside, and the smell of winter still lingered in the crisp air. I was born in the house I later grew up in, right in front of the fireplace, because I'd arrived earlier than expected and there had been no time for my mother to get to town. "What a mess," my mother would say of my birth, but always with a smile.

I grew up in the farmhouse that my grandmother had built many years before I was born. She'd travelled all the way from Zambia, where she had once lived with her young husband. He was a geologist, and they lived on a barren piece of land in the arid south western region of the country. She'd never liked the landscape, and often said that her skin felt like it didn't fit with the feeling in the air there. She hated the dryness and the cracked land, and she had dreamt of a green field filled with everlasting flowers repeatedly for two whole years, my mother said. She had woken up every morning feeling thirsty, and wanted nothing more than to live in the place she dreamed of every night, where water flowed freely. She said she could even feel it moving in her veins for the first few minutes after waking in the mornings and if she woke up in the night sweating, which she often did, she'd say it was because she'd been submerged in a river in her dreams, and a layer of water had remained on her skin.

When her husband died not long after my mother's birth, she'd travelled to Johannesburg first, but had been overwhelmed by the city, and after driving south, made her way eventually to the midlands where she found the piece of land with its gentle valleys and the river that ran through it. She'd been on the road in her old car for most of the day, and said that when she came across the farm her glasses had a layer of dust on them that had made everything look a little gold, but the land matched the place in her dream so closely that she'd stopped breathing for a second and knew immediately that

she'd found her home. She named the farm simply The Valley, and hired men to fix the fence around its borders and then build a house on a small hill above the river. The house took some time to build, so she lived in an old shed with her young child, a pair of chickens and a couple of mismatched dogs for a few months, bathing in the river every morning, and cooking oats and beans on a gas burner when she got hungry. When the house was complete, it was the biggest she'd ever lived in, with three bedrooms and a kitchen that looked over the river. She planted fruit trees around its white plaster walls, and geraniums in big pots on the porch, which had wide glass doors that let in the sun all afternoon.

I never knew my grandmother outside of the stories my mother told me, because she was killed before I was born, in a storm one summer afternoon. It happened not far from the farm, when she had taken her old car to town for supplies. Even as a child I knew the story of her death quite well, as most people in the area came to, because the clouds that had rolled in that day were memorable — unusually big and tinted with green, like the kind that brought hail, but darker. The sky had blackened quickly, even though it was still hours before sunset, and had started to swirl by the time she had started driving the dirt road home. No rain came, even though the sky looked heavy with it, and instead the wind rose to a strength no one in the district had ever seen before. It had moved in circles, gathering speed and momentum, until it turned into a heavy rotating column of air and dirt, and as it spun along the land, it picked up whole trees and gate posts and bits of fence. She must have seen it coming towards her, but there was nothing she could do to escape its force, and it scooped her up too, lifting her car into the air and carrying it several kilometres off the road before dropping her in a neighbour's field, her body broken and blue, crushed between the steering wheel and the door of her car.

My mother was in her early twenties at the time, and had been at home during the storm. When she heard the sound of the wind outside, she said it had sounded like a train going through the house, but it had been the colour of the clouds that had frightened her the most, with their unnatural shade of green and the way they had moved in strange circles through the sky. The storm didn't last particularly long, probably only around an hour in total, and when it ended it was suddenly silent. The biggest of the clouds had disappeared, leaving the sky a steel grey. When my

grandmother hadn't returned home by five o'clock, as she usually did after a day in town, my mother grew frightened, so she took the farm truck out along the road to look for her. She thought perhaps she had stopped on the side of the road to wait for the storm to pass, or maybe even gone inside with a neighbour, but when she saw the fence posts and the gates bent and strewn across the fields, a strange feeling entered her skin. Although she only found her mother's body two hours later, when she noticed the crumpled car sticking out from the grass, she said afterwards that she had already long known what she would see. I don't think the image of her mother's body ever left her, and she told me years later that she looked like she had been beaten to death, which, in a way, I suppose she had.

Although she hadn't known it at the time, my mother was already pregnant with me when the storm had passed through the farm, so she was never quite certain whether she had felt sick with grief or pregnancy for the weeks following her mother's death. But when she realised she had a baby inside her, she said that she simply stopped mourning. She named me immediately — Kera — because she liked the way it sounded, and spent her time replanting the trees that had been uprooted and adding new ones to the garden wherever she saw even so much as a broken branch. The result was, years later, a garden that was filled with blossoms in spring and fruit in summer, and in autumn, soft light always filtered through the leaves that turned red and yellow every April. In winter, the garden took on a naked look, exposing the house and making it seem whiter, and the space surrounding us always looked brighter somehow with no leaves, because the sun could get through the bare branches that stood stark against the clear dry sky.

When I was four, the man who helped my mother prune the fruit trees moved into our house for a while, and about a year later my sister was born. She took longer to come than me, so my mother had plenty of time to get to town, and she was born in a hospital that I was allowed to visit. I didn't like the white lights there, or the smell in the corridors, but I couldn't wait to meet my sister and share all of the garden's secret places with her. I waited impatiently for her to grow big enough to walk with me, and

eventually she did. Left on our own while our mother worked on the farm, we would make shelters in the big hydrangea bushes and in the branches of the trees, and as we grew, the more we explored, out of the garden to the river, and eventually further into the valley and out of the view of the house.

On the farm, we would wear matching light cotton shorts and t-shirts, our hair in loose pony tails, and we were almost identical except for our size. Often, we sat at the edge of a rock pool in the river, the water in front of us a sheet of blue-black glass, flat except for the circles where our toes touched the surface. Once, on a late afternoon, when the light was a wintry kind of soft, shimmering and gold, we collected crab shells and pebbles in our laps and pulled star-shaped flowers from the cracks in the rocks and placed them on us like precious jewellery. We strung the flowers onto fishing line and tied the ends, so that when we were done we had strings of petals to lay out on the rocks beside us. The flowers were the kind that feel dry, so every now and then the breeze shook the strings and they rolled, and there was the sound of rustling along with our girl voices and the occasional plop of toes in water. When the sun started to lower over the hills, we picked up our stones and shells and our strings and dragged them along the rocks, raising the volume of the scene, which moved in time for a few moments with the fading light and the movement of the breeze.

We walked along the river for a while until we faded into grassland. There we followed the narrow path homeward, all the while talking and laughing. With the dimming of the light came a rising of sounds that had not been heard since the evening before — the croaking of frogs in the reeds and the strange creak of insects coming alive with the night. We entered the house, which was warm inside, and we sat on the floor near to the fireplace and untied the strings and sorted flowers and pebbles into piles and tied them onto new, shorter ones. Soon our little wrists and ankles were filled with bracelets and we shook our arms and danced and giggled, happy with our beautiful new creations. Then, there was a knock against the window and we stopped dancing, and ran to slide the curtains aside. The veranda light was on, so we could see, outlined by the orange glow, a man standing with his forehead pressed against the glass. Blood slipped from the side of his face onto the glass and when we moved closer we could see that his

hands were bound tight with rope, his fingertips swollen, blood crusted underneath his nails.

We recognised the man. He lived down the road from us, just three or four kilometres away, and we called him uncle, although we had only known him a few months. Sometimes we went to his house, which was dark and damp, but we usually stayed outside in the garden while our mother was inside with him. The inside always smelled the same, like wood, but wet, and old porridge, or venison if it was a Sunday. The kitchen was big and dilapidated. An old wood oven sat in the corner and the stone floors were always cold, no matter the temperature outside. The garden was lush and overgrown, and we sat in oversized rhododendron bushes or under the hydrangeas and made forts amongst the flowers and branches. The garden always grew dark by early afternoon, in the shadow of the trees and hills.

Now, the man looked older than before, the skin on his face pale and thin, torn open in parts on the side of his forehead and near his eyes. His hair stuck out in white tufts and at its roots we could see a layer of dark black-red, which dripped downwards and onto the window pane where he rested his head. He tried to lift his hands to the window, but he wasn't able to get them higher than his chest, the rope denting the skin at his wrists. His mouth opened and closed, but I couldn't hear what he was saying with the glass between us. I stepped forward and placed my hand against the window, where a dirty smudge of blood had formed. The man's head slipped downwards as he fell to the ground, and there was the crack of bone against the concrete ground. My sister started to cry, and there was the sound of the back door opening and slamming, and our mother's feet running out of the kitchen and around the veranda where the old man lay. Later, I heard my mother's low voice speaking into the phone, and then the sound of her crying in the next room. Some of the people in the area moved away after that, but my mother told us that there was no reason to be afraid, so we believed her.

When we were old enough, my sister and I went to boarding school two hours away, in a town on the coast, but we returned to the farm every weekend and for the holidays in between. As we grew, the roots of the land wrapped themselves tighter and tighter

around me and my sister, connecting me to her and her to me and us both to the valleys and hills we spent our time in. The clutches of the land grew tighter and tighter, but because it was all I had ever known, I didn't notice the weight they gave to my body. But as I got older, the mountains surrounding the farm seemed somehow to creep closer every year, and there came a time when a restlessness took over my body, and no matter how much I walked, there was nowhere I could go that I hadn't been before. I began to associate a full moon with a sleepless night, because the light would wake me up, and I would walk silently out of the house when the sky was bright, making myself invisible as I walked through the fields and into the mountains. With each passing month, I barely slept, and by the time my seventeenth birthday arrived, I had decided it was time for me to leave. My sister begged me to stay, and cried, and even though I was fully grown by then, I did too when we walked to the river one last time. And so, when I left home for the first time, I severed the roots that had wrapped themselves around me, and not having them attached to my body changed the way I moved in the world. I felt unsteady on my feet, too light for the world I found myself in. Before, the roots had held me to the earth, and now, without them there, my body threatened to float from the ground, and in the first few years of my early adulthood I found I had to walk carefully to keep my balance.

I moved to Cape Town to study, and went to live in a small garden cottage that belonged to a friend of my mother's. I found a part-time job in a library in the suburbs, which I liked because I could mostly be alone. I spent a lot of my time in the quiet corridors of the library, and walked from there to my new home every evening, which was hidden from the street by a thick hedge. Slowly I learnt the shape of the town, which felt in many ways to be a foreign land with its sound and light and people everywhere. The day I met Anje, I felt particularly light, my legs disconnected from the ground, and I lingered outside the library to steady myself against the wall before I went inside. She walked up the stairs towards me and smiled as she passed. It was only later, in the evening, when I saw her again and recognised her across the floor of a friend's house, that I first spoke to her. She looked brown-gold in the low light, and while my body was flat and hard like a child's, she looked like a woman. She was dancing to the

low thumps of the music and I sat on a couch and watched her move, and the way her hips and waist curved. She saw me looking, but I was afraid to move so I drank my wine until my body numbed and I walked across the room to her. She smiled at me as I approached, for the second time that day, and held my wrist as we danced. Later, her hands were in my hair, her lips against my neck and my skin burned with the feeling of her tongue on it.

After that it was easy to see her again, because her morning route intersected mine, and we'd often walk together. Sometimes we'd drink coffee on the library stairs before I went in to work and within a few weeks she'd meet me after work too and we would go to the forest, where we'd pick pretty, strange plants and we'd talk about what we were like as children. I liked the way her eyes widened when she saw me from a distance, and I loved her body for the ways it was different to my own. I was surprised when the shape of hers fit mine in a way I hadn't known before, and I craved her fingertips on my skin. On Saturday mornings we would lie in bed looking at each other and she would kiss my hair and smile while I moved my eyes slowly over her, sometimes touching her body tentatively to check it really was as beautiful I imagined it looked and felt, and to make sure that it hadn't changed overnight.

Sometimes on the weekends, we would drive the road outside town, our clothes loose and light, and she would play me strange new music on the radio. I sometimes felt like I had as a child, running wild on the land, only now the landscape was different and the girl at my side was Anje, rather than my sister. This land wasn't home, but still it swept me up in its roughness. I liked the way the brown was punctuated with yellow, in the flowers on the side of the road and in the light on the dust and the road signs where the bends cut into the hills. In our first few months together, it seemed as though Anje liked to be outside almost as much as I did, and sometimes we would drive all the way up the west coast and sleep in the car there, the seats pushed down so we could lie next to each other and stare out of the back of the window, watching the sky and talking late into the night.

In the morning, we would walk in the sun, and swim in the waves. She would run at me on the beach, hopping and swirling. She was always the playful girl, the girl with the grin. On those days, we were always barefooted and we would laugh and dance round and round on the sand. We never stopped moving. We'd lift our shoulders, and roll them and sway; moving our hips back and forwards, our toes up and down. The ground was soft. The sky was high and bright and blue. The clouds swirled with colours of their own. Once, we drove towards the Winterhoek mountains, so blue, so grey, with white stone creases in their big hard sides. We walked on the hills, which wound upwards until we found a blue-green dam, so still it was impossible not to touch. We dipped our toes and then jumped, and it was there that I fell in love with the feeling of forgetting the world beyond my own skin. I submerged my body, and momentarily dissolved into the darkness.

Even if we were in town, we'd lie on the flat roof of her house and watch the moon in whatever phase it was in at the time, so there was always a slice or a sphere of white light in some corner of the sky, of my eye, following us as she moved closer into me. Soon, we were together every night, and later, every morning. I would wake up in her bed and walk through her kitchen to make coffee for us to drink under the big bougainvillea outside. And we would talk, and walk, and slowly make plans under the cover of an old blue duvet in a room that, for a while, felt like the world.

Sometimes we went out in town and danced like we had on our first night together, and over time, I learned to love the way the city looked after dark. The bar lights and the smoke wrapped me in a yellow bubble, and I found that if I allowed them to, any ideas I had of myself faded to mist far from where I stood, and I could be anyone. We drank and smoked, and Anje was always on the lookout for people she knew so that she could return with small packages of powders and pills for us to share. I didn't care what anyone besides Anje said, and I'd smile and watch their lips move and let words spill out of me too. The world looked softer, like a dream, and the nights revealed themselves to me slowly, in smudges of light, and music that vibrated through the layers of my skin, ending always with Anje's body wrapped in mine.

One night, we had been out late, and I was lying on the bed trying to focus my eyes on the ceiling. Anje came out from the bathroom with blood running from her nose and smeared onto her chin. She was sobbing loudly, a look of terror in her eyes, and the tears mixed with the blood and dripped down her neck onto her t-shirt. She was framed in the dark doorway because the blinds were down, but I could hear the rustle of birds in the bush outside and knew that the sun was just starting to rise. I stared at her hands clutching her t-shirt and at her lips coated in mucus and blood. She looked as though she was inside out with her fluids and her fear revealed to me, and although I helped her wash her face and calmed her down to sleep, I wished she had never showed me that ugliness, because I never was able to forget it.

I didn't go out as much after that. For me, the beautiful dreamscape that we had so carefully crafted had fallen apart and the lights punctuating the dark had lost their glow. I preferred the low light of my room, or the early mornings, but Anje craved the night time and couldn't stay away from its music and lights. The skin around her eyes darkened and the gold I had once seen in her pores faded to grey. Where her body had been full and soft, it became fragile and I was afraid to touch her for fear the pressure of my fingertips would be too much and she would break. She was angry at the world and at me, but I wasn't brave enough to ask why, so we gradually pulled apart, going sometimes for days at a time without seeing each other. Still, I craved pieces of her, the feeling of her body near mine and the particular softness of her lips. I would find myself walking to the house at dawn, even if I knew she was just getting back from town, just so I could make coffee and sit in the shade of the bougainvillea as the sun rose, or lie next to her as she fell asleep. Over time, I saw her while she was awake less and less, and one morning as I lay next to her, I saw that her cheeks had taken on a colour somewhere between green and grey, and it made me think of my mother's stories. I touched a curl that had fallen onto her face and watched as it turned to dust between my fingers. Anje was disappearing before me, the skin on her arms slowly becoming translucent, her hands curled up to her chin losing their brown-gold. So I left, and that was the last time I went to her room, although my legs felt light and flimsy again for a while and I struggled to sleep alone, scared that I would never emerge from my dreams

if I closed my eyes for too long. When I did sleep, I dreamt of a giant puff adder swimming across a river, the yellow and black diamonds on its skin cutting through the steel water. When I woke up, the image stuck with me, and I felt like I had seen it somewhere before. It made me think about how my grandmother dreamt of her green land and searched for her home, and how I had left it so easily, as though it was nothing.

When I realised that I wasn't going to see Anje again, I felt the pain in my throat first, before it filtered to the rest of my body. My throat burned and it felt hot and dry, making my breath a little shorter than usual. I walked all through town, my legs so light I floated between steps and somewhere in Newlands, I crossed the veldt and climbed the hill so that the town was on one side of me and the mountain on the other. The roads wound out of the city for as far as I could see, a network of grey snakes in the brown ground. By the time I had walked down the slope, and was approaching the reservoir, the burning had lowered to my chest and even my breath felt hot. As I exhaled, I saw the flicker of a flame leave my lips and touch the grass at my feet, and I stood on it to watch it smoulder. But the more I walked, the faster I moved, and my breath became quicker and harder. With each inhalation my throat and chest and belly was struck with an intense heat that hurt down to my bones and inside my organs. And, with each exhalation, came a cloud of embers that fell to the ground around me. As they struck the dry earth, they turned to flames, igniting the grass and growing into a fire around me. Already taller than me and reaching the branches of the blue gums, there was nothing for me to do but stand in the flames and feel the heat of them scorch my skin and hair and deeper inside until my intestines turned to ash and my bones crumbled in the heat. When all of the trees were on fire and the flames had swallowed the veldt around me, and I could see it moving up the hill towards the mountain, I screamed to release one last flame, and walked into the reservoir where I lay on its cold dark bottom until I could no longer feel the fire in my body. Only when my body was cool did I emerge from the water, and then it was night time and I slipped silently back into town, my feet barely touching the ground, so light my body had become.

After that night, when I had emerged from the flames and the water, I felt different. I was more disconnected from the land than ever and it changed the way I moved, even more than before. Now, I not only floated with the lightness of my feet, I dragged a layer of myself behind my body as though it was something that no longer belonged to me, like an empty packet I was forced to carry around. My body took on a strange layered effect, and I found when I looked in the mirror I couldn't quite focus my eyes. It was like my outer shell was blurred and something not quite visible sat just below the surface of my skin. I urged the girl in the mirror to peel back the fuzzy shell so that the one beneath her could emerge, wiped clean, a beautiful raw being to be remoulded. I shouted at her to reveal herself, so we could start again, but she never listened, and I eventually threw a blanket over the glass so I didn't have to look at my blurry outline anymore.

But, my reflection followed me around, and everywhere I went I saw the girl in the glass, a fractured, unsteady presence hard to ignore. She was in shop windows as I walked on the streets of the town and even in fragments of light on the surface of the swimming pool in Newlands, where I'd sometimes go in the afternoons to stretch my body and hold my breath for as long as I could. I couldn't see her when I was under the water, and it was a sanctuary I sought even when the air turned crisp in the autumn and the light faded early, dimming while I was still swimming tirelessly up and down its empty lanes. Out of the water though, she was persistent, always glaring back at me with her annoying look of sad longing, a body separate from my own. She seemed to pursue me more and more, in the glass doors of the library, flashing past in car windows and bathrooms, creeping quickly past when I increased the pace of my step and sauntering at the side of my vision when I leant against my own sliding doors to smoke in the evenings. The look of her made me uncomfortable, her skin too pale, her hair so long it reached her hips and covered her face in a big black cloud when she let it loose. One evening I caught her looking at me sullenly as I sipped my tea in the garden, and with a look of anger in her eyes she threw the cup right at me and it shattered between us. I looked at the shards and her face so full of intensity, and walked back inside to escape the glare of her. I cut my hair right off that night in one long braid and then cropped closer and closer to my scalp until it was as short as I could get it, and later threw the hair out with the rubbish. She disappeared after that and eventually I was able

to take the blanket off the mirror in my bedroom and I stopped hurrying past every surface of glass I passed by.

With more time alone, I walked a lot and learnt to navigate the city in new ways. I resisted the urge to always drive away and out of it and tried instead to absorb its feeling into my skin and to attach its land in some way to me. I started in places I had never explored with Anje, the streets of Salt River and the alleys of Muizenberg, where the buildings were run down and dirty, peeling and marked with paint. I took the train sometimes just to read the graffiti on the seats and walls and would walk all the way from Muizenberg, through St James and on to Kalk Bay to see the city change along the tracks and to jump into the icy waters of the tidal pools along the way. The ocean on that side of the city always looked a moody shade of grey, starker and wilder somehow than the bright blue of the Atlantic Seaboard. It smelt different too, stronger, more like salt and kelp, and I liked the way the wind blew right off the water and the way I could feel it below my surface and in the sensitive skin of my neck and scalp, now that my hair was mostly gone. There was a coffee shop I found, set back from the ocean across the tracks where I would sometimes go to warm up after being swept by the sea spray and wind or when I'd been swimming in the cold. Inside, it was small and kind of shabby, mostly with surfboards leaning against its outside walls and wet footprints on the floors inside. I drank tea there sometimes when my hair was damp and my skin felt frozen, and spoke to the man who ran the café if it was quiet, which it often was, especially on weekday mornings and in winter.

"I like words that start with 'k'," he said to me when I told him my name.

And he repeated the sound of it whenever he saw me, "K, K, K, Kera," like a song under his breath.

His name was Jaco, and he looked more like a boy than a man with big yellow eyes and a light body he liked to move when he spoke. He smiled a lot and laughed and I liked listening to him talk. He made me feel strange and curious. I was amazed at all the ways in which he was different to me and I seemed to intrigue him too. We turned things upside down for each other, as though we were both peeling back parts of the world neither of us had thought to look at before. Fragments of my fear turned to wonder and it was this feeling that allowed me to kiss him one afternoon on the damp road outside

the café. There was no urgency, and I was surprised by his softness and the way he stood still for that moment in the rain. We got to know each other slowly, revealing layers of ourselves over time. There was no dream light or music in our time together, and no dancing. I didn't crave him in the way I had Anje, but he made me feel different. I was calmer and quieter. He fell in love with my body and I let it happen because he touched me as if I was the most precious thing he'd seen. He ran his fingers through my short hair and touched me tentatively, not sure of himself but eager, easily excited by the feeling of my body in his hands.

After a year, I moved into his flat in Muizenberg, and everything about him — the smell of his hair, his breath on my neck at night — felt familiar. One summer, I took him back to my mother's farm with me and showed him the parts of it I had explored as a child. The house felt different with him in it, and smaller now that I was no longer a child, but the land let me right back in, despite all the time that had passed. It laid itself out for me so that I could spread myself all over its beautiful green expanse, and we spent the days floating in the river and lying under the oak trees on its banks, naked and alone with all that space around us. I'd almost forgotten its softness and the way it wrapped itself around me, I'd been in Cape Town's hard space for so long. We walked in the mountains and something in the place pulled layers I had been hiding out from me, and I spilled them out for him to see, letting them unravel in messy ribbons between us. He took them willingly and tied them around his own body, pulling us closer in a way we'd not been before.

When I found out I was pregnant, my body separated itself from me, not for the first time, but in a new and rebellious way. It was beyond my control, and I found myself shrinking inside of it, not because I was afraid, but because I simply could not compete with the force of it. At first, Jaco announced you'll be fine, *we'll* be fine. And quite quickly, my body had changed. We had waited for it to grow, for something to grow. He would touch my stomach, protective and excited. My breasts became swollen, foreign. My body was a new kind of wild. But after eight weeks, I learned that there

was no heartbeat in my belly, and I met him near the beach to tell him. Fog rolled in over a grey sea that day and hung on the hills behind Simonstown, drifting. The sun was high and pale, just a stripe of light penetrated into a small circle of sand.

We walked from the parking lot at Muizenberg, towards the vast stretch of beach, empty mostly, absorbed by a strange mist off the Atlantic, our fingers touching, then intertwined, then loosening and spreading and brushing and touching again. The weight of the loss hung between us. On his face, I saw the cramp of something promised, then stolen. The betrayal. But neither of us could find the words for the things that fluttered and sunk between us. He touched me, but his fingers felt too light. We sat on the beach encircled by the cloud. He liked the mist.

"Feels like a dream," he said, "like we're invisible".

But I was trapped in that unmoving cloud that grew more leaden.

"It'll pass," he said, but the grey was blinding and although the sand was soft, it was cold and I could see no further than the tips of my toes.

The nights following that felt long. Guilt and sadness mixed into the fabric of the dark. I carried death inside me for a time, before it could be scraped away. He stroked my stomach, stopped himself. Touched my hair instead. I recoiled. Sobbed. Moved closer again. We lay in bed with the windows and curtains open. The last of winter's cool crawled in so that we could keep the heavy duvet on us and curl in each other's warmth. Street light filtered through the spare room door, casting a shadow on the wall until dawn when we could finally sleep and stop trying to talk about everything, that was, as it had turned out, nothing. The room became a haven and a trap. Our voices grew husky, our eyes dry. Coffee cups stained the bedside table, the liquid remnants growing cold. Time was filled with the rearranging of books. Straightening of sheets. Flicking through the news.

In the hospital I felt myself becoming a shadow, myself outside of myself, lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, nodding yes, fine to the nurse, eyes glazed over even before

the drugs, and I found myself thinking about the day my sister was born. When it was done I cried, and he did too, but we remained apart, me propped up on the pillows facing outwards to the parking lot and the gardens beyond, he crumpled into a chair against the sick-green curtain. We thought that would be the worst of it, and we were relieved. Afterwards, we drove home and I slept a lot. And I bled, cells slowly healing inside of me. Later, we took a drive out of town, and the yellow canola fields stretched endlessly in rows and rows as they did every winter. Eventually, I turned off the radio, wiped my eyes, rubbed cream on my face, fixed my hair. He leaned his elbow out of the window. We watched a crow in the sky, and I told myself I'd give myself just one more day of mourning.

After that, I wanted everything to go back to the way it had been, but I couldn't shake the strange sadness that I'd been left with. I wondered if the doctors had left something in me, and it was slowly rotting me from the inside, because I felt heavy with something I didn't recognise. I moved wordlessly through the days, going from mundane task to the next with a new numbness. I could see Jaco was afraid of my silence and afraid to touch me, and in return I resented him for doing this to me, although I would never say so. Something odd and uncomfortable hung between us, and each of us felt its weight in different ways, allowing it to grow larger when we were together until it filled the house. I became frustrated with my body for making me feel the way that I did, for the way it dragged everything out, but still I had no control over it and all I could do was let it transport me through the days and nights before it released me to sleep in the hours in between. Eventually, I told Jaco I had to leave for a while, and I avoided his sad eyes when I said it, and kissed him softly, which made my belly feel raw.

I drove the long road to my sister's over three days. She had chosen to live and work in the small town we had been to school in, a place I had not been in years. Halfway, I stopped at a village, at a backpacker's on a hill above the beach, which was quiet being out of season. In the bar, I met an American man, who told me he loved my accent. When I replied that I kind of liked his too, he thought it was hilarious because he had

never considered that he had one. I laughed, but really I wondered what it must be like to be so self-involved to think that what you sound like is normal. Nonetheless, I drank with him for most of the night and took him back to my room when we were both drunk, because it was so easy to be dishonest in that place between places.

For the next few days, I drove all day and stopped only to sleep, talking only when I had to, and staying inside my room until dawn, when I got back into the car and turned up the music as loud as it would go. As I drove towards my sister's home, I thought about a time when we were children and we'd taken shelter from a snow storm inside a hay bale. We'd been out walking, and halfway across a field we'd found one that was lopsided and loose, unlike the others, which were lined up neatly and tied up tight, so we'd been able to pull its insides out in big handfuls of hay to hollow out the centre. We sat curled up in its scratchy core and watched the sleet slowly turn to snow around us. Later, our mother had found us and taken us home to thaw in front of the fire before bed, and the snow had continued to fall, causing the electricity to trip and the water pipes to freeze. The roads were blocked with snow too, so we had been stuck on the farm for five full days, unable to get to town or school. When I told people the story, the part they never believed was that there could ever be so much snow in this country, but for me I wondered that there had been a time when the body closest to mine was my sister's.

When I arrived, I felt the air was thick in a way that swam in waves on the road. In Cape Town I was always separate from the land. There was a coldness I was drawn to, in its air, its water, its wind, its people. And its landscape always sat pretty, at a distance. No matter how far I walked there, I was always looking back at a view somewhere apart from myself. But here, I felt myself quickly slipping inside the place. Big leafed plants grew wild at the side of the road and on my right as I drove up the coast, the sea was bigger somehow. The heat crawled up the side of the car and into my pores. I wound down the window to feel the warmth on my face. Green flashed past. Palms. Delicious Monsters. The big fanned out trees from Madagascar. The foliage encroached onto fences and buildings so that the line between them was a beautiful overgrown mess.

When my sister was at work, I walked alone, down the road from her house towards the sea. On the beach in front of the parking lot, which was cordoned off with a low wooden fence, there was a lone lifeguard and a man with two children, standing knee deep in the waves. The children held nets, the kind that come in luminescent pink and green made with wood handles and flimsy wire. They had likely just bought them, because they were still intact, from the women who sit with their legs out straight near the pathway between the beach and the parking lot, and sold these and other beach essentials, like hats and towels, plastic buckets and spades. It was the season for avocados too, the big kind that tourists love. The man pointed at the ocean. There were dolphins beyond the breakers, but the children were not interested. They would rather see a shark.

It was windy and the sea was a murky grey, so the pathway along the beach was more or less empty. I came to this place as a child, and I recognised its landscape, but I was a stranger here. I wore a dress, which flapped up with the wind and I had to hold it down, but there was no one to see my legs, and anyway, it was the kind of town where people walked around in sarongs and beach towels, even in the shops. I carried my sandals and walked barefoot, which meant I couldn't walk as fast as I would normally have liked to, and although there was the risk of getting a splinter from the wooden pathway, my toes felt light in their nakedness.

The last time I was in the town, I was almost finished school. Free for the first time, I had gathered with the other girls and together we drank cheap, sweet wine in clusters and then walked, unsteady and giggling down the road to the bar with the dance floor. There, we'd met boys and drunk more and danced close to each other's bodies, our hot skins touching. Every night, we kissed different boys in that place and their sweat dripped onto us and our teeth clashed. Their tongues were too wet, too eager, and I hated the dampness of their t-shirts and the smell of alcohol on their breaths, but it was what we were expected to do in this place, so each night we allowed the ritual to happen to us. We gathered in small rooms and stood in our underwear and dressed each other, choosing clothes from each other's bags, arguing over how best to do our hair, which lip gloss to wear, the colour of our nails. And then, we would pour the wine into mismatched glasses and sit in a circle and get drunk, quickly and easily, our cheeks

warming, our voices growing shrill and then we would leave the apartment that belonged to a friend's father, and enter the world that smelt of cigarette smoke and the sweat of boys, so unlike the places we had come from before. It was terrifying and exciting, and although we woke up in the mornings with headaches, we revelled in our new dirty freedom. Now, when I thought of the clammy hands and the sugary tongues stained green with sweet liquor I let touch me, I felt sick and strange, like I didn't recognise that particular version of myself.

Along the pathway was a line of buildings — big apartment blocks with wide windows and balconies that looked out to the sea. Some of them had small patches of grass in front of them, with places to *braai* and sit in deck chairs when the weather was clear. I wondered what it would be like to live in a place where people were always looking in as they walked by. The lounges were exposed behind the glass doors and I could see right through the ground floor flats, filled mostly with white furniture that was made to look like it had been whitewashed and weathered by the sea. Mostly they were holiday homes, so maybe it was different, but still, the people in these places were always on display in their glass boxes, like fish at the aquarium, only not as beautiful, in their brightly coloured bikinis and shorts they wore once a year.

When I reached the end of the path, I put on my shoes and stopped at the old hotel that was set just on the edge of the beach near the tidal pools. The interior looked like it hadn't changed since the nineties, and there was big wicker furniture in the lounge arranged in a half circle and facing a big fish tank. Outside there were tables and chairs spread out on a deck looking over the beach, and big palm trees provided shelter from the wind. There was a couple eating scones, and a man in a collared shirt working on a laptop, but other than that the space was empty. A small group of women lay at the swimming pool just beyond the hotel's restaurant, despite the cloudy sky. Their bodies were already brown from other days in the sun, and they lay out to be seen from the windows above them with their carefully chosen swimming costumes and beautiful bodies.

I chose a table on the edge of the balcony so I could see the ocean, which was churning with white horses and knocking at the walls of the tidal pool. Nothing stood between the hotel and the sea view. I looked at the couple sitting nearby, and then the man working, and wondered if these were the kinds of people I could talk to. The couple looked younger than me, but not by much, and I imagined they are here on holiday. The woman was wearing a white dress that stopped just above her knees, and a pale blue cardigan that looked soft, and white sandals. She had perfectly coordinated her outfit to match her small blue earrings. Perhaps she bought these items especially for this holiday, imagining as she did how she would look against a background of sea, or in a shiny restaurant. I wondered what else she planned to wear on this trip, that would be recorded in countless photographs of matching clothes and pretty smiles. The solitary man looked much older than me. His hair had a slightly red tint to it, and his facial hair looked rough, but groomed. I noticed he was drinking beer, even though it was not yet noon, and thought he couldn't possibly be from here. He looked up at me, but his expression remained unchanged, and he looked back at his computer to type. I felt disappointed that I would never know what it is we could have talked about. I wondered if he would have looked at me longer if I had been older, or younger, or if this had been a different place.

When I returned to my sister's home, I discovered that she had arranged a party. It's a special occasion, she said, us being together again, something to celebrate. There would be people from my past there, those I hadn't thought of in years, others I had never really thought about at all. The night before the party, I lay in the unfamiliar bed in the unfamiliar room and tried to imagine where the walls were in the dark middle of the night. In my own room, they were close enough to touch when I lay in bed, at least two of them anyway, but here, the bed was positioned in the centre of the room, adrift on an ocean of tiles. The windows were far away too, so it felt like there was nothing to contain me. There was too much space in her house, and I couldn't seem to breathe normally in the humid nights, which arrived earlier than I was used to, but ended too quickly with a sun that rose sudden and bright from the sea. I woke up early, and tried to be quiet as I moved through the house, opening and closing the kitchen cupboards as

softly as I could, creeping into the garden to drink my coffee, afraid my sipping would wake her, and the day would be forced to begin before I was ready for it.

Later, my sister started on the preparations for the party, and I resisted the urge to escape, choosing instead to sweep the leaves from the driveway. The plants were big and wild, spreading their vines and leaves wide, and hiding creatures in their shadows. Spiders and lizards and insects that never revealed themselves to the sun. There was certainly more venom in this town than most others I had been to. It was in the yellow seedpods that dropped from the trees at the gate, and in the little red berries, and the bright flowers on the sides of the driveway. Last year, my sister found a scorpion in her shoe, and tossed it in the garden like it was nothing. One bite from that little fucker and I'd be in hospital, she said when she told me, but in a way that was way too nonchalant for the reality of the situation. I think she never really believed she could be hurt by something like that. Like she could live in this place that was wild and dangerous, and remain immune to its power as long as she coated it in neutral shades and rugs made of genuine wool.

When the evening arrived, even I couldn't resist the beauty of its warmth, the particular pink of the sky. From the veranda I could see a line of ocean glimmering on the horizon, and the sky was clear except for a thin stripe of cloud across it. I found myself wishing it was summer so that I could feel the full extent of the sweet, strange nostalgia, the full rage of myself at sixteen that I knew would come at me, if I had sweat on my skin and the smell of jasmine was in the air. In the moments before the guests arrived, between laying out the glasses and filling the jugs of drinks, I smoothed my hair in the mirror and put lipstick on. Red for tonight, because it made me look like someone who was from a city other than this one, even though it didn't really match my dress, which I had already changed twice.

The women who came to the party used to be girls I once knew at school. Others were friends of my sister's, from work, and their partners. Mostly, they were dressed similarly, in clothes that were fashionable, but not brand new. Their dresses were modest in length (nothing too short) and not too expensive, and brightly coloured, so

that if I looked down on the group from the veranda, they looked like an extension of the garden beds in their varying shades of orange and pink. When we talked, they told me about their weddings, the ones they'd had, or were planning, and the types of flowers they had chosen, the colour of the dresses, the style of their hair. If I stood close enough I could smell their perfume, which was sweet, and floral. They shone in their pastel colours, their eyelids shimmered. I wanted to fall in love with their perfect skins and whatever it was that lay beneath them, but it was impossible to get beyond the creamy base, the bronze powder, the gloss. I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflection of the window, and thought that I didn't look like myself in the heat.

On the weekend we travelled inland to my mother's farm. When we left the coast, the air became cooler and easier to breathe. In my mother's home, we gathered in the kitchen as we always had. We sat on the counters to drink our tea and at the big table for meals. My mother made banana fritters and the room smelled oily and sweet. Our fingers and lips were sticky when we ate and when we could fit no more in us, we went outside to walk in the garden. My mother showed me the new trees she had planted and we checked on the old ones. She wrapped her arms around my waist when we walked and I felt happy to be there. My sister felt the same. She held my hand when we walked to the river and we reverted to old versions of ourselves when we took off our clothes and jumped into the cold water. There, we were free to scream into the cool air.

When I returned to Cape Town, I couldn't bring myself to go home immediately. I went instead to stay with my friend Kat, in her house in the suburbs. The house had wooden floors and a beautiful courtyard, but inside it was dark for most of the day, because the sun could never quite reach through the windows. The house opened up straight onto the street, and was very close to the houses on either side of it. The suburb was unlike the others I had lived in until then, although in some ways it was like all places felt the same over time, no matter how strange they were to begin with. At first, though, it felt new and different, mostly because of the darkness in the house, and the street noise outside of it. Every morning, I walked around the neighbourhood near to the house,

familiarising myself with the way the streets were laid out and the routes I could take without getting lost. I liked the trees that grew on the sides of the street and the way that their roots pushed the concrete upwards until it cracked. I liked the places where the bougainvillea and other big plants hung over the walls. Sometimes their thorns stuck to my hair when I walked underneath them, which hurt when they pulled, but I could appreciate the way they refused to be contained by the walls of the suburbs. I didn't have any place I needed to be, so I walked in the mornings when other people were locking their front doors and getting into their cars. I walked when they were on their way to work, and their cars were crawling slowly in lines down the road. Often, I walked right past these cars, and caught glimpses of the faces behind the windows, and heard fragments of whatever it is they were listening to on the radio, which was usually a morning show where people phoned in and talked, but sometimes it was music better suited to dancing than sitting in a car, which made me walk faster and filled me with more energy than the cold had already given me.

Opposite Kat's house was a block of flats, with a big oak tree growing in front of it, which meant I couldn't see into the windows directly in the front, but it was possible to see the few along the side of the building which weren't covered by the branches. A lot of children lived in the building and in the late afternoons when they returned from school, they played in the parking lot with balls and skateboards and made a noise that carried far across the street. Sometimes I sat outside the house, on the small veranda right on the street, and I felt strange watching the children and being so exposed in a place that was not mine. I felt particularly out of place when other people started the ritual move from work to home while I remained still, but it was the only place I could be to get a little sun in the afternoons, so I forced myself to stay there for at least half an hour, even if there were crowds of people walking past from the train station, or to the shop just down the road.

After a week, I started to settle into my friend's home, although I thought a lot about whether I should go home. I had very little to do while Kat was out during the day, and sometimes at night too. She was an actor, so her hours were irregular. She attended any casting she could find for adverts that would play on overseas TV, and was in a play in a theatre in the city centre. I went to watch her one night, and met some of her friends

there. She was amazing on stage and seemed like someone else entirely for the fifty minutes she performed. I hadn't known that she was good at her job, and I was surprised and happy to see her telling the story. I looked around the audience briefly, and could see that the people sitting next to me also appeared convinced, which made me feel connected to them, and we all clapped loudly at the end. Afterwards, some of my friend's friends invited me to a bar to drink with them. We went to a place just down the road from the theatre, which was smokey and quite full, and which had a jukebox near the door. We took turns to choose songs and danced in the hazy bar until it was late and we were drunk on cheap whisky.

Kat helped me get a short-term job painting sets for films. The work was physically exhausting because I crouched down a lot and bent and stretched and used muscles different to the ones I used when I walked, but it wasn't a full day job, and it felt like a good way to fill the mornings. I could still be back at the house in time to sit on the veranda in the sun, although it was gradually growing hotter and less pleasant to be outdoors in the late afternoons. The people I worked with were mostly from other places, so even though I felt like an outsider, I felt like I was one of many. At around eleven o'clock, we usually stopped working to drink coffee or energy drinks and some people smoked, and we talked about different things, like which bands were good to see, or whether it was safe to walk in certain parts of the city. I never saw these people outside of work, but I think it was good for me to talk to them and to listen to what they said, rather than to spend all of my time alone in Kat's dark house.

Between my morning walks and work and the occasional trip to see Kat perform, and drinking at the bar near the theatre, I read a lot of books, and sometimes sketched in a little book of blank pages I had, which made my time feel full. I put a chair near to the window in the bedroom, so I could sit next to it with it wide open late into the night and see a slice of sky above the roofs of the other houses. The room felt hot as spring approached. I read all kinds of books at night, that I selected from the public library based on the colours of their covers and the font style inside. I couldn't bring myself to read an ugly book, no matter the quality of the story. Often I thought about Jaco, and we spoke on the phone every few days.

"When will you be back?" he asked often.

I thought about the way he always sang my name, and was anxious thinking about whether I had made a terrible mistake leaving him behind for so long. When I felt that way I cleaned the house. I swept the floor and mopped the bathroom tiles and pulled the hair from the shower drain, even if I could see it wasn't my own. I felt calmer when I cleaned, and for some time afterwards, and Kat didn't complain. If I got tired of reading and drawing, I walked the thirty minutes to the cinema and sat alone in the back row and cried if the movie was sad. It felt good to let the tears fall for someone else's story, even if I didn't believe it.

It wasn't often that Kat and I were at home at the same time, but if she was free I cooked for her. I experimented with all kinds of dishes, from Morocco and India and Thailand, and spent time looking for the various spices and vegetables the recipes required. I enjoyed working through a shopping list, and following step by step instructions that I found online. One evening, we sat in the courtyard and ate noodles with finely chopped vegetables and spoke about a time when we had been much younger, when we had been at school together in a place far from this one. We laughed about the way our lives had been and how we'd first met — in a line for lunch, both of us limping because of the blisters our brand new shoes had given us.

"I'm thinking of trying burlesque," she said, and I imagined her wearing sparkly underwear and shaking her breasts on a small stage for other women.

"It'll look good on you," I said, and I meant it, because she was good at telling stories with her body, which was beautiful, even though I knew she couldn't really see it the way I did.

When I went to my bedroom later that night, I thought about Kat on stage and wondered what colour costume she would choose and how much skin she would reveal. I imagined her in emerald green, which would match her pale skin and black hair, that was long and straight. I wondered why she hated her body so much that she had to show it off all the time. I thought about the little girl she had been when I first met her and

marvelled at how one person could transform so dramatically in just one life. She had always been a performer, in some way, always the lead in the school plays, and singing me songs when we had nothing else to do at boarding school, but now it was her whole world, and although I was sad to admit it to myself, I didn't really know her anymore. In a way, we'd been forced to be friends when we were just thirteen, but even so, we'd chosen each other out of a group of other girls, all equally awkward or anxious or shy on that first day. Now, we shared a city and a home and still I didn't really know what we were to each other. She was a story teller, and I was happy to watch her and listen, each of us comfortable enough in our roles, alone in our time together, drifting separate on parallel waves.

I went out with the people I met at the theatre, who were really just Kat's friends, but I started to see them more than I saw her, so in a way, they became mine. If we didn't drink and dance, we visited each other's houses and cooked for each other, always bringing wine tucked under our arms. Sometimes, small groups of us went walking together, along the promenade next to the ocean, or around and around the common, and on weekends, we wandered on the mountain and through the forest. Walking made it easier to talk. We could leave the words behind us as we moved, rather than letting them sit and stagnate between us. One time, we walked up the back of the mountain to the reservoirs on top, and swam in the cold water. Afterwards, we sat on the rocks and smoked and it felt like we were on a strange planet above the city, because the rocks were so bright and white next to the black water whose bottom I couldn't see.

I ran with my new friends around the common some mornings, and the mist lingered just above the ground before the sun was hot enough to melt it. I felt happy in those moments, when the air was still cold and damp, and my breath came out in fine white clouds. We started when the sky was a pale orange on the horizon, and the mornings felt so soft, like an extension of the night's dreams, before the day grew bright and harsh. My friends usually ran faster than me, so I had to push myself to keep up and the

exertion burned my muscles and sent bursts of pleasure through me, which I think made me like my new friends more than I otherwise would have.

"So, are you going to stay here?" one of them asked me one morning.

"I can't think of anywhere else to be," I said, although it wasn't true. But the world outside of the suburbs felt like too much to think about just then, and this was as good a place as any to wait for something else to happen. My life felt different to the one I'd had before. I'd walked in the other place too, and cooked oats on the stove top in the mornings and shopped for spices and vegetables, but still, it wasn't quite the same. I was alone here, and it made me feel lighter, if a little lonely.

My new friends went to a music festival in the desert and came back sick and tired, although they would not admit it. They had spent too much money for it not to have changed their lives. They said the music was terrible, unless you were on drugs, in which case it was magical. I tried to imagine myself in that space, but found it was impossible. I wouldn't mind the dirt, but the idea of thousands of people in it terrified me. When I was younger, my sister and I went to a music festival. It wasn't in the desert, but on a farm not far from my mother's. The place was divided into campsites, food trucks and stages. It was best to stay in the right area at the right time, although there were no signs to say so. I wasn't so afraid of crowds then, and it didn't feel like anything bad could happen there. Everyone looked happy, even when it rained and all the tents got wet. The farm was in the mountains, and there was a river that ran below the campsites. Even though it was autumn and the water was freezing, we swam in it and washed away the smoke from our hair, the mud from our feet and nails. We screamed when we emerged from it, and lay in the sun, which felt like the best kind of warm we'd ever had. The farm was quite beautiful, less so with the campsites and the music tents pitched, but still it was that bright green and yellow leaves kind of pretty, with big clouds often perched on the horizon. We wore short shorts and gumboots most of the weekend, changing only in the evenings into tracksuit pants and hoodies when the air cooled down. Then, we drank red wine and spoke over the music, spilling down the fronts of our tops and getting drunk late into the night. One night, we sat in a tent decorated with psychedelic lights and kissed boys in tie-dyed pants, getting high on their joints and the slowness of their lips.

Now, I would never go to a place like that. I would feel like a stranger, even if the land looked familiar. I didn't like the girls who wore flower crowns in their hair and pretended they were free, and I was afraid they would see it in my face, even if I wore what they wore, and moved to the music as though it were something I loved. Rather, I remained in places where it was easier to hide my discomfort. In coffee shops where the barristers were tattooed and beautiful, and where they played music on weeknights; or parties at my new friends' houses where everyone was drunk and it was acceptable to ignore those you didn't want to talk to, and to talk to people who looked more interesting than your friends, even if they weren't. Sometimes these parties were fun, if the whisky was good and everyone was in the mood to play.

One night, Kat introduced me to her new boyfriend Lucas. He spent most of his time smoking outside and lingering at the edges of conversations, speaking rarely and quietly, but when he did he made the people around him laugh and widen their eyes, especially the women. I found him one night out in the garden smoking at the concrete table. He told me had taken a job teaching film to students at the technicon, which he felt was unstable given the industry. I wasn't sure if he meant education or film, but I nodded either way.

"I made my own music video once," he said, "and dressed as Carmen Miranda in it. With the lipstick and everything."

I laughed and imagined him with fruit in his hair and a bright mouth and admitted I could see it.

"Are you glad you did that?" I asked.

"I am now," he said. "Although at the time I did it for different reasons. Like, I thought it would be funny or cool. But now, I can appreciate how stupid I was, and it feels like progress, in a way."

We both laughed. I don't think either of us believed him.

I felt calm with him. It could have been that we didn't really know each other, or sometimes it just happens that way, when there's that certain softness that some people exude. Like the softness of the peach sky and the mist in the morning, in human form. The night was quite cold, and when we stopped talking I shivered and his finger tips felt like ice when he passed me the joint. We sat facing the house, so we could see the big glass doors and inside them, all the other people at the party. Our friends and their friends with drinks in their hands, all wearing a lot of black, in dresses and pants and boots. The people looked so similar through the glass and I wondered if the city attracted a certain kind, or if we all just became this way after a certain length of time in this place. I noticed one woman wearing a very short black skirt and I could see, at the top of her leg, a fine-lined tattoo of the outline of a woman's thighs and crotch wearing lacy panties.

Later, after we had spoken and smoked together for hours, Lucas asked if I would like to go somewhere with him. I said ok, because I expected him to forget by the morning. I was surprised when I saw him outside the house the next day. When I was sitting in the car, I wondered how it was that I got to that moment. We drove on the west coast road, which started off ugly, passing through dirty suburbs and I could see the nuclear plant looming in the distance, surrounded by a brown cloud so that it looked like it was floating on the surface of the sea. There was something about the desolate landscape that felt comforting, as though it gave us permission to feel sad sometimes. On the radio we listened to music from the nineties, because he thought it would be funny to remember what we used to think was good. He was driving, and I sat cross-legged in the passenger seat. I always felt more comfortable when my body was folded up in some way.

When we got to Melkbos, we parked at the lot near the sea and walked along the beach. The tide was in, so there was only a thin strip of sand, and there was kelp all over it, which smelt strong, but not unpleasant. Just off the beach, there was a little shop painted lilac that sold soft-serve ice cream. He bought one, a big vanilla swirl in a cone like we ate when we were kids, and he looked like a child when he held it up for me to lick,

even though his face was covered in rough stubble and there were lines around his eyes. He told me about a film he was writing. It was about a murder that was planned by one person and carried out by another and how the first person was able to get away with it by convincing the second person to take the blame.

"It's very complex," he said, "because it's about how everyone has their price, but also about privilege and desperation, which is really relevant right now, don't you think?"

I wasn't convinced, but I hadn't known him long enough to say so, so I nodded and pretended to think about his story. Instead I wondered if I should drink coffee or wine when we stopped walking and got to the restaurant, which he had told me was at the other side of the beach. The decision was important, because it would determine how the rest of the day went, both for me and for him.

The restaurant had wooden shutters and a deck also made of wood where we sat on a bench facing outwards onto the street and the beach and ocean beyond that. Our backs faced the deck, where there were a few other people scattered over it, so although I couldn't see them, there was a background noise of quiet talking and the clink of cutlery and glasses from time to time. The air was cool on my neck, and I felt more aware of my body because of it. I decided to order wine, and he did too. It warmed our lips and slowly we got drunk, and my body softened and the time slipped away because soon the sun was sinking into the sea and the sky turned pastel and then dark. The smell of seaweed faded slightly as the temperature dropped even more.

We decided to take the bus back into town. Both of us had had too much to drink to drive, and he said he didn't mind fetching his car the next day. We had to wait half an hour for the bus, and I felt the effects of the wine slowly fading. When we finally got in, the lights were too bright, and there was a kind of buzzing sound. The world blurred by through the window, and I rested my head against it, remembering other places I had seen through glass. I hadn't often taken the bus here, and I made a mental note to do it more, because there was something soothing about the way it let me look down on the road from its height, and the speed at which it moved down the bus lane, passing cars and leaving Melkbos and the suburbs in between so quickly, so that I could snatch only fragments of the storefronts and the golf course and the vlei as we sped towards town.

We didn't talk much on the ride. I think he was hypnotised by the bus too, but when we got back to the city centre, we became suddenly aware of each other again, and craving more wine, we walked up the road from the bus stop to the lower end of Loop Street, where we found a bar signposted in neon lighting at the top of a dirty stairwell. The bar was dark and smokey, and wasn't decorated like the ones further up the street, where the brickwork would be tastefully exposed, and the lighting would be dim but warm. Here, the tables were sticky and arranged in booths covered in maroon plastic and we ordered cheap red wine and got drunk all over again, quicker this time because of the remnants still left inside us from the afternoon. It was comforting to make a new friend, even if our friendship would last only until we had slept together, and then we would go back to ignoring each other at parties and choose other people to become interested in.

After the bar, we walked to his place, and he showed me the view from big windows that faced the harbour. He had a big collection of records that his father had given him and he played one that he said reminded him of a road trip he went on once, after his brother had died. I hadn't expected him to say something like that. We lay down on the couch to listen to the song, and when it was finished, he crawled on top of me. I could feel the couch springs underneath my back, and I felt soft between the weight of him and the hardness of the metal. The hair at the side of his face was peppered with grey, and I wanted to touch it, but he held my hands above my head and breathed onto my neck. The ceiling was high above us, and he hadn't closed the curtains, so I watched the reflection of the streetlamps at the top of the windows and felt his body grow warmer on mine.

In the morning, when I lay in his bedroom, which was close to the city centre, I thought about Muizenberg. If it was summer, I would go to the tidal pool, the one just below the train tracks. If it was hot I would walk there slowly and take with me a backpack with my swimming costume and my towel folded up inside. Folded and rolled, like I was taught when I was a child, so it fitted into the bag easily, taking up as little space as possible. It would take me a while to get there, because I would make the mistake of wearing my sandals and my feet would hurt, and by the time I got there I would be sweating and very hot, but that would make it easier to jump into the pool. The water would feel cold at first, but it would be a relief from the heat pounding the concrete

streets, and I would swim up and down for as long as I was not bored. Afterwards, I would rinse myself under the pipe in the wall and pull the knots in my hair out with my fingers and tie it into a bun on the top of my head so that it was off my shoulders and out of my eyes and I could stay cooler for longer. If it was summer, I would be happy to walk after my swim, because by then it would be turning to evening and I would get the feeling I get when I smell a mowed lawn in the breeze, or someone lighting a *braai*, even if I have no lawn of my own, or space for a *braai*. I would phone Jaco, and we would meet and drink drinks that we drink in summer only, and we would stay out late because we would lose track of time, neither of us ever having got used to the late sunsets. We would talk of other cities we wished to visit, because the summer would have us dreaming of summers elsewhere, and we would feel happy to exchange our beaches for other beaches and our mountains for different shaped mountains, and also our town for other towns in better colours, with better flavours.

If it was winter, I would walk in the rain and I would put on my boots and my jacket to do so, and my ears would hurt in the cold wind. I would insist on going outside, even if Jaco wouldn't join me and I would spend more time alone because of it. I would walk on the green hill behind our flat, and also next to the ocean and afterwards I would pull off my clothes and leave them on the bathroom floor and stand in the shower until my skin turned red. Afterwards, I would dry my hair and put on my tights and my dress and my other boots and I would meet Jaco and we would go and drink drinks in a warm place and we would stay out late because we would lose track of time, both us forgetting how early the sun sets in winter. We would talk about the things we would do when it was summer again, because the winter would have us dreaming of our beaches and our mountains that are so beautiful in the sun. And the town too, with its colours that are so bright in the summer and the foods that are served when the weather is warm.

I left Lucas to sleep and when I got back to Kat's house, I packed my clothes into my bag and cleaned the room while she was at work. I left before she got back, and sent her a message to say I was going home, and that I would call her in a few days. It was late when I got onto the M3, and the road was empty and dark. Jaco wasn't there when I arrived, so I switched on all the lights and stood in the lounge. I noticed he had changed the position of the couch slightly so that it was further away from the window than

before. When he got home, he stood quite still in the doorway for a while. Finally, he put his arms around me. He said that he was happy I came back because he was sad without me. I said I was sorry, but I was glad I couldn't see his face when I said it because I knew it wasn't enough. I noticed the clock on the wall had stopped and wondered how long it had been that way. It was ten to ten every time I looked at it.

It was only when I was back in Muizenberg that I noticed how strong the smell of the sea was. It might have been that I had been away from it for a while, but it smelt more pungent than I remembered, bringing with it a constant saltiness in the air that I could smell even when I was inside. Jaco and I sat on the couch in the mornings with the windows open, eating our oats, and it was the first thing that struck me every day. At first, it was just the saltiness, but it gradually turned sharp and sour.

"It's just the kelp rotting on the beach," Jaco said when I mentioned it. "It happens all the time."

It was true. When the tide was far out for hours at a time, the big branches of kelp on the beach did tend to attract insects with their stench, but I couldn't help thinking it was different this time, more acid than before, and it permeated the flat in a way that wouldn't allow me to escape. Jaco would leave for work after we'd eaten breakfast together every morning and I'd close the window when he was gone so that I could shut it out as best I could. I could see he thought I was exaggerating the extent of the kelp's impact on my senses, but since I'd been back he seemed afraid I would leave again, and although there had been moments of anger, in between he treated me carefully, as though I might break if he said the wrong thing.

One day Kat called and asked me to come for dinner.

"You should bring Jaco," she said.

She had recently finished with a play and finally had some time off.

"Also, I miss you," she said.

And I tried to imagine why she said that, when we had spent so little time together in the house anyway. We drove to her house on a Saturday night, and it started to rain lightly as we got out of the car, so fine droplets stuck on our hair and on the outside of our clothes. When we went inside, it felt strange to be back in the house, especially with Jaco next to me. I'd felt so different the last time I had been there, although I noticed that Kat had painted the walls, which made the space lighter. She herded us into the lounge, and from the doorway I could see through to the kitchen where Lucas stood at the counter. I caught a glimpse of his hands pouring wine into four glasses and midway he looked up and smiled at me, lifting just one finger as a kind of wave. I smiled back, and although I hadn't expected to see him there, I didn't feel particularly surprised. I couldn't identify any feeling really, neither pleasure nor guilt. If anything, I wondered why I had agreed to be here, although it was good to have a momentary distance from the smell of rotting seaweed.

We sat on Kat's big couch, our legs folded and tucked under our bodies, and drank the wine and sipped at spicy tomato soup. Lucas spoke about the film he was still writing, and then Kat demonstrated some burlesque moves she had recently learned. She ended with her back turned, her head twisted to face us over her shoulder, and pouted dramatically, which made us all laugh. When we'd finished all the soup and the wine, Jaco brought out a bottle of whisky he'd found in a cupboard at home, a gift from someone a long time ago. We drank it slowly and it warmed our chests, turning our conversation louder. When I went to the kitchen for water, Lucas followed me, and looked inside the fridge. I opened the tap and didn't say anything, but I could feel him breathing, and it made me cold, in the exposed skin between my hair and the collar of my shirt. When I'd filled the glass, I stepped back and faced him, but all he did was look back, like he was waiting for me to do something. I walked past him and back into the lounge. Kat was the most drunk of us all and she wanted to clink glasses between every sip.

"These will be the good old days, won't they?" she said as she lifted her glass.

Even though I knew it was all the whisky and wine that made her say it, I couldn't help feeling myself slipping under the weight of her sweet, drunk melancholy.

We all fell asleep eventually, me and Jaco on the couch, Kat curled up in the bean bag on the floor, Lucas's head in her lap. When I woke up in the early morning, the house smelt of stale smoke, although I didn't remember anyone smoking inside. I got up and quietly gathered the glasses and bowls from the lounge and piled them in the sink. The dishwashing liquid made lemon-scented bubbles and I scrubbed all the wine glasses and dishes and I felt momentarily calm washing away the lip stains and the little bits of chilly and tomato seeds stuck to the bottom of the bowls. Afterwards, I went to shower because my head hurt and the skin around my eyes felt tight and dry. I washed my hair and dried myself with a towel I found in the bathroom. I put my clothes from the night before back on. On the front of my shirt I saw a small wine stain, near the edge of the seam. I walked back to the lounge and saw that the others were still sleeping. I looked at Jaco lying on the couch. He was on his side, his hands pressed together between his knees. He always slept so still, barely moving in the night, even in an unfamiliar place. I remember Kat telling me once that if she had to kill her boyfriend, she would cut his throat while he slept. It was a strange thing to say, but it made me wonder if it was something I could do.

I made coffee and went to sit in the courtyard. My headache seemed like the kind that I could do nothing about but wait out. After a few minutes Lucas came outside. His hair was a mess and I noticed he also had the mark of wine on his shirt. His presence made my body feel heavy, like the weight in my head was sinking downwards into my legs.

"How are you feeling?" he said. He had grown more hair on his face since the last time I had seen him.

"Just tired," I said, although my head ached and I really wanted to lie down again.

"We should go out again sometime," he said. I shrugged. "We had fun," he added.

"We did," I replied.

I remembered how the floor of his room was covered in a brightly coloured rug and the shelves on the wall opposite the bed were lined with music I'd never heard of. He took the coffee cup from me and drank from it. After that, it started drizzling so we went inside and woke the others. Jaco and I drove home and went straight to bed. I only woke

again when it was dark outside. We had left the bedroom windows open and the tip of my nose and fingers were frozen with the outside air. Jaco was still sleeping next to me, and for the second time that day, I looked at him lying so still. I stroked the side of his face as gently as I could, and noticed that his skin felt much warmer than mine. I touched his earlobe and pressed it softly between my cold fingertips. It too felt soft and warm. When he opened his eyes and saw me so close to his face, he pulled me closer to him and held me against his chest, his body begging me to stay with him.

Over time, we started to invite people to our flat. I think it was Jaco's way of convincing me it was a home. Sometimes, the people that Jaco worked with came round to eat and drink with us, and I cooked for them, or I invited my friends from the suburbs. Jaco asked me often to invite Kat and Lucas over, and when I did, they ended up staying late into the night and we drank too much. Jaco and Lucas always had a lot to talk about, and became friends, which seemed strange to me.

"It was just one night," Lucas said to me when I mentioned it.

He looked like he felt sorry for me when he said it, which was a look I didn't like on him, so I left it at that. Always at some point during those nights, mostly near the end of them, I started to feel like I didn't recognise anyone in the room, even though it was always the same people there. I worried that the people in my flat would overlap with the ones in my drawings and I would forget who was who. Usually, by the morning, my fear had passed, but I always checked that my sketch book had remained untouched at these gatherings, and made sure that my friends had not become trapped in its pages.

Around the time of my twenty fifth birthday, I started to feel that time was speeding up. Each year spilled into the next, with little to distinguish each new one from the one before. Jaco bought me plants that could live indoors and we painted our walls bright, light colours. We invited people round more and more, until our friends started to feel like extensions of ourselves. We ate and drank with Kat and Lucas, or over time, variations of them. Kat and another man. Lucas alone. Lucas and a new woman. And other, interchangeable couples we chose according to our moods and the kinds of evenings we felt like having.

I was offered a job in the art department of a publishing company, designing pages for magazines. I travelled by train to the centre of town every morning and back in the evenings, until the outside blur through the windows became familiar. The job was easy and routine — the movements of my hand, the staring at the screen, the tea breaks in between with the people in the office, walks at lunchtime in the city and to and from the train station. I wore my headphones when I worked, breaking for lunch and tea. I chatted with the other women who worked there. They didn't ask too much of me and they liked me for listening to them. The light in the office was a little bright when I first started the job, but I adjusted quickly. Every morning I took the 7:55 train from the station at Muizenberg, which I walked to from my flat, after Jaco and I had eaten our oats on the couch. I listened to music on the train and watched the people and read bits of what they were reading. I walked from the station in the city for ten minutes to the office and every second day I bought coffee on the corner outside before I went in, for myself and the woman I sat next to. She bought us coffee on the other days, but not from the same shop. We exchanged hello-how-are-yous and laughed at things sometimes, and then I put on my headphones again and listened to music while I worked. Usually at around 11am, the woman next to me tapped my shoulder and we went to the communal kitchen, sometimes gathering other women along the way. We made tea with hot water from the urn and stood in a circle on the balcony outside where we talked for half an hour. I looked at the city around us and the building with the big clock face painted on it, and the church steeples and high-rises, all dwarfed by the mountain behind.

When each work day was over, we took the elevator down to the street together, our bodies crammed close and then shouted our goodbyes and spread in different directions towards the bus stops and parking lots and train station. I walked along St George's Mall between the pin oaks growing in the concrete and loosened my shoulders which were stiff from sitting, and looked through the shop windows at the dresses in summer and the jackets and boots when the leaves on the trees grew dry. On the way home, the train

was usually fuller than it was in the mornings and if I accidentally left the office late I had to stand, my body between other people, sometimes so close I could feel them pressed against the back of my thighs and their breaths against my neck. If I could get a seat, only my knees touched other knees or my shoulders were just grazed. Often, people holding plastic mugs and tins walked between the seats and sang hymns. If I saw them coming, I closed my eyes and turned off my music so that I could hear their voices, which sounded so sure and sad. Other times, a man would get on to shout a sermon for us all to hear. After listening to it once, I grew tired of his voice, which was too loud and lacked the rhythm of the singers. When I got home, Jaco was usually there already. If it was raining and the lamps were on, the flat looked warm from the outside and when I saw him moving inside through the glass, while I walked on the street, I sometimes remembered why I had fallen in love with him.

When I realised I was able to make some money by doing illustrations for children's books and album covers, and the occasional marketing campaign, I left my job in the city centre. I didn't have to drive anywhere to do it, and I stopped taking the train. I woke up whenever I felt like it. I did yoga at noon in my underwear, in the lounge with the windows wide open and with the exception of the occasional meeting, I had nowhere I needed to be. I spent a lot of time alone. I gathered together scraps of my life and pasted them onto paper in haphazard lines. My drawings were mostly beyond my control, and the creatures I created were more dangerous than they were whimsical, even if I was able to disguise them in pretty pastel colours suitable for sale. The creatures came to me in dreams and stayed with me all day, present and heavy, but they refused to come out on demand, forcing me to wait for them to emerge when it was least convenient, in the middle of folding the laundry, or when I had just removed my clothes to shower. As a result, I spent a lot of time waiting, and when they were ready, they were messy and loud, spilling out all over the floors in my flat and creating unsightly marks on the walls. They made me feel uncomfortable and lonely, with their disregard for my time and my desire to live in a space that was clean, but I needed the money, and I didn't want to return to my job, so I allowed them their inconsiderate ways. I filled the moments between their births writing lists of all the other things I needed to do, and swimming up and down the tidal pool to make sure my body remained intact.

When I was alone, I spent a lot of time thinking about all the things I would say to Jaco when he came home later, but when we were together, I forgot all of these things, and other things came out, which left me feeling like I had not emptied the right things from my body. This made me angry, but I was unable to say why, which in turn made him angry. I wished to be alone then, until the next morning, when I was, and I began again to think about what it was I needed to say. Every day, my memory betrayed me, until I decided there was no use in the words, and I chose instead to channel the time into creating more drawings than before, forcing them out, even if I knew they would not turn out beautifully and I would not be able to sell them for children's books or album covers or marketing campaigns, but either way I made them and stored them somewhere out of sight. I found the more that I forced them, the easier they came out, and although they were so ugly I was unable to show anyone, my days became filled with the action of making them. Still, I did most of the other things I did before, I went to the pool, and I made shopping lists, and did groceries, and I folded laundry and cooked dinner, and I made enough of the images to pay some of the rent, but in between, mostly in the very early hours of the morning just before the sun rose, I drew whatever it was I had seen in my dreams the night before. I moved, as soon as I woke up, from my bed to my desk, barely opening my eyes for fear the images would escape me, and drew them quickly into my sketch book in fast messy lines. Usually, the images did no justice to the dreams, which were often full of movement, but I found they required very little colour, so I was able to translate them with just one or two pencils into the scenes shaded in black and grey and high contrast lines. One morning it was the image of a helicopter crashing through the window of my lounge, spreading headless bodies among the potted succulents on the balcony, while another time it was my most beautiful friend sitting in a tree with her legs hanging down, gesturing for me to join her. I was too small to touch her feet dangling above me, but I was reaching up with both arms anyway.

Most days, I finished with the dream sketches before the sun was up, and over time I found that they came out quicker and quicker, leaving me able to complete them and pack them away, and ignore them before breakfast time. I found too, that they left my mind empty and clean afterwards, allowing me to focus much more carefully on my other drawings, which began to appear more easily than before. Although they started to

appear more consistently, I began to like them less. They were neater and more predictable. I felt betrayed by their boringness and missed the way they used to torment me. I began to think I should abandon them, they had changed so much, but they sold easily. So, I produced them quickly, always with the distraction of music in the background, and didn't look at them much before I sent them off.

I was invited to collaborate on an art installation. Some friends of my friends had seen my illustrations and imagined I would be interested, so I agreed to join, although I was afraid of the project, which sounded as though it would be big and very public. The first meeting was at noon on a Monday, and although it was already mid-June, the sun was hot and bright. The park was not far from where I lived, and I could see the tops of its big gum trees from my kitchen window. Little else grew in the park, the grass was dry and sparse and except for a small slide set and a see-saw, the space was empty. The other artists were mostly women, and as I entered the park, I saw them huddled around the base of one of the blue gums, talking and drinking coffee out of biodegradable cups. The idea behind the project, they told me, was to create an installation that was not only striking and strange, but to build something that would urge people to think about the way we interacted with our city. I had heard most of this before, in the emails they sent me and also over the phone, and most of the information came from a woman wearing tracksuit pants and a baggy t-shirt who looked a little older than me, and another woman, in loose jeans and a tight pony, chipped in between sentences as she explained. Other than that, there were just three of us, another woman, a man and me. I knew that the two women who were talking were painters, because they were the ones I had met before and who contacted me about the project, and I recognised the man from an exhibition of metal sculptures I went to months ago in the city. The first woman explained her idea to create a labyrinth in the centre of the park with small solar powered light bulbs which were stuck into the ground on stalk-like pipes. The rest of the space, she said, she envisioned as a space for sculptures made from recycled materials, and on which plants could grow over time. It'll be its own ecosystem, she said, protected from the foot traffic that goes through the park, because it would be

raised off the ground, and although it would be made from rubbish, it would eventually become a green space within the suburb.

Part of the park had been cordoned off with red and white-striped tape to show us where we were allowed to work, and we started with the labyrinth, which would be at the centre of the space. I sat with the woman who I didn't know under a tree. She told me her name was Zahra, and together we screwed the little bulbs onto the metal stalks, while the others laid out the design of the labyrinth on the ground with a grid made of string and heavy rope and steel poles for the pathways they had designed. We spoke about the work that each of us did, and my body was comfortable in its new position, with my back against the tree and the sun coming through the branches in little pools on my shoulders. She worked mostly as a ceramic artist, and was inspired by the moon, she said, so each of her pieces showed in some way, the phase and texture of it. She spoke quietly and slowly, and the combination of her voice and the repetitive motion of the work was calming and my fingers moved quickly and consistently. I imagined her art to be so beautiful, with its roots in the sky, and wished that I had more than my messy dreams to feed my own. I thought about her making her creations day after day, and I wondered how many people were creating things in the world, simultaneously and alone, each one equally out of control of what it was they made. My own creations had become dull, and I was happy to be outside with a reason to work on a vision that was not mine.

Once the labyrinth had been laid out, and all of the bulbs were attached to their stalks, each of us worked on a section of the design to plant the lights into the ground, evenly spaced along the rope. The earth was hard and dry and it was difficult to place them deep enough, but we hammered holes in the ground, and slowly it took shape. By the time the sun was dipping behind the mountain, the lines of the labyrinth were covered in the lights, and as we stepped back we saw the lines and circles just starting to glow as the sky darkened. When I got home, I stretched out of the kitchen window and from a distance, the lights looked like a circle of flowers shining in the deserted park.

I met with the group to talk about the sculptures we would build, and together we planned to make a big bird from old tins and car parts and broken china and other pieces of rubbish, which we would hang with metal wires from the branches of a tree, and in the gaps between the pieces, we would place plants that would eventually wrap themselves around the entire body and wings. The man wanted to make giant metal sharks, on which we would spray moss, and hang them between two of the gum trees. We also decided to make a series of tepees with wire and wood, big enough to sit inside, on which we would plant creeping vines and vegetables. Over the next few weeks, we worked on the project whenever we could, working sometimes together, other times alone. On the days when we worked together, we talked, but there were times when we worked in silence, immersed in the materials and the movements of our own bodies as we hammered and built. The work required more of my body than my drawings ever had, and every night I felt muscles in new places. It took time, but slowly we transformed the scruffy park, and when it was done, I feel quite sad that it was over. Even though the plants didn't end up growing as we had hoped, and the sharks rusted after a winter in the rain, and some kids kicked over a section of the labyrinth, I still walked by often and thought it was the most beautiful thing I had made.

Still, my sense of achievement was nothing compared to the others in the group. I marvelled at the strange beauty of what we had made, but for them the task was much bigger than that. We've made a change, they said, we've given people something to think about. I tried to agree, but I felt the distance growing between us. When we were no longer immersed in the work, I drifted away from them and their sense of activism, except for Zahra, whose voice I had fallen in love with. The others were determined to start a new project, and while I craved the physical work, I started to feel afraid they would see through me and realise I didn't share their mission. I avoided their calls, or when I did talk to them, I told them I was suddenly extremely busy with new clients and jobs that took up all of my time. Eventually they gave up on me, and I heard about a new space they were working on in a different suburb. There was talk of an even bigger sculpture garden, with animals on the ground and in the trees, and solar lights that wrapped around the branches. I imagined it would be beautiful, but I had forgotten the purpose of these projects. Even though they called every now and then to see if I would join, I don't think they really missed me.

I started to spend more time with Zahra, whose gentleness was addictive. She showed me her studio, which was a small garden shed behind her house, and there she taught me the basics of her art. I liked working with the clay, softening and moulding it with my hands, even though my creations looked like those of a child's next to her pieces. We sat together for hours at a time, and she told me about the fear she felt every time she started a new project.

"It feels like my skin is the wrong way round," she said, "like there is no part of myself that I can trust. And I don't know what my hands will make, or if they'll make anything at all."

I knew what she meant, because I felt that way too, and I knew what it was like to feel exposed, even for the pieces I tucked away in my bedroom drawer and didn't show to anyone.

"We put our bodies into this work," she told me.

And I looked at our hands shaping the clay in front of us, and imagined the skin cells we were transferring from our fingers to the clay, and the way our tiny particles were being covered and smoothed with each stroke.

"You're in there now, and you can't take it back," she said, as though she knew what I was thinking.

Over time, she convinced me to share my work with her, so I agreed, only if she would let me draw her. So, one afternoon, when we had finished in her studio, I took her to my flat when I knew the light would just be starting to fall through the lounge windows in stripes through the burglar bars, and the wooden floors would be a warm brown in the sun. She leaned against the wall next to the window and I photographed her face and neck, so that I could draw her later, and I positioned her so that parts of her were in the shadow. When she took off her clothes to let me photograph her body, I saw a scar that stretched all along her chest, onto her ribs and around onto her back, a mark left from a

heart operation she had as a teenager, and up the front of her leg, a jagged line from where she fell as a child and tore the skin right open. I felt the urge to touch these marks, and I wondered in what ways her body would feel unlike other bodies I had touched before. I looked at the pieces of her through my lens, imagining how I would draw the texture of the scars that looked so different from the rest of her skin.

Zahra told me that to be around other people's art helped her sometimes, because often she was lonely, and seeing others' work reminded her that they were lonely too. So, we went to galleries together to look at art side by side. One evening we went to an exhibition of tapestries called *suzani*, beautifully embroidered fabrics made with brightly coloured silk and thread into intricate designs. Next to one of them I read how the *suzani* were traditionally made by brides in places I couldn't pronounce, and given to their new husbands on their wedding day. I was drawn to one with big orange flowers and small blue blossoms and birds flying around them. There was something about the colours that reminded me of something I couldn't quite remember. Or, it might have been the smell in the room, which was an old church hall with wooden floors and a high ceiling with beams along it. In the room there were lots of other people, and I felt a little warmer than I would have liked. Zahra walked near me, sometimes ahead, before returning to my side, and I tried to figure out who she had become to me. I could see she was drawn to a different tapestry, one which had a big circle at its centre, with smaller circles surrounding it in layers all the way to the edges of the fabric. I tried to imagine what it was she saw in it, but it was impossible, because I didn't like the colours, and the way the shapes had been put together made me dizzy.

I spent a long time on the drawing of Zahra, adding small pieces to it gradually, sometimes spending just a few minutes on it at a time, other times working on it for long quiet periods. I turned her scars into vines, so her body looked like it was wrapped in leaves. The shadows on her face I made dark grey, so that her eyes looked bright underneath them. When I finally gave her the drawing, she said that she had not known I was able to see her so well, but that she loved it nonetheless. I let her keep it, and she placed it on a shelf in her studio. She said she looked at it every day, and it was as though she was looking into a mirror into another part of herself.

When my sister called to tell me my mother had died, I had been making pancakes. The kitchen smelled like cinnamon. Outside it was clear and cold. The news hit my body first, and my legs started shaking before I felt anything else. After that, my throat felt dry and my chest developed a strange, dull ache. When I hung up the phone I stared down at my shirt and noticed a button undone. I fastened it with fingers still sticky from cooking. My jeans were dusted with flour.

I left that afternoon to meet my sister and together we drove to the farm. There wasn't much to do but be together and neither of us had much to say at first. In the evening we walked in the garden and sat in the old swings that still hung from an oak tree in front of the house. We sat in silence in the dark, both of us waiting for the full impact of her absence to hit us, too big for the swings built for children. When it grew too cold to stay outside, we went into the kitchen. My sister made us tea and I looked in the fridge. Half a bottle of milk. Tomatoes. A cauliflower. Some eggplants. I sliced the vegetables and fried them, and we ate at the heavy wooden table in the centre of the room. I noticed a tile had come loose on the floor under me and I moved it with my toe. Underneath it was concrete and cold, even through my sock.

"I was going to visit her next week," my sister said quietly. "Why couldn't she have just waited. For god's sake."

She sat hunched up, picking at her tomatoes with a fork. In the dim light of the kitchen with her face turned half down, half sideways, she looked just like our mother. I didn't say anything.

That night we slept in our old room, curled together in one bed. The walls were a different colour to the pale yellow of our childhood and the linen was crisp and white. The room had been redecorated for guests when my sister had left home, but the smell was somehow the same. When we turned off the lights, I could see remnants of the

glow-in-the-dark paint on the ceiling where we had once stencilled star shapes. Beyond the smudges, the darkness was the kind I had not seen since my last visit. It did not exist in the city, the kind that pressed against my eyes, leaving me with no way of knowing where it began or ended. The silence too was overwhelming in its magnitude and I covered my ears to escape it.

When I woke up in the morning, my sister was already up. I walked through the house to find her. The kitchen was empty, as was the lounge and porch. I pulled on my boots and went outside where the grass was covered in a light layer of frost. "Jack Frost's icy fingers," my mother used to say every time the white ice coated her plants. I saw my sister standing at the edge of the garden, her hand holding a teacup, the other resting on the top of the fence post. She was gazing out towards the river, one foot balancing on a strand of wire. I wanted to be in the same position then, lopsided and still, but the morning air made me shiver. Instead, I walked back inside and sat on the kitchen counter and drank tea. I looked at the trees outside of the windows and wondered if I should plant some more, now that my mother could no longer do it.

The house was full of my mother. The bulbs she planted in bowls on the porch, the butternut seeds sprouting on the window sill. And all of the things that would have been useful a few days earlier. The clothes in the cupboard. Pills in the bathroom cabinet. Her gardening hat. A hairbrush. There was a half-read book on her bedside table. Inside it was a bookmark with a picture of a seagull and a yacht on it, and an extract from a poem. I felt unsure of what to do with all of these things. I sat on her bed, which was perfectly made, and thought that perhaps we should leave everything as it was, in case we forgot it. My sister disagreed. She thought there would be something therapeutic about sorting through it all, packing it in boxes to donate or throw away. So, we sat on the floor of my mother's bedroom and pulled her clothes into a pile between us. We flipped through the fabrics and arranged them according to what could be given away, and those that were too old and threadbare to save. Her smell was still on them, which was mostly just the smell of the washing powder she used. I kept aside a baggy jersey she must have had since the eighties, with black and white stripes and the face of a panda on the front. We laughed at how ugly it was, but I couldn't throw it away. My sister chose an old beanie with a pompom on the top, and the rest was packed away.

When the clothes had been sorted, we started on the bathroom and tossed all of the toiletries in a black bag. We were quiet as we worked. A bottle of multivitamins made a sound like shells when it hit the tiles through the plastic, and I noticed my sister crying soundlessly.

After we left the farm and returned to my sister's place, I spent a whole day in bed. I didn't remember ever doing that before. It didn't feel good, but there was nothing else I could think of doing. When I heard my sister's car in the driveway in the early evening, I jumped up. I didn't want her to know how I had spent the day. I couldn't sleep that night, so I took some pills. The medicine made me dream and I woke up feeling as though my eyes had been glued closed. I lay in bed trying to remember the dreams. They came back at me in fragments. I was back in Cape Town in a room full of people, trying to explain something but my words weren't coming out right. No one understood. They looked distracted, and spoke to each other, even while I was talking to them. Then, I was in a theatre. My sister was there. I told her that this was the way I had imagined the place would be. She didn't say anything. There were more dreams I think, lots of them. They filled my head with a foggiess that sat just behind my eyes. Trees and a kitchen floor and driving somewhere. The images layered on top of each other, just out of my memory's grasp. Trying to remember them all made me tired, so I stopped. I got out of bed and went to shower. I was afraid I would fall asleep again if I didn't move. I washed my hair and scrubbed my body hard. It felt like the contents of the pills from the night before had leaked out of my pores and covered my skin. When I got out of the shower, I stood by the window and let the sun dry me a little before I got dressed. I put make-up on so that I wouldn't lie down again and stain my sister's linen.

I went to the supermarket and walked up and down the aisles trying to decide what to buy. I wanted to cook for my sister when she returned from work, but the choice was overwhelming. Eventually, I decided I would make a pie, because the day was moving slowly, and it would take some time. I selected the ingredients: flour and butter and oil and vegetables. Preparing the food made me feel better. Chopping the vegetables.

Rolling the pastry. Laying out all the ingredients on the kitchen counter. The actions calmed me. I could control the process. I felt like I could create something of my own choosing that would not make me or my sister feel sad or scared.

We sat in the garden to eat that evening, perched on the patio stairs. It hurt me to look at her. Her sadness was so quiet. I think I would have preferred her to sob loudly or to shout, but even when she cried no sound came out of her. Her tears were big and plopped heavily from her eyes to her cheeks. They hardly made a mess. I wanted her to think that I was ok, but I was angry with my mother, who had hidden her illness almost entirely from us. I imagined her in the weeks leading up to her death and wondered if it had crossed her mind to warn us.

When I left my sister and returned to Cape Town, I realised that my sadness was quiet too. I hadn't noticed before, because it sounded so loud in my own mind. But, when I tried to express my grief to Jaco, I became aware that there simply were no words I wanted to say. It was like a physical space existed between us, one that could not be filled with talking. I no longer had a mother, and language played no part. I wanted Jaco to know my sadness just by looking at me, by being near me. I almost convinced myself it was possible.

During that time, I focused more and more on drawings for children. The patterns and shapes they required from my hands were comforting, and I was drawn to the brightest colours when I filled in the spaces. I could still remember so vividly the characters of my own childhood, in the books and the fabrics on our beds and curtains. If I closed my eyes, I could see the yellow of the bedroom my sister and I had shared. We'd had pale lemon curtains for a long time, with small blue flowers on them, and in between that, little rabbits with ribbons around their necks. Both of us had loved the design, and my mother had let them hang in our room long after they had faded and the patterns were barely recognisable in the places where the sun shone on them most. We'd had stickers in the bathroom too, just above the bath, a school of fish in bright colours. We'd named each fish and assigned them all personalities, and would include them in our bath time games in the years we still fitted in the bath together. It made me wonder if any of my

drawings would be etched in someone else's memory one day. I felt a bit sad to think that the characters I was creating were made on days I was filled with so much sorrow. But then, I don't think it was visible in their little faces and the colours of their clothes.

In my mother's house, we had packed away most of the things that become useless after someone dies. But, the furniture remained in place. It was difficult to find anyone who wanted to live there, because the farm was far from town. Eventually my sister was able to find somebody to stay on a short-term lease. The tenant was a recently divorced man, she told me, who needed a place to stay before his mistress' divorce had been finalised, and they could move to an estate closer to town. I didn't meet the man, but I didn't like the thought of a stranger in the house. I wondered which room he would sleep in, and what he would do all alone there. Would he see the peeling stickers above the bath, or the ones on the inside of the cupboard in the bedroom? Would he pick at them while he lay in the bath or selected a shirt to wear? I imagined him lying on his back staring at the traces of glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. I worried a lot about the trees that my mother had loved so much. I thought about how she had taken care of them when her own mother had died and felt sad that they had no one but a stranger's hands on them now, if any at all.

When I suggested to Jaco that we move to the farm, he told me I was being nostalgic. "You're imagining something that doesn't exist anymore," he said. "It's just because you're grieving."

But once the idea had occurred to me, I couldn't let it go. Of course I knew it wouldn't be the same. I didn't expect it to be. Jaco thought I was crazy, but I noticed he was careful with his words when he implied it.

"You're feeling low," he said, "you'll get better."

Maybe it was true. I did want to feel better, but for some reason, I couldn't imagine it happening if I stayed.

I couldn't convince Jaco to come with me, at least not immediately, which made me feel a different kind of sad. He agreed to come and stay with me when he could get some time off work, but I suspected he was losing patience with me. I left on a rainy day, which I was glad about. It matched the image I wanted in my mind, of me turning my back on a city and going backwards, but also to something that was new. I wore a grey coat and cried when Jaco left me at the airport and I felt a little faint when I actually got on the plane to leave.

My sister drove with me to the farm, and we spent some time cleaning each room, dusting the floors and scrubbing the tiles in the kitchen and bathroom. In the evenings we ate, sitting on the floor next to the fireplace in the lounge. When I was a child, I had fallen into the fireplace and singed all of my hair. I had only been in the flames for a few seconds before my mother pulled me out by my feet, and my head had knocked against the stone. My skin was completely unharmed, she had been so quick. I had no memory of the incident — I had only been around three years old at the time — but my mother had told me the story countless times as a child. She had been amazed, she said, that I hadn't cried, or even screamed in fright when it happened. Only afterwards, when I touched the bruise at the side of my face did I make a sound to show I was in pain.

When my sister and I sliced up vegetables to cook, we saved the scraps as my mother had, so we had something to grow in the garden. Butternut seeds. Carrot tops. An avocado pip that we placed in some water to sprout. In the mornings, we woke up early and walked for an hour before turning around, so that soon the routes became familiar again. My sister was off for three full weeks from her job as a school teacher, and in that time we established a kind of routine together. Eating and walking and gardening and lying on the floor by the fire. In between, I worked on projects I still had from clients in Cape Town, and my sister read and planned lessons for the new term, spreading the contents of her brightly coloured stationary box on the carpet. We were two grown women, living in a house with our crayons and books tipped onto the floor. We looked after the garden we had adopted, and spent time together and apart, depending on our

moods. It made me wonder if I was capable of living with anyone, or if we were connected in this calm, comfortable way because neither of us remembered a time without the other.

When my sister had left to go back to work, and I was alone, Zahra called.

"You left without saying goodbye," she said.

It occurred to me then that I was selfish. Zahra was my favourite friend, and I hadn't even considered her when I left. It felt strange to become aware of myself in this new way.

"Sorry," I said.

She told me about an exhibition she had been to, and how the pieces had made her feel. I lay on my back in a patch of sun on the porch and let her talk for as long as she needed to. Maybe everyone is selfish, I thought. I remembered my Art History teacher once saying that even sex was just mutual masturbation. He was always finding ways to talk about sex, and death.

I went into town occasionally when I needed to buy coffee or food. The town was small, although it had been much smaller when I was a child. Then, there had been just one small shop on the main street, a place for farm supplies and tools, and a petrol station. If we went there with my mother, she would give us a five rand note, and we would buy chips so that we could collect the plastic discs that came inside the packets. The town had expanded a lot since then. There was an estate on the edge of it where people, from Johannesburg mostly, built houses so that they could spend time outside of the city. As a result, there were new restaurants in the town, and other things the city people could not do without. Shops that sold cheese, a German-style pub, a yoga studio. When I saw people I had once known, it felt strange to be recognised by those who had only ever known me as a child. They were curious and friendly and concerned, mostly that I was alone.

In the early mornings, I would walk through the veldt. Often I reached the border between the farm and the neighbouring plot, which was a kind of commune where people lived together in a few small houses close to each other. The fence ran up a hill and cut the land into two segments, and once, on the other side, I saw a woman walking. Like me, she walked along the fence, also upwards. I watched from a distance for a while, but she walked slowly and I caught up with her quickly. When she turned around and saw me, I noticed the lines around her eyes.

"I didn't know anyone was living here," she said, gesturing at my side of the fence.

"I am," I said, "for now."

She told me she walked along the slope most mornings, and picked plants, and mushrooms in the spring.

"They come up after thunderstorms," she said.

I wondered whether the mushrooms were forced out of the ground by the thunder, or if they were drawn upwards by the promise of rain. The woman told me her name was Julia, and she extended her hand over the wire between us. I gave her mine in return and felt her skin, which was rough, and had soil in its cracks and under her nails. She crouched down in the dirt, and picked at a root.

"African Potato," she said, and pulled up the plant. "For skin wounds."

"My mother had some of those once," I said.

She smiled and nodded, and continued to dig. My mother had befriended a *sangoma* many years before, who would bring her bulbs for her garden. Once, when she had had some tools stolen, he buried a pouch of something in the ground outside of the workshop. The shape of the woman's body squatting on the ground, hands in the soil, made me remember things I had not thought about in a long time.

The next day, I woke up before the sun was up and a very faint mist hovered just above the ground as the light slowly grew outwards. I walked upwards along the border again, and when I approached the fence, I saw Julia crossing the slope. She called me over the fence, and together we drank coffee from her flask while the sun rose on the horizon and quickly warmed the ground and all of the air around and above it. Afterwards, we

walked on her farm as the day's heat grew bigger and bigger around us. The land stretched big and wide. The ploughed soil in the fields was brown, but also a kind of red, with shrubs punctuated in little clusters. I imagined we were on Mars and she agreed, quite seriously, that we could be. The earth looked cracked or ready to crack depending on the angle, and we agreed it was the most beautiful thing we'd ever seen.

When Julia asked me what I liked to do, I found myself thinking about the feeling of my feet pushing against the tidal pool in Muizenberg. My body suspended in water. Surrounded. And the sound of being underwater. A kind of drone — of the waves and the way the water dulled the sound of the outside. And then, my favourite, the moment just between water and air, when I could see both, the line between blue and light. I had always tried to slow that part down, to pause it so that I could stay in that in-between for longer. I would swim up and down and count, emptying my mind until it was just the number for twenty five full metres. One, one, one, breathe, one, one, and wall. Two, two, two, breathe. Submerge. Push and pull. I liked to force my body to sink to the bottom and make my arms as strong as I could to pull myself fast and straight through the water. When I was a child, before I could swim properly, I would lie in the river on the farm with my belly in the water and my arms out and float with my face half in, half out of the water, so that my eyes blurred, but I could still see the outline of the land against the sky. I would float for hours like that, my skin shrivelling into translucent wrinkles.

I wondered why I'd let myself forget that. And then all I could think about was water and I felt quite desperately that I needed to immerse myself in it, but all I could see was land and sky. I thought to ask Julia what it was she liked to do, which was, as it turned out, identifying plants. She liked to make lists and sketch leaves, and also the feeling of knowing the names of things around her. I thought about asking her why she had come to this place, but decided to save it for later for fear of scaring her. I found I didn't mind her presence and thought of more questions to ask her if she stayed long enough to hear them.

"We're celebrating tonight," she said. "You should join us."

"Ok," I replied.

I forgot to ask what it was they were celebrating. It occurred to me that I hadn't been in a group of people since I'd left the city.

Although the commune neighboured the farm, I had to drive twenty minutes on a dirt road to get there. I left as the sky was softening for dusk. The lands around me stretched out in green and brown lines. When I opened the window, I could hear the sound of guinea fowls as they settled in the trees to roost. The moment felt separate to other times I'd been on the road, and I turned off the radio so that I could be in it without distraction. I turned off the district road when I saw the entrance, which was marked with a sign and a stone with an arrow painted in white. As I approached the houses, I could see the glow of a bonfire. People stood around it, holding drinks or smoking, or both, in half-circles in layers of skirts and scarves. I sat in the car for a few minutes and looked through the windscreen at the group. I could see Julia sitting on a log, with some other women. When I went to her, she smiled, which made the lines around her eyes move closer together. The fire was close enough to warm my face and hands, and I watched the flames and absorbed the new voices around me. Some of the people at the gathering were residents of the commune. Others were their friends from the town, or the city further away. Julia pointed out her brother, who made shoes to sell, and her neighbours, people who ran a home stay for tourists, and others, gardeners and painters and farmers.

"Julia lived in the city once," one of the women sitting near me said. "Can you imagine that?"

"Not really," I said, although I knew what it was to reveal more of one thing than another, depending on the place.

Julia asked me if I would like to see where she lived. It was a small house she and her brother had built. It had a thatched roof, and on the outside walls were paintings of trees. To see her bedroom, we walked up some stairs into a loft with a big window through which we could look down onto the fire and the people. Beyond that was the faint shape of a mountain. There were a lot of plants in pots in the living area

downstairs and when she showed me the kitchen I noticed the bag of roots I had seen her collecting the day before. She opened a cupboard and filled up a cup with wine for me. I asked her if she liked living there and she said it was better than where she had been before.

"The city felt empty to me," she said.

We went back outside and the gathering slowly spread out. Some people ate in circles on the ground, others huddled closer to the flames. A man sat on a log and played a guitar. Julia and I lay down next to the fire. The sky was vast and dark above us.

"There's a lot of stuff you need to hack through when you're young," she said. "Yourself really wants to bring itself down. You've got to be careful of that."

I didn't know what she was talking about. But I liked lying in the grass with her next to me, and the way that, with the exception of the tip of my nose, my skin felt warm in the cold.

She told me she had been married to a man once, but she'd left him because he was afraid of everything. He hardly slept, and when he did he had night terrors.

"I could understand his fear. I mean, there's so much wrong with the world. But you have to eat and work, and try to have a good time sometimes," she said. "Otherwise you'll never be ok."

Her words made me think of something I'd seen once — 'Eat and drink, but think about Syria' — written in black marker on the side of a train in Cape Town.

I didn't tell Julia about that. I was in the mood to listen. I turned onto my side towards her, but I couldn't really see her face. There was just an outline of her in the dark. I put one hand out and felt her hair on the tips of my fingers. It was long, and spread out around the edges of her body. We lay like that for a long time. Eventually she stopped talking and I rolled onto my back again. The gathering had grown quieter, and I could hear the sound of something moving in the grass. I imagined a small animal looking for food somewhere close by. I stretched my arms above my head and pictured my feet being pulled in the opposite direction by invisible strings, the way a yoga teacher had taught me once. I wanted to feel my body relax, the way it did when I was alone, and just starting to fall asleep.

Some people started to play drums next to the fire, and the sound brought me back from my body. Julia and I sat up and watched them. A woman was dancing with fire poi and she moved in time with the music. I sat next to Julia, and tried to absorb it all. I felt so far from the city. I'd come back to this place that should have been familiar, but it was all different. Except for the colours, which were the same. In the grass and the mountains and the dirt. And sometimes I got a feeling that I'd had before, and I think it was the place that gave it to me. I felt suddenly surrounded by people, the drummers and the dancer and the people watching and dancing along, and Julia at my side, but the crowd was small enough that it didn't frighten me. She took my hand and we moved closer to the others. It was not what I expected I would do in this place. I danced with Julia, and watched the way the fire moved in circles. For a while I didn't think about anything. When I left the gathering, and drove slowly back to the farm at dawn, I had an idea to paint on the walls of the house. Julia had trees on the outside of hers, but I wanted to do something different. It would be a pattern, something abstract, with colours I had not used before. I thought about it for a long time, and sketched ideas every day. It was hard to decide what to do, and I suspected it would take me months to commit to the right shapes. Still, it felt good to plan something, even if it would never be useful to anyone.

In the winter, everything turned brown and the air was dry. My skin scratched easily and my lips cracked. The sky was more blue than before and I took a lot of photographs of the landscape. The contrast looked good on film. When I went through to town, it was quiet. There were chalkboards in the restaurant windows offering special prices. The locals huddled around the fireplace at the pub. The night that Julia came to visit me was cold. It felt like there had been snow higher up. I made soup and lit a fire. I'd spent a lot of time alone since I'd seen her last, so I wasn't sure if we would have anything to talk about at first. She wore lots of layers, which she gradually removed as the fire warmed us. Underneath her jacket and jersey, she had on a t-shirt that said 'what are you staring at'. I was surprised when she kissed me. Close up, she smelled like citronella, and weed. I told her I didn't want us to sleep together, and she didn't seem to mind. She talked about a retreat that some people at the commune were going to host to teach people about meditation and what they called self-empowerment. I watched her face

when she spoke and tried to stay present. I had a vision of driving all the way back to Cape Town, only to find it gone when I got there. It was a lonely thought, and I didn't know why I'd had it. I suggested we smoke, so we stepped outside onto the veranda and stood in the cold for a while. When she exhaled, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes. She leaned against the wall, one hand in her pocket, her back slightly arched. I wasn't high yet, but I felt strange. There was something about the way she looked then that made me change my mind about her. When she passed me the joint, I stepped towards her and leant against her, not too hard. I kissed her and she stayed in her leaning position, except that she pulled her hand out of pocket and put it on the side of my waist. We went back inside and she took off my clothes. When she moved her hands over my body, I felt myself stiffen. I stretched out on the floor and imagined the invisible strings pulling me apart again. I was afraid of her expectation, mostly because she was so much older than me. Slowly, I felt my body relax. Still, I wanted to know what she saw when she looked at me.

When I was finally ready to paint the walls of the house, there was a particular style I had in mind. I tried to describe it to Julia, but I struggled with the words. I looked at artists' work online to see if it already existed, and I made little sketches when I saw something close to what I wanted. I went to town to buy the paint and when I was there, I spent some time walking around. I looked through the windows of little shops that sold second hand furniture and antique ceramics. I had coffee in one of the new cafés and watched the people outside through the glass. They could be easily divided into those that were from this place, and those that were not. I could tell from what they did and what they wore, and the cars that they drove, or didn't drive. The effect of the image through the glass was very strange, because I found myself trapped somewhere in between the lines I had created. I had already started to look different by then, because I dressed for the farm and was fitter than before, but I could find no category for myself.

I selected the paints at the hardware shop, and when I returned to the farm, I mixed them until the shades were right. When I was a child, I was always mixing paints to

look for new colours. They had always ended up brown back then. That was before I learned how they worked. I sat on the porch as I mixed. When I looked up I could see directly through the glass doors to the garden. It looked bare in the winter and there was a lot of exposed soil. But I knew that there were bulbs under the surface and when it finally rained everything would grow taller than I would be able to contain.

When I started, I worked on the painting for a full morning. I tried to empty my mind while I painted, the way I had heard people say they did. I couldn't get it right. I thought about the meditation workshops on the commune where people sat in rooms together in silence. Julia had asked me to try it, but I was afraid there would be strange sounds, if someone moved next to me, or if a floorboard creaked when it should have been quiet. Even though I spent a lot of time painting the wall, I'd only done a small piece by the late afternoon. I worked slowly, but I didn't mind. The action of it made me calm.

I split the days into painting the wall, and working in the garden, and walking. I wore clothes suited to these things, and my hair was always pulled out of my face or tucked under a hat. I became more observant of the weather and the length of the days. I knew when it was time to start planning the vegetable garden. I was aware of the particular intensity of the light at each time of day. The movement of the river fluctuated with the rain, and it did not surprise me. Even though I had done nothing to deserve pleasure, I knew that Julia would give it to me if I asked. I learned to make it clear with my body. Sometimes I would go to her house and lie in her bath until I was warm and soft. I would wrap myself in a towel and look out of her big windows at the mountains in the distance. They were a shade of blue I was unable to ever create myself. I always went home afterwards. I didn't want to let her see me fall asleep, or wake up in the night, confused from a dream.

When I became fully immersed in my painting project, I discovered a new feeling. It was like a light left on in my body, and although it was always glowing just below the

surface of my skin, sometimes just faintly, there were other times when it would burst brighter, more noticeably. Coming not in waves, but in pulses. Sometimes a soft, regular flutter, other times a more intense flicker. Something between a sound and a feeling. A beat. Like an electrical current drumming, opening and closing. Like a heartbeat, but much harder. And warm. I would feel it in my chest, mostly in the middle, but sometimes it rose further and further upwards towards my throat and into my mouth, with its very own flavour. Something like coffee, with a similar bitterness, but also a little citrus.

I grew used to its constant drumming and was almost attached to the feeling it brought. I soon learned that there was no other sound that could drown it out, and I learned to make music with the rhythms it added to the world around me. The shower, for example, added a lightness to its otherwise sombre base, while the hum of people chattering in the coffee shop in town would make its pulse quite consuming. Heady almost, like a kind of trance music, impossible to resist. Often I would seek the sounds that best complemented the one in my chest, so that I could immerse myself in them for a while. It was a kind of exploration I began to crave.

I tried to record the music in my body by writing it down when I sat inside in the evenings, but there simply were no words for the beats and pops and fizzles I heard, so I continued to try with colour instead. I tried to memorise the sounds so that I could paint them all over the walls of the house. When it was too dark to paint outside, I stretched a big canvas on the floor of the lounge and weighed down its four corners with pieces of furniture — a bookshelf on one side, a small stool on another, and I tucked the other side under the couch so that it lay flat and smooth. I mixed as many colours as I knew, and when there weren't enough, I tried to make new ones. The sound of my body mixed with the rattling of the truck on the dirt road mixed with the sound of my feet crunching in the veldt in the morning. I focused carefully on the mix of my body with the water bubbling in the kettle, and the birds in the trees outside. I mastered the art of completely absorbing the sounds around me and merging them completely with the hum of my own body, and it began to feel natural, although it still required a very intense kind of focus. When I saw Julia, she commented often on how calm I was, and in a way it was true. Nothing bothered me because I had no space for anything besides listening and

memorising, and painting. I never stopped, not even when I worked in the garden and talked and ate for fear of missing the perfect sound, which I could later translate in colours.

When I walked on the farm in the early mornings and again in the late afternoons, all of the listening and the memorising exhausted me so that by the time I got home I could barely move, but I forced myself to mix the colours for as long as it took so that I could splash them over the walls of the house and the canvassed floor until I had finished with that day's tune. Then, I would curl up on the floor and leave the canvas to dry until morning when I would roll it up and lay a new one in preparation for the day.

Gradually, it became like an extra sense. To make sure I heard every beat, I breathed slowly, never moved suddenly, was never in a rush. I wore shoes only when it was absolutely necessary and chose clothes made of the thinnest fabrics. I found that the less there was between my body and the world, the closer I could listen and the more sounds I could absorb into my body and save for later when I could spill them outwards onto my canvas. You're so calm, Julia would say again and again. What's your secret, she would ask. And I would shrug and smile. But, the better I became at listening, the harder it became to paint at night, and eventually I found I had run out of colours. I mixed more and more and stayed up all night trying out any colour combinations I could think of. But as the morning sun came through the curtains and I rubbed my eyes to let them adjust, I saw that all of my colours had turned to grey. Even the brightest shades had mixed together to form a uniform monochrome and that's all the canvas was now — a series of grey smudges and lines in the early morning light, flat against the wooden floor boards.

That's when I began to feel that the colours were no longer of any use to me. The outside walls of the house were complete, the canvases filled. Still the beating in my chest drummed away, and the buzzing rose and fell in little light shocks, but all of my paintbrushes were muddied in grey. I rinsed them in the bathtub until the water ran clear, and pressed down the lids on the paint tins and carried them to the shed outside where I lined them up on a shelf and locked them away. I piled my sketch books and

pencils in there too, except for the black one, which I used to pin my hair back up into a bun on the top of my head. I put my shoes on and dragged an armful of rolled up canvases out of the door, and threw them into the shed. I turned down the driveway and walked, slowly at first, as was my habit, and then faster as the beating swelled in my chest. The air felt fresh, and although I was tired from the sleepless night, and my eyes burned in the light, I began to run. With the pounding of my feet matching the pounding of my heart, matching the beating of the feeling in my chest, I found the sound at first to be amplified, so loud I felt almost lost in it, but as my strides became easier, more regular, the sound gradually lessened and by the time I had reached the border of the farm, it had lowered to a mild hum, a volume I had not heard from my body in what felt like ages. So, I carried on, along the fence, and up the hill. After about an hour, my legs burned and my feet felt swollen and sore, so I slowed to a walk and turned back towards home, but the sound remained low for a few hours after that, and I found myself straining to hear it until around three o'clock when it kicked back in at its familiar pitch. I found myself momentarily relieved to feel the beating rise again, and was secretly afraid that I may have almost lost it. But, back at home, with the paints in the shed and the brushes lying dry in the bathroom, and a big empty square on the lounge floor, the beating rose to a new height that evening. Without my colours, I tried instead to mark its patterns in grey pencil on the wall until I felt I could sleep. All night the sound became more and more intense and I slept only in restless fits, so that at dawn, even though my muscles ached and I felt sick with tiredness, I put my shoes on again and ran outside, this time in a different direction, down towards the river. My muscles hurt and my feet pounded hard on the ground with its coating of leaves and pine needles, and although I still listened for the sound, and it was still certainly there, it dimmed again to a pale glow just below the surface of my skin.

For so long I had been cultivating my way of listening and memorising the sound, and now that I had lost the ability to translate it in colour on my floors and the walls of the house, and had learned instead to lower its volume with the movement of my body, I found the effects of the running lasted only as long as my muscles felt the effect of my movement. While my blood pumped fast and my skin sweated, the sound was faint, and even for a few hours afterwards while my body slowed down, the volume remained manageable, but once the effect wore off, the sound returned not only to its usual level but would continue rising higher and higher until I struggled to hear anything else, and

was forced to run again. And so I would beg dawn to come so that I could leave the house and lower the sound. After a while I started to run in the evenings too, so that I soon associated fading and rising light with a soft beating in my chest, while the bright afternoons and the darkest part of the night overwhelmed me with their sounds.

Over time, the sound in my chest lowered more and more until I could barely hear its regular little beats. Eventually, I was struck with an eerie silence. As I strained to hear if it was still there, I noticed that the line between the horizon and the sky was glowing a faint, iridescent pink. The colour was a little blurry at first, and came and went in fuzzy lines. After that, I started to see glowing colours in other places too, in the lines of leaf veins and around things — the rim of my coffee cup, the window frames, between the strands of my hair. The colours varied, sometimes yellow, pink, orange, depending on the time of day and the angle at which I saw them, but always they were dim and fuzzy like the look old photographs get when they have been left in the sun to fade.

The colours appeared on most things, and eventually there appeared to be an iridescent dust on the world. Rather than hide the objects it covered, it highlighted them, making everything appear a little brighter than before, so that the landscape became dotted with fluorescent shapes, especially at midday when the light was at its brightest. A ring of light developed around Julia too, at the curve of her head and shoulders, and down the sides of her ribs and legs. The more time I spent with her, the brighter it seemed to grow. It was an impenetrable layer around her body, and although I tried to ignore it, I was tempted often to try and touch it. Once, when we were out walking on her farm, and we had stopped to watch a kite swooping for flying ants, I tried to run my fingers over it while she wasn't looking. My fingers slipped through it and it left a fine powder on my hands, which I quickly brushed off before she could see it.

After that, we walked further, and stopped eventually in the shade of a tree near a small dam. I lay on my back and looked through the branches. Above and through the leaves the clouds swirled until I was dizzy with their movement and with the heat.

"Does my breathing sound loud?" I heard myself say, but Julia didn't appear to hear me.

I was suddenly aware of my body as an external force beyond my control. The tips of my fingers felt heavy, my feet light inside their socks. I sat up and looked at the dam in front of us. Its level was low, holding just a shallow sheen of water. The surface churned with the reflection of the sky, and the wind blew elaborate ripples along the top. The edges were dry and the land was cracked where the water should have been. The dirt was split into big brown squares with deep gaps between them. I stood up and walked along the dry dam floor.

"Don't fall down one of those cracks," I heard Julia shout across to me.

I bent down to check that they were just centimetres wide, but still I imagined stepping into one and falling into the blackness. I could feel the sensation of my feet letting go and hanging suspended between the surface and what lay below. A long deep corridor of darkness. And in it would be all the creatures that lived in the dark, the centipedes with their red heads and the beetles with their luminescent shells. And if I fell deeper, I would reach water and be submerged in cold darkness with the kinds of fish with lights in their scales.

"Are you ok?" I heard Julia say, and I pulled my eyes away from the ground to look at her coming across the cracked dam floor.

I nodded and she reached out to me and I must have looked fragile or small, because she touched my shoulder, and I saw the powdery light around her hands disperse slightly and fall onto my own skin. I let her hold my hand as we walked over the dirt and back towards her house until our skins began to sweat and I let go, watching as the light melted into a puddle between us. After that, there were little gaps in the layer of colour around her and whenever I touched her, pieces of it would crumble away, leaving a trail of fluorescent flakes wherever we walked.

Soon after that, Julia asked me to travel to the coast with her for a few days. I hadn't left the farm in weeks, so I agreed to go. We drove to a spot where the beach stretched further than we could see and the ocean was dark and warm. We stayed in a little house on a hill made of wood where banana leaves flicked at the windows, and which had a

small deck that faced out to the river and sea beyond. In the morning we walked from the cabin down the hill towards the water. The air there was thick and hot. The vegetation grew tall and wide, and when we walked in it, we were dwarfed by banana leaves and tangled creepers that spread out beside and above us. The path to the water was almost completely covered with leaves and vines, and palms encroached along the sides, their broad leaves covering all but a glimmer of sky. Small creatures lived in the plants, and all around the ever-narrowing pathway there was the movement of lives in miniature. Little geckos lay flat on leaves so that their translucent bellies were silhouetted above them as we walked, and always there was the sound of something shrieking in a branch nearby — birds and monkeys and insects that clicked and cried all throughout the day. The dark that surrounded the pathway was green-black and shimmered in spots where just a shred of sun could get through, so that even in the early morning it felt like we were walking through a small piece of night time, with a scattering of stars falling around us and the thick scent of soil and leaves under our feet.

When we were in the thickest area of the plants, the light around Julia's skin turned a shade of green, light at first, so it matched the smaller banana leaves and the pale ferns. As we moved through the leaves, the layer on her skin grew darker until I thought she would disappear in the growth as her body merged with the shade of the trees. By the time we neared the end of the pathway, I ran for fear of being trapped forever in the green darkness, while she lingered to look at the plants and examine their leaves, her fingertips glowing emerald as she ran them over the veins and stems. When I emerged from the tunnel, I saw the river first, flat and still, a smooth grey slate, and then the undulating sand dunes on the beach. With the heat crawling inside my skin, I ran straight into the river where I let myself sink for as long as I could under its steel surface. I held my breath until the blue-grey entered my pores and I could feel the cold wetness seep into my body, clenching my fists until I could feel it in the roots of my hair and the skin underneath my arms. Then, I pressed my feet into the soft sand bottom and pushed upwards so that I could break the stillness with a big breath and a splash that rippled outwards in little waves. I closed my eyes under the water and opened them just as I emerged to see a glimmer of yellow just below the surface. I moved my arms in underwater swirls and watched the shape of the water spill outwards from my body to the surface, using my legs and the muscles in my stomach to keep my head above water and spin around and around until the sky and water became one blue-grey blur. Then, I

sank again and listened to the dull thump of water in my ears. Slowly, my body loosened, my fingers uncurled and softened, and I stretched my legs outwards in front of my body, floated back to the surface, unravelled my limbs, and swam back to the shore, where we sat on the bank and drank coffee from a flask. Julia smoked while I absorbed the sun into my cold skin until its wet outer layer slipped away and the temperature of my body matched the heat of the day, and I wrapped it up again in a cocoon of clothes.

When I had emerged from the water and my skin was dry and warm, and Julia had moved away from the forest and her glow had dimmed to a pale blue that matched the shade in my own sun-soaked pores, we walked over the dunes and along the edge of the ocean. The lines in the sand moved with the wind and I watched them as I walked, stopping sometimes to follow the spirals with my eyes up and over the dunes, and into the plants that crawled through the sand. Often, Julia left my side to examine the *vygie* and the dune aloes that sprawled out at the edge of the beach, and I used a stick to create patterns of my own in the sand, listening only to the wind and the waves as I moved in circles and zig zags across the beach. In the moments in between, we walked side by side, my toes in the water, hers in the sand, and looked out at the gold expanse before us, and picked up shells, and kicked at dry seaweed and coral so that it cracked into pieces and left a trail of pink and brown behind them.

As we walked on the beach, I followed a line in the sand towards the top of a dune and saw in front of me a tumbled mess of colour, luminescent yellow and orange, and ropes. The pile moved in the wind and with each gust, the sheets of colour rose and fell, pulling the ropes with them, so that the whole bundle moved gradually down the dune in tiny increments. It looked to me like a creature, lifting its wings with the wind, and opening its giant mouth from time to time to reveal the neon colours of its tongue and throat and what looked like limbs sticking outwards in a tangled ball. I waved at Julia and called her over, pointing at the creature on the dune, and as she looked upwards in the direction of my hand, I saw her face change from gold to grey, and she ran towards the pile. I watched her for a few seconds, a tiny figure moving towards the knotted cloud of colour, and then followed, my feet moving as fast as I could make them in the soft midday sand. I saw, then, amidst the yellow and orange and the ropes, a man,

tangled and twisted, his body fallen from the sky and wrapped now in fabric wings and cords. I looked at Julia and saw her face stuck stiff in a shape I had not seen on her before, eyes wide, skin tight.

"Stay here," I heard her say.

I watched her disappear quickly across the sand, a terrified urgency in her body, until she eventually disappeared behind the dunes, leaving me alone with the man bound in the sand beside me. The man in the sand lay still, his eyes barely open, and every now and then a groan escaped his body, which appeared to be broken in parts, his shoulder lopsided, his legs crumpled beneath him. Eventually he closed his eyes, and pulled his mouth into a tight grimace, low moans spilling from his face each time the wind moved the fabric twisted around him.

After that, a group of people came over the dune, and there was new noise and movement around us. The man was released from his neon binding and taken away and we could eventually walk back along the beach and cross the river. We pushed through the tropical leaves back up the hill.

"He's going to be ok, you know," Julia said when we got back to the cabin.

But when I finally fell asleep that night, I dreamt of hundreds of bodies knotted together in a circle around me, their limbs braided tightly like shiny, white rope.

A storm blew in over the ocean the next day and the wind rattled the cabin so hard we could barely open the door against its force. When we stepped outside, we were hit with a sideways wind and our hair blew over our eyes and mouths, blinding and silencing us into a wet, blustery mess. We started down the pathway to the beach but the leaves were heavy with water and clung to our legs as we passed, so we turned back midway and returned to the cabin, where we dried ourselves off and drank coffee on the floor, our backs against the shaking walls. Once inside, after the enormity of the storm and the weight of water and wind around us, the cabin felt small with the two of us inside. Until now, we had spent much of our time together outside, always with space between us. We had had the farm land around us, and the mist of dawn, and later I'd had the water on my skin and in the roots of my hair, she'd had the plants in her fingers, the sand

under our feet. We'd been small under the sky and in the sea, but now inside the shivering cabin, I felt oversized, as if the walls might burst with the weight of my breath. I imagined the wooden slats and window frames blowing away in an upward spiral, the wind scooping us up as it twisted out to sea. I looked at Julia to see if she was imagining the same, but she was resting her head against the wall, her eyes closed. I could feel a blind spot developing just at the edge of my vision and I knew that next there would be a sharp pain at the front of my skull. I stood up and crawled into bed, folding my body into a tight ball and closing my eyes until the room faded to black and it was just the sound of the storm outside that remained.

After that, something felt different. The late summer storms that burst the sky open in the afternoons and evenings cooled us down, and the pores of our skins felt lighter. On the day we had found the man on the dune, I had seen fear in the lines near Julia's eyes and in the tightening of her mouth, and it changed the way I looked at her. Seeing her fear made my own feel like it fitted more comfortably in my body, and although I kept it carefully tucked underneath a thin layer of skin, I paid less attention to it than I had in a long time and found I had to place my hands on my body from time to time to check that it hadn't shifted out of place, or broken the surface of my skin and revealed itself. I worried sometimes that it would spill outwards into a messy puddle or that it would creep out of my body, a creature with limbs like an octopus or an insect, tearing my skin and emerging dark and alive. So I was careful to keep it in place when we walked and talked, and at night sometimes I pressed down on my chest just before I went to sleep when I was under the covers in the dark. I laid my hands flat on top of myself and pressed downwards with as much weight as I could, before running my fingers down the sides of my ribs and up my neck to check for cracks or leaks through which it could escape. Only then would I roll over onto my side and pull my knees to my chest and close my eyes and exhale slowly in preparation for sleep.

The road back home was potholed, and the land lay flat and overgrazed as far as I could see. Twice we slowed down for goats in the road. The fleshy aloes on the roadside with

their orange flame flowers filled me with a sweet nostalgia as we drove. When we stopped in a town on the way, my body felt smaller than before, and I was afraid I'd be crushed by the movement of the place, the buildings that stretched upwards and the people crawling everywhere I looked. We parked the car at a petrol station and walked towards the town centre. The streets felt dirty. Dust clung to the back of my heels and my skin grew an extra layer of grime I had not felt in a while. The sound of cars hooting and people shouting wrapped around my head and everywhere I turned there was colour — in the skins of the fruits laid out on the street, and in the skirts of the women sitting straight-legged on the ground and in the umbrellas that shaded them, and in the stickers on the sides of the taxis that rushed past. There was red in the dust in the air, and grey in the exhaust fumes and on the hot tar. All of the colours merged and swirled in a chaotic mess and I felt my eyes blinking faster than normal as I tried to absorb them all, and they felt dry and heavy with the movement. The air was hot, but I breathed it in anyway. It tasted dirty and thick and entered my lungs slowly, trickling down my throat before I was able to exhale fully. I watched the ground and saw it moving, with small insects that scuttled in and out of holes in the paving, lines and lines of them forming zigzags on the street.

When we were finally close to the farm, Julia's car broke down on her dirt driveway, so we walked up the road towards the house. Along the side of it was a line of pine trees, and their green outlines stamped dark against the sky. I looked up at their tips as we passed and saw above them a thin slice of moon. On the other side of the road, on my left, the sun was lowering and the field was brown-gold in the light. The way the sun hit the land made the hills look like they were knotted up and folded against the sky. Julia walked next to me and when I looked at her I saw her breath coming out in a cloud from her mouth because the air was already freezing. I wondered how warm her body felt under her jacket, and if the tips of her fingers were soft inside her pockets. Mine were stiff with cold. Mostly Julia looked ahead, or at the field on the side of the road, but sometimes she turned her face towards me. In those moments, I liked the feeling of her looking at me. I felt like I was a part of the landscape we were in, and she was too, and it gave me the feeling that we were both close to the same thing.

When we arrived at Julia's house, we went inside and I lay in her bath until my skin warmed up. She made me tea, something with healing properties, she said. It tasted bitter but I drank it anyway, and rested the cup on my chest, half submerged in the bath water. When I got out of the bath, I lay on the end of her bed and stared up at the ceiling, which had wooden beams along it. The colour of the wood and the light, and the way the ceiling was low made me feel like I was inside a honeycomb. I didn't remember falling asleep, but when I opened my eyes, the room was dark and I could hear the sounds of the kitchen downstairs, a cupboard opening, and water being poured. I got up and walked to the top of the staircase and looked down, so I could see her cooking. I liked looking at the outline of her from that angle, and I remained still. I didn't know if I should stay upstairs or go down to her, but I didn't want her to turn around just yet. As I stood there, I felt my body separate itself from me. It wanted physical contact and the taste of Julia's cooking. I knew that if I listened to it, all of my own resistance would fall away, and I would give way to the strange ache it was stirring in me. I'd got caught in the thought longer than I was aware, because when I focused my eyes again, I saw that she had moved and was standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at me.

"Come eat," she said, and turned back to the open kitchen door and lit a joint.

I watched her smoke for a second.

"Ok," I said, and walked down the stairs. I leaned against the door frame next to her and we smoked like that for a while, facing outwards into the dark.

Later, when we sat in the lounge, Julia pulled out a box of beads, and I spilled them on the floor to look at the colours. Julia made a necklace, and when she gave it to me I held it for a while just so I could look at it. She had threaded beads in shades of gold and red onto brown thread. I let her clasp it at the back of my neck. When I looked in the mirror, the lamplight was so low I could hardly see the thread, so the beads looked like little shiny stones suspended on my skin. Although I never wore jewellery, I kept the necklace on, and touched the beads often, rubbing the smoothness between my fingertips. When I took off my clothes, I looked down at the gold and red against my chest and thought they made my body look different, the way that they hung so delicately between my breasts.

That night, we lay on the couch top to toe, me curled in the corner, knees to chest, her spread out straight. On the TV, there was a documentary on mute. In it the world was displayed in thousands of colours and millions-of-years-old creatures that existed in the deep unknown. Bioluminescence flickered in the dark, and then, a transparent squid throbbed pink, then yellow.

"You know, they know more about the surface of the moon than about the bottom of the ocean," Julia said.

I felt a single tear fall from my face, and drop onto the couch's fabric in a little dark patch.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

And I laughed.

"It's just too much," I said, "too big."

I pointed at the screen, and laughed some more, and the squid pulsated, and tears dropped in big slow motion plops on my cheeks and hands. Julia laughed too, but just for a moment, and touched my foot, and flopped back down, stretched out and sideways.

When Julia took me home the next morning, I asked her to drop me at the bottom of the driveway so that I could walk the last stretch of road home by myself. I wanted to see the trees, which were gradually turning green again, and through their branches, the house, covered in the patterns I had painted. From a distance, the walls looked so bright against the sky and the garden, and for the first time, I really saw what I had done to the exterior of the house. It made me wonder what my grandmother would have thought, if she could have seen it this way, still standing in the same position after so many years, but different now, coated in colour. As I walked under the trees, I found myself thinking about how I had hung upside-down from the branches when I was a child. The feeling of blood rushing to the tips of my fingers and into my head so that it tingled, a ticklish almost-pain spreading through my forehead and face. I had learned quickly to close my

eyes so that I didn't get dizzy from the upside-down branch view. I knew if I saw just a speck of them, the light circles in the leaves would make me spin, and the walls of the house would blur. There was always the sound of my sister climbing the highest branches, her voice and the sound of her feet forming noisy clouds in the leaves. Now, the sound in the trees was of hadedas, but the dappled light was the same as it had always been.

When I got to the house, I threw my bag onto the kitchen counter, and took off my shoes. I pulled my hair out of my face and crossed the lawn. There had been frost in the early morning, and small pools of ice remained in the garden. I touched one with my toe and watched it crack, black soil beneath it. I walked to the shed outside, and I let my eyes adjust to the darkness. There, I found the shelf of paintbrushes and the remaining tins of paint. I gathered them, and carried them to the porch, where I laid them out on the floor. I looked through the windows onto the garden, and could see just a hint of pink and white on the fruit trees. Below them, the grass was a faint shade of green underneath the brown. I mixed the colours as close as I could, and I prepared my brushes to paint on the inside walls, which were white and stark in the morning light. As I worked my brushes across the plaster, I felt myself fall into the movement of the lines. I let my body follow the patterns on the wall, moving my arms and eyes with the lines and colours as they spread bigger and bigger across the room. The action of it was consuming and I let it control me, until the light disappeared and the room was dim. When I could no longer see the paint on my brush, I stopped working. The lines on the wall were finer than the ones on the outside, the colours more pastel, a little muted. They spread across the walls and came together in the corners, so it looked like the paint had leaked from inside the plaster. I opened the door and looked outside. The night was particularly dark, and I stepped outside into it, alone in the almost-spring cold.