

# **Bitten**

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by

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## **Abstract**

My poetry investigates the extraordinary in the everyday, exploring my life as a mother and wife, to find the quiet truths that lie there. Using fresh ways of describing familiar experiences, the poems describe tiny, almost-missed moments and voices that have shaped me. Throughout the collection, I imagine my younger selves commenting on my current self and vice versa. Ultimately, my poems use simple words and clean lines to evoke how I feel (and how I want the reader to feel) in each of the moments they describe.

*for Anthony, Livia and Griffin  
whom I love beyond words*

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**1**





## Waiting

You are conceived in the sparse dark  
Before the rising dawn on Easter Sunday  
He says: *I'd better get a...*  
I say: *No* and stay him, my hand on his back  
Gripping him gently between my thighs.

After, I lie still, my hips tilted upward in prayer  
Willing you across the threshold  
You are eager to be born  
I am impatient to meet you.

## newly pregnant

like a waning buttered moon  
between my heart and my belly  
there is no more space  
for the world that shouts:  
*Look! Look at me! See what I can do!*  
these are under-water words  
and I am turning inward

## Morning Sickness

Over my shoulder  
a tide of black ink rises  
my fingertips bleed raw  
against the grit of sand  
as it sucks me furiously back to sea.

Like how my mother taught me to fold socks  
one rolled tight within the other  
I am twisted back into myself.

## Announcement

I could not read my mother's face  
when I announced: *I'm pregnant*

But today those same thick lines of fear  
are already written on my face

For my daughter who will, years from now,  
announce to me: *I'm pregnant*

Her heart, like mine, suddenly splintered in two  
Pandora's box emptied beyond repair

## Stormborn

In the summer night  
– the blackout so fierce I don't know  
where my fingertips end –  
my waters break with the storm.

On the chill hospital floor  
I pace out each step she will walk  
and (rocking) (howling)           let go

When she forges her way out  
in blood and fire  
I pass onto her  
what remains of me

then fall  
like a goddess flung to earth  
achingly mortal.

## Six Sleepless Nights

Exhaustion cuts me  
flays open my heart  
lets the truth seep out.

\*\*

I am angry  
fished out of sleep  
her cry - a hook  
into the softest centre of me.

\*\*

Surrendering I think:  
there will be many nights ahead  
when I will wish for the weight  
of her cross little body on mine.

\*\*

Seeking something unspoken  
she latches to my breast  
a key in a lock  
my heart is undone.

\*\*

Starved of her  
I stand over her cot  
a pilgrim      waiting.

\*\*

Icy dawn  
cat-curved we burrow down  
her flutter fingers write  
messages of love  
on my bare belly.

## Breathe

Hand on her breast  
I beg  
*Breathe*

Eyes on her lips  
I pray  
*Breathe*

Her body against my chest  
I whisper  
*Breathe*

And when I look away  
I stop  
Breathing

Holding mine in  
So that she may  
*Breathe* instead



## Feeding Time

At feeding time  
she lies milk-heavy in my lap.  
Each suck gathers  
the loosened webs of myself  
pulling them  
into an exhausted halo  
around me.

Her kneading fingers  
knit the threads  
frayed from the day  
and with her lips  
she stitches them lushly  
back to my heart.

## Midnight

You cough sleep-heavy  
head on my chest as fear twists cold  
between my shoulder blades  
and my breath fights to bring yours to ease

Slowly your weight grows  
against my elbow, the fear slips away  
as your breath, as my heart  
no longer labour      for air

## Martyrhood

Twelve hours of labour,  
my eyelids ache for days. Sleep  
is a starved-skinny addiction, my  
withdrawal so tight I  
bargain for it.

Sometimes I'm lost  
for words so I just say:  
*I'm exhausted*  
Sometimes I say: *I'm fine*  
meaning: *I'm exhausted*.

I imagine they whisper  
– behind my back –  
*She's so brave! So strong!*  
I don't really think they say  
that. I don't think they  
say anything at all.

## Conversation

My 21-year-old self watches  
crossed arms  
as I pick up the dummy behind the couch  
soak stained babygro's

She asks: *Look at you –  
is there any of me left?*  
I tell her: *Not now, I'm busy*

Later she is there, sulking still,  
I say: *But look!*  
*I painted the bathroom walls  
the colour of our blue house with the lemon tree.*

## Weaning

My breasts grow grey with grief  
As she cleaves herself from me  
*They grow grey*  
*They grow old*

They feed a small death  
Thin like tissue  
*They grow grey*  
*They grow old*

The loss grows in the dark room  
My baby now a changeling  
*They grow white*  
*They grow grey*

## The Silence

Today as she was swept off to school  
I teetered like a forward slash.

Every afternoon  
I ache for silence.  
Every afternoon  
as she sings,  
cries, tosses toys / Yet  
in the pin-drop void  
of morning  
I miss her  
and the chubby noise that  
trails in her wake.

## Dovetail

My lips in her sleep-splayed palm  
Her bottom in the well of my crossed legs  
My thumb in the unwary arch of her foot  
Her legs falling over the brace of my elbow  
My heart into the grey-green wide of her eye  
These are the ways she still fits into me





**2**



## My Grandmother's Name

In her 70's  
the rigid clack  
of a label maker  
stamped out  
her neat name  
to be stuck  
spirit-level straight  
on cupboards, Tupperware,  
biscuit tins and dustpans.

Her widowed father,  
open-handed helpless,  
had passed her on to his sour sisters  
to be raised in a house of chiming clocks  
and maudlin tapestry cushions.

Even as a child she marked everything  
in strict Victorian capitals:  
MOIRA ELAINE LONG  
in case anyone should  
think to take what was hers  
in case anyone should  
forget (again)  
where she belonged.

## Photograph

We sit in the sun eating ice cream  
her belly is fat with my brother.  
It must be a warm Durban winter  
as we lick drips of vanilla off our fingers.

I am two, chubby-thighed  
perched on a cheap garden chair  
next to the voluptuousness of my mother.

The polaroid has faded to green  
but I can still see Dad now  
behind the camera  
singing: *Lulu look here, smile.*

## First Memory

*for Warwick*

I am two,  
wearing woollen stockings (they itch)  
tucked into Dad's firm hip,  
he points through the glass  
at the sea of babies rippling behind it  
*There he is, there's your brother*

When my life has faded  
to the colour of old paper  
this will still be with me:  
tiny pupae, their fists rising softly  
out of blue-lined hospital blankets

## For Daughters

No words can really describe it  
You will become tongue-tied  
so sweaty with indecision  
that your knees will knock together  
Convinced everyone is watching  
looking at you, talking about you.

No-one will tell you  
there is no way out other than time  
Time that aches slowly through long classroom days  
sweeping by in short skirts on loud weekends.

No words will ease the mortification  
of stained underwear  
or bra shopping with your mother  
or explosions of pimples on your chin.  
or boys' hard-ons in the corridor.

Nor will anyone tell you  
how you will ride waves of lust  
and toss your hair in the wind  
oblivious of your freshness in the world  
Knowing everyone is watching  
looking at you, talking about you.

## The Road

The party sprawls  
into the unruly night  
Boudina hugs me hot to her skin  
whispers *I really miss you hey*  
I remember a burnt blue road trip  
grey veld grass  
a smothered sunset  
when we were still friends.

As I drive home  
I cry  
as the disciplined flames  
of cat's eyes red and yellow  
slink impassive away from me  
in the rearview mirror.

## Roots

Seventeen, she walks  
under the bridge of cherry blossom  
across the lawns, where the boys play rugby,  
and tries to smoke.

She sits on the bench  
on the lawns of this settler town,  
familiar from the first day,  
and knows she is buried here.

On the lawns  
she kisses the tree  
and watches her roots break  
through the manicured grass.



## Sweat

Sweat-slick he climbs  
through the classroom window  
hockey stick in hand  
when, mid high-five, his shirt rises  
I want to fall off  
the crisp cliff of his hip bone

I want to lick his stomach in his bedroom  
meet the hard rise of his jeans as we dance  
in a hall tight with tissue paper roses  
call his hot mouth to my nipple  
in the mid-winter dark of a garden

He is bald and bearded now  
my breasts no longer tip skyward  
but some days he must still be that boy  
because some nights, in the sweat  
of another's embrace, I am still that girl

## Refugee

You arrived on the wet doorstep  
Seeking refuge from your life  
And I, weak-kneed in your light  
Opened the door too wide.

You unpacked into my world  
Your shoes sat coupled in the corner  
Your T-shirts hung in my closet  
Crowding my clothes.

## Once Bitten

We ate sex for breakfast  
You pushed me up against the gate  
at that digs party in the blue house  
you held my wrists tight above you  
*I waited all my life for you.*

On your formica kitchen counter  
your saggy-bottomed bed  
your mildewed shower  
my cheap pine desk  
We pulled the mattress to my fireplace  
and lay there till dawn  
*I never wanted to sleep alone again.*

Sometimes I would scream  
and the neighbours would bang on the ceiling.  
Sometimes you would whisper: *bite me*  
and I would.

When we moved in together I saw:  
you were never going to shop with me  
for groceries on a Sunday morning.

I bit other men after you –  
they didn't like it.







## This Long

Racked by morning sickness  
I watch as he washes dishes  
Folds laundry  
Feeds the baby  
Weighed low by guilt  
I launch wobbly apologies toward him

He says: *We do not balance the books*  
*Every day*  
*Or every week*  
*We balance it over... this long*  
The span of his arms reaches long-wide  
Before encircling me  
With the imagined lifetime of our love

## Delivery Room

As the doctor roared at me to bear down  
all I heard were your whispered lips against my ear.  
Your words (lost now) like firm hands  
easing our daughter into this world.



## Song to Scrub Floors By

Sing for me and my housewifely hands  
sing for my dishwashing soul  
and my toilet-brush heart.

Take the lightness of years left alone  
and put them out with the rubbish –  
but not by the neighbour's wall!

Make a sign: *Please do not dump here*  
meaning this instead:  
*Please do not dump your life shit here*  
*or I'll be forced to ninja chop you*

meaning: *Fuck off I'm busy*  
meaning: *I'm super-busy and important*  
meaning: *I'm searching and not finding*

meaning: *Can you help me?*  
meaning: *I swallow my washing machine pride*  
meaning: *Can you help me?* meaning: *Can you help me?*

## At Pick 'n Pay

Kerry and I talk  
softly. Her jaw set as she  
speaks of *blastomas* and *biopsies*  
(her friend's child is dying  
four years old)  
She says: *It won't be long.*

Kerry pulls me in  
we weep together while  
people shop around us  
And I ache.

## Finally

Alone at night  
the tight memories of the day unwind like  
Lindsay's baby released  
from her swaddling.

My face finally takes the  
shape it's wanted to be for  
hours  
*It's okay*  
*No-one is watching.*

## Black Cat

Black cat has no worries about black sounds.  
She doesn't wonder if she is a poet  
she knows between claw and pad  
the shape of her footprint on this earth.

She doesn't worry about musical lines  
she has tuned her ear to the birdsong.

Black cat has no writing master.  
She does not take raw poems to him  
with a submissive skull.

She sits to attention  
soldier paws drawn together  
the curve of her tail        a line  
her swept back ears        a stanza.

## Red Sky

We should have known this morning  
When the red sky said:  
*Beware! Watch out!*

At lunch we took pictures  
As the distant veld on Stones Hill burned  
At four the smoke hung low over town  
*Ag it's fine... I'm sure it's fine hey?*

Through the bush telegraph  
Of this winter-dry town  
Where everyone is someone-you-know  
It came with *I thinks* and *maybes*  
That roared into real names  
Houses (once homes) became ash  
And then: *I feel so helpless*  
*What can I do?*

*You should have known this morning*  
The red sky said.

## Skin-walker

*Skin-walkers have the natural ability to transform  
into any animal they desire by wearing the pelt of that animal.*

The teacher's words flay me  
stripped to tight muscle and cold bone  
I press my hands to my  
stomach, think: *I do not want to sit  
naked at this table.*

Like a skin-walker  
draped in pelts  
I have worn these skins for too long:  
    inhabited their wrinkles  
    and the bend of their elbows.

He says: *You're too hard on yourself*  
I hear what is left of me  
screaming through my pores like sweat  
purging the doubt, leaving  
just my cool bare flesh in the sun.

\*

## Other Mothers

Other Mothers say this:

*Get on now*

*I did just fine*

They throw away their late nights  
with the dirty nappies  
slap on their lipstick  
and smile.

They hobble me

(bind my feet bloodless)

and cast me to the dark road.

They say this:

*You should...*

and

*I would...*

as I flail and suck tarmac  
drowning on the road.

With fire-eyes they

say: *walk dammit... like I did ...*

But the road is full of stones

Other Mothers have thrown there.

*like that*

*I don't do dishes*

I confess in the restaurant

(I do not admit I don't do laundry either)

My friends' mouths say:

*Awesome! You're so lucky!*

But I read: *You're spoilt* and

*Whadayamean you don't?*

Over the nachos

They lay a proud litany on me:

Of crusty sinks and

Bulging laundry baskets

They remind me:

They are martyrs in the best possible way

They hang fast to their suffering

Flagellate themselves with housework

They say: *MY husband*

And rhyme it with: *can't, won't*

And *just isn't*

Ending with *like that*.



## The Garden's Memory

A garden is harder than a marriage  
you can't throw sex or wine at it  
to pacify the wilderness that threatens.

A garden remembers holds to  
rhythms  
you laboured to weed out. As you  
tame it,  
clear the Eastern Cape clay it springs  
up  
slaps you .

A climbing rose, a pale matriarch,  
grows vicious despite my secateurs.  
A pear tree, fat with lichen,  
defiantly bears wizened fruit.

## Childhood Home

When they retire, my parents  
will sell our childhood home.

Hot-cracked slasto by the pool  
The fading shadows of a long-gone frangipani tree  
The echoes of children's voices  
Grow paler each year.

My brother is wistful:  
*I wish I could buy it from you guys*  
He dreams of a new wife and babies  
growing brown and happy there.

The rope swing still hangs from the avo tree  
The stone birdbath endures in the rose bed  
The azaleas grow fatter every year.

## Last Roadtrip with my Brother

We drive through the unruly hills of the Wild Coast  
The potholes bigger than our Mazda 323  
Little boys and girls fill the ruts with cow dung  
Begging money for their service

The stones on the beach  
We take shots – one of us  
Posed awkward against the background of sea  
*C'mon boet take the bladdy picture*

The acrid mosquito coil  
And hot December night  
Oozing with hippie drumming  
I on the floor, you on the bed

Neither of us sleeps  
We rise at dawn for cold showers  
And a quick getaway, leaving cash  
And a note: *Never coming back here*

## The Bench

That afternoon in the damp, green spring  
I see you and Chappie: at seventeen  
You are all angles and sharp edges  
With your against-all-school-rules afros  
Smoking menthol cigarettes  
Tossing a ball for Blackie

Today I want to unearth a smoke from your box  
Hidden under the loose bottom of a side cupboard  
And sit on the bench with you — my brother  
Even though our beloved Blackie is long gone  
And no-one smokes anymore

## Foundations

I arrive back windswept  
warm from the beach  
Ouma says: *But you know*  
*it was so cold this morning in Home Affairs...*  
She punctuates her story with *the blacks*  
and *these people*.  
As my smile hardens  
I long for the forgiving sting  
of salt and sand.

\*\*

The clutter  
has sunk this house deeper  
into its foundations.  
Alongside Rama tubs, jars of rusty nails,  
dusty silk flowers, commemorative teaspoons  
and once-quirky magnets.  
All heavy with dust.

\*\*

They've just been to Hong Kong  
returning with pens and bottle openers  
T-shirts from the airport  
that say I ♥ Hong Kong  
(\$79 for one, \$49 for two)

Their photos are of blurred grey roads  
and high-rise buildings  
pictures from the plane window  
or the funicular up the mountain.  
All taken on the move.

\*\*

Their net curtains  
stop any real light  
that tries to seep through.  
They hang limp  
with a lifetime of sensible choices  
watching his end unmoved  
like a shroud.

## Oupa is dying

except no-one will say  
that he is.

We sit down for dinner  
in the kitchen  
at the blue Formica table  
ignoring the wavering treble as he says grace  
the sharp intake of breath as he shifts in his seat  
not seeing the tiny mouthfuls he eats.

We talk about the local hardware store  
(where you'll find light bulbs the supermarket doesn't stock)  
He is dying  
even if no one will say so.

## Pursuit

The poem chases me in the dark  
It is a warm stone  
Deep in the centre of me  
A weight in my palm  
Its gritty voice below my fingernails  
Like soil in springtime  
I take my pen, dig in,  
The ink drowns it blue.





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