

## 100 PAPERS – AN ANTHOLOGY OF PROSE POEMS AND FLASH FICTION

### 1. Shopping List

“Bread, oil, yoghurt, apple juice, mieliemeal...”

Liesbet stared at the half-used roll of white toilet paper, which she'd taken from the spare bathroom. She slotted it into the toilet roll holder in the main bedroom's en-suite bathroom and threw out the empty cardboard cylinder. She wondered whether the remaining toilet tissue would last until she could get to town herself.

“S'that all?” Roelof's voice echoed on the mobile.

“Um...” She fingered the last scrap of tissue stuck to the empty cardboard cylinder before tossing it into the bin covered in frilly yellow gingham.

She would have to ask Roelof to get the toilet paper. The last time they ran out because she hadn't written it on the shopping list, there was an all night fight. Liesbet had wanted to buy it herself, because white toilet paper was particularly important to her. Roelof always bought rolls of pink, to match the tiles and the towels, or yellow to match the walls and the toilet seat cover his mother had crocheted. His mother had taught him the importance of matching things. She said it showed a man's feminine side.

Liesbet needed white tissue paper because it told her intimate details about her private place, details she wasn't ready to share with Roelof yet. Against the pink paper, she could not detect the faint spotting that had heralded each failed pregnancy. Against the yellow paper, she could not see the discolouration of her secretions that accompanied her fertile period or revealed another infection.

“Get some soap, toilet cleanser and...” she hesitated.

“Hurry up,” he crackled.

“Toilet paper – please buy *white* toilet paper.”

The phone went dead. Had he heard her? The reception at the farm wasn't good.

She was two and a half weeks overdue. Eighteen days precisely. She wondered whether she her nausea was real or whether she was imagining it again. She thought her breasts felt more sensitive than usual. There was a metallic taste in her mouth, as if she'd been sucking on a coin. In the bathroom, she lifted her skirt and

dropped her panties. She sat on the ledge of the bath. There was still no sign on the cotton gusset. She didn't want to go for a pregnancy test to the only doctor in Ulugwadule, the town that was a railway siding. Its name translated from Zulu into 'the barren place'.

Roelof's bakkie swerved up to the farmhouse in a cloud of dust. He dumped the shopping bags on the kitchen table, grabbed a beer and slouched down in front of the rugby on TV. The Bokke were slaughtering the All Blacks in Wellington. Liesbet unpacked the bread, oil, yoghurt, apple juice, mieliemeal, soap, toilet cleanser and rolls of toilet paper – yellow and pink.

## 2. The Organist

“That boy is peculiar,” said the voorsitter of the Kleifontein Christian Ladies’ Society sipping her tea.

The committee sat on the stoep of the pastorie. I was collecting the bottle tops that called from the street. They urged me to construct them into a tambourine.

“He has caramel fingers,” said another, as she gathered her handbag closer to her. She clutched the beads about her neck.

I could never explain to anybody that it was things that stuck to me, not me to things.

“He’s will end up like Piet,” said Ouma, wiggling her dentures.

My uncle is an intellectual, a drunk, and in prison this month for stealing funny things from the apteek.

Last month, I developed an efficient system for aerating the library fishpond. I used the nozzles, tubes and pump bags I’d found in my uncle’s cupboard. First the librarian was interested in the fine spray I created. I hadn’t noticed she was there until I saw her reflection in the water. Then the posmeester passed by, and he called the apteker who also came to look at my project. Next thing, Konstabel de Villiers arrived. He greeted me with a double hoot from his police van. It seemed he’d come to admire my handiwork too.

“Nice kit you got there, boykie,” said the Konstabel. “Where did you find that bulb syringe?”

I pointed in the direction of our house.

“Very interesting,” he said. “Do you want to show me the precise location?”

I didn’t. But I took him to Oom Piet’s cupboard anyway. The konstabel found his missing handcuffs in my uncle’s cupboard. There were some collars that had disappeared from the pet shop in there as well, but they hadn’t been useful to my project.

“Did she drop him on his head?” they ask about me, when Ma is out of earshot – but I am not. They think I’m deaf because I don’t talk.

“He’s a tonteldoos,” said Tannie Liza who found me reading *Die Ossewa* before I’d been to school.

“He’s a liar,” said the teacher when the ornaments on her desk broke and I blamed Chicken. The redheaded rooster that perches in the peach tree is my best friend.

It was the truth. I was teaching Chicken to read from the Bible on the teacher’s desk during pouse. We started in Luke. Chapter 22, verse 33. He was managing well with this section: *And he said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison,* but when it came to *and to death,* Chicken skrikked.

The next verse was his undoing.

When we got to *I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day,* Chicken got into a flap. Down went the ceramic ballerina, the porcelain shoe and the see-no-hear-no-speak-no-evil monkeys.

“That fowl’s heading for the pot,” warned my mother. “You’d better learn to control him.”

“You buying favour now?” asked the teacher two days later when I put an apple on her desk. I nodded.

“What you want, boy?”

She was still cross, even though Ma had bought her a new ballerina, another shoe and the monkeys from the apteek – where she got them in the first place.

I wrote on the exam pad I always carry: Chicken wants to play the organ.

“Go ask the dominee,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s just a whim,” said the dominee’s wife. “It will pass.”

“The organ or the cockerel?” asked my mother.

“Maybe both.”

Now, when I pass through the dorp with Chicken tucked under my arm, people just stare. Chicken can play Bach’s *Chorale Preludes*, Mendelssohn’s *Sonata in F*, and the *Versets* by Thomas Tallis. His legs can’t quite reach the pedal board, so I help him out with the bass.

Last time I interrupted the Kleinfontein Christian Ladies’ Society meeting on the stoep of the pastorie to collect the key for the organ loft, the voorsitter said, “That chicken is peculiar.”

### 3. Curl Your Fingers

“Curl your fingers, Davie,” I say to the petite seven-year-old. His legs swing at the piano stool.

“Do you like my hair?”

“I do, indeed. Did you style it yourself?” His mop of dark curls has been gelled into meringue-like points.

“My sister helped me.”

“Curl your fingers.”

Davie makes a little bird-like claw and starts C major scale again. He sniffs noisily, then plays the first three notes with curled fingers, but by the time he has passed his thumb under his hand to complete the rest of the scale, he has forgotten the correct hand position.

“Keep them curled,” I stretch across and reach under his hand, touching his palm gently. It is sticky. In response to my touch, he corrects the hand position. When he is finished, I ask him if he washed his hands.

“I always wash my hands...”

“Perhaps you missed the peanut butter?”

He studies his hands and nods.

“Maybe I did.”

“Will you go wash again, please?”

“If I have to...”

“You do. Pianos don’t like peanut butter. Use soap this time, boykie, and warm water!”

While he scuttles off to the bathroom – which has no light fitting, and hasn’t had since I started teaching at the Pereira’s home a year ago – I survey the family room. The couch is threadbare and its stuffing pops out in places. There’s a hole in the kitchen roof and the back door is broken. Ngwenya, the ancient manservant whose name means ‘crocodile’, always offers me tea at some point in the long afternoon. The cups are always clean, if chipped.

Davie’s khakis bear the badge of an elite private school. He dries his hands on his pants as he sits at the piano, which is diabolically out of tune. I have recommended that Mr Ashkenazy, the tuner, should be called, but I guess there isn’t spare cash for his fee.

“Shall we try G major now?” I ask. Davie starts G major on F. I move his thumb up a note. “G, Davie, not F.”

He starts again and, predictably, forgets the F-sharp. I tap his fourth finger to remind him. He starts again – this time on G – but with flat fingers. I don’t bother telling him to curl his fingers; rather I choose to remind him of the rhythm.

“Even-Steven, even-Steven,” I chant in time with his plodding G major. It is correct and almost rhythmical. “Excellent!” I cry. Davie beams. I look at my watch. We are five minutes through a half hour lesson. I yawn and catch a bored tear escaping. I rub it away before I remember that I fed a chilli to my parrot before leaving home. I forgot to wash my hands. My eye burns and I snap at Davie who is now playing G major with the wrong fingering.

“No Davie!” I say, louder than I intended. My harshness startles him and I feel guilty. “Its thumb-two-three-THUMB, not ...” but before I finish he has corrected the pattern. I excuse myself to wash my own fingers and use the bathroom. A child has left a large curl in the toilet bowl. I open the window for fresh air.

Outside, I stare at the neighbour’s palace that is visible over the security fence. I suspect the neighbours disapprove of Mrs Pereira’s noisy brood, as much as they detest the broken washing machine that stands beside the ramped car. Grass grows up around the abandoned items.

I look at my watch. It is eight minutes into Davie’s lesson. His older sister has an hour-long lesson, and while marginally more accomplished, she is less musical than her younger brother. I should get the piano tuner to tune the instrument and pay him myself. Nobody but me even registers its condition.

After washing my hands, I am reluctant to clasp the doorknob on the bathroom door, because the toilet brush hangs from a hook just above it. I realise it hangs there to prevent the youngest sibling from sucking on it, but it strikes me as unhygienic to have the thing dripping down onto the door handle. I look at the hand towel and wonder about using it to open the door, but when I consider where the towel might have been I pull off a couple of sheets of cheap toilet paper instead. I hold the handle through the tissue.

Emerging with a fist full of toilet paper, I am greeted by Ngwenya, who needs a cataract operation. Through milky eyes, he watches me stuffing the toilet paper I just used to open the door into my handbag. I feel ashamed to be seen doing this.

“Would you like tea today, Madam?”

“Thank you, Ngwenya.”

I open Davie’s *First Piano Tunes* to a piece entitled ‘Gallop Away’. The way Davie plays it – clearing his sinuses in the rests – it might better be called ‘Slump into a Greasy Pond’.

“Curl your fingers, Davie,” I start again. I may as well tell him to keep a steady rhythm, to practise everyday, or to crawl across the ceiling for all the attention he pays me.

I sigh and watch his legs swing to and fro in a dotted rhythm – LEFT-right LEFT-right LEFT-right – that bears no relation to the three-beat time signature of the piece, nor to the irregularly accelerating tempo of his sniffing.

“Blow your nose,” I say, handing him the toilet paper from my handbag as Ngwenya plonks the tea mug down on the piano. I thank the old man and decide – on looking at my watch and discovering that this lesson still has 15 minutes to go – that today, I shall cry my own great crocodile tears into my tea, because if this child does not curl his fingers I will bite his head off.

I stop myself. While he played ‘Gallop Away’ I scrutinised the accretions behind his ears. Until Davie has had a good wash, he is safe from my dark urge.

I take a deep breath and say once again, “Curl your fingers...”

#### **4. How the Oreo Stole Christmas**

Jansie plucked the frikkadelle one by one from the countertop. Oily shadows dotted the paper towel on which they had rested. Jansie tapped loose odd mincemeat crumbs and positioned the golden brown balls between the pale yellow stuffed eggs, which she dusted with bold chives and snappy paprika. She placed a ring of cherry tomatoes about the rim and interspersed them with juicy black olives. Her dish was an artwork against the cobalt blue platter.

Jansie stared at Marta's delicate koeksusters, dripping with cinnamon syrup. Pastor Patrick had a soft spot for koeksusters. She glared at Maryke's famed melktert, which had raised the highest bid at the charity fundraiser.

During the Nativity play, the mothers feigned interest in the tubby angels with silver foil wings; they forced laughter at the recalcitrant donkey refusing to wear its ears.

The unwritten rule of the unspoken contest heralded the baking queen as the maker of the item that was first sampled by the minister. The women studiously avoided each other's gaze.

Jansie smirked when Pastor Patrick sailed past Maryke's melktert; she rejoiced as he waltzed past Marta's koeksusters to the end of the table. She gasped as the pastor stretched past her cobalt blue platter and snatched a little brown biscuit with a white icing centre imported from America.

## 5. Litter-bugs

After Lerato's funeral, Grace saw the world from a peculiar angle. The doctor diagnosed labyrinthitis. If she tilted her ear 45 degrees to her shoulder, then the pews inside the chapel at Christ the King Elementary were nearly level and the stained glass windows rose almost perpendicular. But when she sat back from the kneeler after praying, the dark interior pitched about her and she wanted to be sick.

She touched the walls as she walked along the corridors and held tightly to the banisters in the stairwell. When she looked down at the reading rug next to the puzzle rack, her eyes pooled and swam on the spot where she'd last held Lerato.

A week earlier Grace had written on the board, "King's kids are not litter-bugs". The chalk squeaked and snapped in her hand. "Nobody gets lunch until that messy playground is tidied up," she said. "It was in a terrible state after recess. Come back for your lunch boxes when you've picked up the rubbish." The bell rang and children raced barefoot past the chapel to pick chip packets and sweet papers off the grass.

Lerato clutched the curved garbage bin and flung a lollypop wrapper over the edge. She let out a small fluttery cry and jumped backwards on the grass. She ran wheezing to her teacher to show her the black stinger left in her palm. Grace was about to remove it with a deft scrape of her fingernail, when Lerato crumpled and fell to the ground.

"Thato, you must run for Sister Mary-Paul," said Grace to Lerato's twin brother who tagged along as she carried the limp child back to the classroom. "Run please Thato," she pleaded, laying Lerato on the reading rug beside the puzzle rack. The boy gasped in sympathy, staring as his sister's lips turned blue and she stopped breathing, as if he already knew that neither Sister Mary-Paul nor an ambulance could arrive in time.

The grade ones returned for their lunch boxes. "I picked up twenty papers, Ma'am," said Refilwe. "We got no litter-bugs anymore."

"Can we eat now?" asked James, shaking his sandwiches.

"Why's Lerato sleeping Ma'am?" lisped Liza through the gap in her teeth.

"School is not for sleepyheads," said James, mimicking his teacher's inflection.

Jojo popped the straw into her juice carton and said to Thato, “Your Mama won’t be pleased.”

## 6. It's Just Not Cricket

Sister Xavier trundled her trolley along the rutted street from the butcher to the greengrocer. A leg of lamb, a sack of potatoes and a bunch of carrots peeked over the top. Sister Angelica carried a small basket containing the weekend reading material: *The Saturday Star* for Sister Xavier, *Southern Cross* for Sister Johanna and for herself, *Planet Sports*. The publications concealed the Hello Kitty™ scented gel pens she had bought with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary's weekly housekeeping allowance.

Sister Angelica hoped that while she was paying and packing, Sister Xavier had indeed been as truly engrossed in the comparative prices of house brand and premier variety sticky tape as she appeared. However, as they walked along, Sister Xavier continued to stare at her basket with uncommon interest.

"Will you look at that?" said Sister Angelica, pointing to the bottle store display.

Three figures looked as if they had tumbled over a wheelbarrow, and having fallen to the ground, they lounged before a vast flat-screen television. Their limbs, constructed of beer cans wired together, stuck out at peculiar angles. Coarse leather velskoen attached to the bottom of their legs jutted out at a jaunty angle. Even the white stitching appeared to tap out an appealing rhythm. The non-existent faces, hidden under wide-brimmed white hats, watched Shaun Pollock score the winning run in the recent victory against New Zealand. The clip repeated over and over on the screen.

"'Tis the devil's own work," said Sister Angelica, in her lilting Irish brogue. She had opinions on most things, and the devil in particular.

"Surely not the cricket?" asked Sister Xavier, suspiciously.

"Not the cricket."

"Will that be the drink or the box then, Angelica?" Sister Xavier had strong feelings on the subject of the degeneration of cognitive functioning in the youth exposed to excessive stimulation by the SABC.

"Neither!" grumbled the coach of Sacred Heart's Under-15 1<sup>st</sup> XI.

"The men, then? They look like some of the parents, don't they?"

"Not the men either," she muttered.

She had to agree that Sister Xavier had a point about the comparison. The parents' demeanour had been problematic of late. There had been an unfortunate incident between Messrs. Sequeira and Khumalo when the Umpire Takahashi called a no ball on young Carlo Sequeira's throw. That was the match her team had lost against Christian Brothers, Boksburg. It was unfortunate that South African Breweries entered the premises in every parental picnic cooler. Still, it wouldn't do to agree with Xavier too often.

“What then?”

“They're taking over the world.”

“Who?”

“The Americans!”

“Who'd have thought?”

“Well, just look at them, will you?”

Sister Xavier looked in the window again. One of the slouches was constructed of cans of Castles, the other of Windhoek Light. The third was constructed out of a brand she had never seen before – admittedly beer was not her favourite tippie.

“Miller!” hissed Sister Angelica. “Americans... and their beer. They're taking over the world!”

“It's just not cricket,” agreed Sister Xavier. “Next thing, the Japanese will be keeping score with fruit-fragranced markers!”

## 7. Thorn

Josh wrote 'mortician' beside First Choice on the career guidance form. Mrs Kirk, the Life Orientation teacher, retrieved the forms she'd use to assist the Grade Nines in choosing their subjects for matric. Josh had not written down a second or third career choice. The form had not been signed by a parent or guardian.

When Mrs Kirk phoned his father, he said 'mortician' was wrong, he told her to put 'soil science', 'viticulture' and 'land management' on the form. He wanted his son to do a BSc Agriculture majoring in Oenology, at Stellenbosch University. Josh was to follow him in managing the family's wine farm, he said.

Jesus had given Josh a thorn from his crown to carve a message on his forearm: 'Oh Death, where is Thy sting?' The thorn didn't scratch out the words properly. It tore at his flesh, leaving only ragged lines. The teacher bent close to Josh, checked his eyes for redness or glassiness. His pupils were not dilated. She inhaled deeply, trying to catch the sweet scent of dagga smoke on his clothes or hair. Nothing. Yet the boy was agitated. Adolescents, she shrugged. The teacher couldn't see the blood spots on Josh's sleeve, hidden under his blazer.

Josh borrows a grafting scalpel – the one his father uses to graft vine clones onto well-established rootstock. Perhaps it will work better, more precisely. Josh prays, asking forgiveness for spurning the Saviour's thorn. He also borrows his father's hunting rifle.

## 8. Bridgework

“Did you have a good rest yesterday?” asks Dr. Lipkin tucking his sideburns under a disposable mask. My husband, Johan, is his first appointment on a Monday – the emergency slot.

Johan lisps, “I did not.”

Yesterday afternoon, just after visiting the cheirologist at the Healing Fayre, he spat out his bridgework in a mouthful of toffee apple. Johan saved it, wrapped it in a paper serviette. The dentist examines the mangled remains of his former colleague’s work with an inscrutable face. Bits of tissue paper have snagged in the wire. Dr. Lipkin scratches under his yarmulke with a well-manicured finger then pulls on latex gloves. He looks about 19 years old. This worries me about the most recent addition to the Norwood Medical Centre. My husband also has well-manicured fingers, but no yarmulke.

“Do you not rest on the Sabbath?” asks Dr. Lipkin.

“I do not.”

“My husband is a church organist,” I say.

I do not explain that he is also a solitary Wiccan with Pagan leanings. Or is he a solitary Pagan with Wiccan leanings? Johan explained the difference, but it passed through my agnostic head. Nevertheless, he does not want it advertised to the charismatic evangelical community he serves weekly at the pedals and console.

Johan believes that the taps leak when the water sprites feel disrespected and that the tsunami was caused by the angering of Jormungand, the World Serpent that lies at the bottom of the sea. He is convinced that the US military’s testing of secret eco-weapons on the seabed is what disturbed the ancient snake.

“Those crazy Americans are trying to slay Jormungand. That’s the cause of the current cosmic imbalance,” he says, staring at the moon.

My husband lights green candles in the bathroom to appease the spirits. I don’t bother explaining that the taps leak because the council engineers were fixing the pipes up the road and the water pressure changed. Last time the taps leaked, it was because the washers needed replacing. I arranged for the plumber to arrive while Johan practised at the church.

“Those green candles did the trick, didn’t they?” he asked, beaming.

Yesterday he lit blue candles because it was Sunday, or because he wished to astrally

project prophetic dreams for healing the ozone layer. Maybe it's just the summer solstice and he is casting enchantments for truth, honour, loyalty and tranquillity upon our house.

"Hurry up," says the dentist to his assistant, "you keep our patient waiting." She is also new, demure in heavy woollen stockings and a long skirt. She wears a shawl and has wide frightened eyes. She bumps the tray of tools beside the headrest. "Easy does it, haste makes waste," grumbles Dr Lipkin. "What's the rush?"

Johan meets with the new pastor once a month for coffee at the Mugg and Bean. Pastor Frank said at their recent meeting that the tsunami was a test of faith, and faith in God can move mountains and divide oceans, after all. Johan told me afterwards, that he didn't think the minister would hold truck with Jormungand, so he just said, "Uh-huh," and, "Ja," and, "Guess you're right."

Then Pastor Frank asked my husband what he had been reading.

"Nothing," said Johan, lying through his dodgy bridge about the stack of literature that wobbles on his bedside table. *Faerie Magicke*, *Runic Script*, and *Wicca for You* make a formidable pile.

"I've got just the book for you," said the pastor, pushing *Right Answers for Wrong Beliefs* across the table.

Johan thanked him and returned last month's *Daily Devotion for Modern Believers* unread.

"How did you find it?"

"The wife enjoyed it," said Johan, lying some more. This satisfied the pastor.

"Hallelujah, Brother, what an answer to prayer!"

My wayward soul is high on Pastor Frank's list of spiritual concerns. When he phones to book Johan for a funeral, and I answer the phone, he asks me how my walk with the Lord is going. I sigh and say, "Well enough Pastor," then yell for Johan before he asks when I'll be returning to the flock, I.

Johan said that when the cappuccinos and lemon meringue arrived, Pastor Frank stretched across the table and held Johan's hand. He closed his eyes, and thanked the Lord loudly for His mighty blessings and pledged divine protection over their every step, trusting the precious blood of Jesus to guard them as they celebrated His abundant love.

Johan says the first time they met in a restaurant, he also closed his eyes and mumbled "Amen" at every cadence. Now, he tells me, he stares at the mint leaf stuck

in the cream and slips silent incantations to the Goddess beseeching her forbearance of this necessary employer-employee ritual. Mint is a wonderful cleanser of the aura. He has planted a sprig of it under the dripping tap in the garden.

This morning, I drove my man to the surgery because he is muggy with pain medication. I am muggy with the thought of what his bridge cost in the first place. The dentist's former partner was a wreck: a Bulgarian sadomasochist who wore thigh high white leather boots with her white mini and lab coat. I know she had a matching black pair for her nocturnal pursuits. I'm psychic that way.

She was arrested for defrauding the Medical Aid and was struck off the register. I recall discovering the astonishing bills listing anaesthetic I know she never administered. When I queried the account she denied giving me only one of the four ampoules she had charged for. I run my tongue along the uneven crowns I probably never needed. Where were Johan's psychic powers when we let such a person loose on our teeth? Couldn't the angel cards have cautioned us against a criminal tooth quack?

After the first injection, the dentist rests his hand on my husband's shoulder.

"Hang in there, my brother," he says.

Johan nods.

"I bear no grudge against church organists."

## 9. Siyabonga Means ‘Thankyou!’

We’ve been waiting outside the indigenous nursery at the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens for half an hour with the new maid. She started last month. Her name is Siyabonga, which means ‘thankyou’ in Zulu. I wish I had not lost my hat.

The sun is so bright reflecting off the page that I can hardly see to write the new journal I got for Christmas. Mom is inside ordering Waterwise™ plants with Raphaella, the landscape designer. Our old garden has too many exotic plants. They must go. All except the roses. Raphaella says it is fashionable to be environmentally responsible. Roses take a lot of water. You shouldn’t waste water. It’s a precious resource.

When Raphaella met Mom and saw all of us in tow, she said, “Ag shame! They’re going to have a bit of a wait.”

Mom said, “No problem, the maid will watch them.”

We are Proudly South African™ now, so we have to buy stuff that’s made here. Even plants. Proudly South African™ labels have a large tick in the colours of the new South African flag. The sun hats we bought at Woolies™ this morning had that label. Mom’s going to be mad because I lost a brand new hat. It could have been one of those imports from China that get the ‘Made in South Africa’ label sewn in over here. I read about that in the newspaper.

Today is so hot. I wonder if the whole of Devil’s Peak will just ignite, with all those oily plants heating up under the sun. It hasn’t rained for ages. Our teacher says that the hole in the Ozone layer is changing weather patterns around the world. There are water restrictions this year, so Speed is not allowed to use the hose anymore. Speed is the garden boy. He likes to clear leaves from the driveway with the hose, spraying them so they float into a channel going down the storm water drain. It takes a long time to do that because he talks to all the passers by. Dad says it is fortunate he was not named Lethargy.

Mom gave Siyabonga a twenty and told her to buy us cold drinks. That’s only enough for four drinks. I told Siyabonga she could have mine, but she wouldn’t take it. I wanted to offer her a sip but it’s not nice to drink from the same can. So I didn’t. And maybe she has AIDS anyway. Mom said that to Dad when Siyabonga was sick last week.

Yesterday we saw a helicopter diving down into Hout Bay with a great bucket underneath it. Once filled, the chopper swooped back up Chapman's Peak and sloshed the water over the burning mountainside. I don't know if you can get AIDS from sharing cans.

Corné has a new mobile with a camera. She bought it with her pocket money. She takes my picture and sends it to Mom. Then she texts: "We waiting, we waiting, it's getting aggravating."

Boykie and Renier start chanting the rhyme. Now *that* is really aggravating. So Siyabonga says, "Come guys, let's find tadpoles."

She takes them to Lady Anne's Bath, which is a bird-shaped pool. She would not have known back in 1800 that soap pollutes the mountain streams. Corné says it wasn't her bath-bath, more like a swimming bath. It's too small to swim in. Today people throw coins in the bath to make a wish.

Corné says, "Where's the change from the Cokes, Siyabonga?"

The maid holds her hands, palms up, empty.

"Then you can't make a wish," says Corné. She and I stay behind, taking photos of each other on the bench.

There is a notice in the bathroom saying you should not take tadpoles home. It is cruel to animals. I'm not sure Siyabonga has read it. Come to think of it, I don't know if she can read. Mom used to write the list of chores in a book for the last maid: polish the stoep, defrost the freezer, dinner party – 14 settings. Mom doesn't do that anymore. She tells Siyabonga everything that has to be done, and then she says, "Got that?" Afterwards, Siyabonga repeats the list.

When Mom and Raphaella return, Corné says that Siyabonga took the boys to find tadpoles because they were grating on our nerves.

"That woman is just the most divine maid," says Mom.

"You're lucky. It's so difficult to find a good girl these days."

"Mine is a gem," says Mom.

## 10. The Captain's Hat

There is a board up at the entrance to the offices displaying epaulettes and hat brims that were once worn by all police officers. As these matching items ascend in rank, they have progressively more braid, stars and elaborate twirls. Pinned to a moth eaten piece of blue felt under smeared glass, they have long gathered dust. Dead beetles and silverfish are trapped behind the locked window.

Alongside each item are yellowed curling labels with 'Luitenant' and 'Kolonel' inscribed upon them. In the old South Africa, red-nosed men with beerboeps, beefy paws and names like Botha and Van der Merwe, wore these titles. That was when the SA Police was still a Force. In the new South Africa, the police are a Service. Senior officers have titles like 'Superintendent' and 'Commissioner' and names like Tshabalala and Maluka. There are also senior female officers who squeeze their ample breasts and cellulitic buttocks into tightly fitting royal blue issue.

The display under the cabinet has not been updated, though, so it is easy for a new recruit to be confused.

Whenever I run an errand for a captain from the Band, I scurry along, avoiding eye contact lest I should see a senior officer and be obliged to greet it. Panic sets in when I see epaulettes, because three weeks after my enlistment, I still can't recognise whom – but more importantly, what – I am greeting. The Band needed a flute player urgently. The annual eisteddfod was about to happen and there was no piccolo player to take the solo in *King Cotton*. I was enlisted before receiving basic training at POLCOL.

My education about Police Protocol has been gleaned in bits and pieces by listening to the gossip and speculation of the pianist and clarinettists – also new recruits, similarly unenlightened.

I thought one should not salute an officer who was not in full uniform. I understood I should 'brace up' – a gesture which had been demonstrated and resembled to my mind the leaping action one might perform were a carrot to be suddenly rammed up one's butt while simultaneously clutching one's jacket hem. The eavesdropping method of learning gives one an incomplete picture.

Yesterday, I was seated on the stairs outside the display board before a rehearsal. As I wrote my daily entry into my pocket book, a lady captain arrived in the company of an inspector. I was using my driver's license as a ruler to underline the

date – twice, as per regulations, which had been explained. My flute case was balanced on my knee. My senior officers were, it seemed, deep in conversation and I noticed that neither wore hats. I assumed it would be acceptable to greet in a respectful tone. Smiling, I acknowledged the captain first and then the inspector.

“Are you a police officer?” she asked, looking at me over the top of her gold-rimmed sunglasses as if I were a lizard’s tail she had found in her sandwich.

“Yes, Captain!” I said, still with my proud smile stuck to my lips like phutu glued to the bottom of a pot.

“So, do you not salute your senior officers?”

I leaped up – clutched my flute case, thought better of pointing out that she was not in full uniform, dropped my pen and pocket book, resisted explaining that I have not been instructed on the police protocol, let go of my driver’s license, wished her horse flies breeding in her pumpkins -- and saluted with alacrity.

“Sorry, Captain,” I said with my brightest smile.

“That’s better,” she smirked.

Later I griped to Zibu, the fat tuba player, about the indignity I had suffered.

“Oh, that one,” he said with a knowing look, “she is a highly uneducated somebody!” He cleared his throat as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. “When Logistics was out of stock, we asked her to lend us a hat for Thandiwe. She refused, on the grounds that someone would buy muthi from a sangoma and hide it in the inner hatband causing her to suffer headaches.”

It is silkworm season right now. Every seven-year-old in Johannesburg has an abundance of pale wrigglers. It would be a small matter to slip some little friends from my son’s perforated shoebox and transfer them to the captain’s hat. It hangs on a coat stand near the photocopier.

But, I am afraid to do so. I’m not afraid of discovery, nor am I afraid of impersonating a sangoma. I can’t plot my silly revenge, because should even one soft white worm suffer an untimely death on the lady captain’s well-oiled head, I might develop a rare and terrible allergy to silk.

I could, perhaps, collect their tiny black droppings...

## 11. Steinway Summer

A piano grew in my grandfather's garden last summer. Daisies sprouted through the keys, pansies at the pedals, around the seat, snapdragons. Beside it an archway entwined with crotchets that blossomed in shades of Chopin, quavers of Schubert, semis of Schumann.

Grandfather put compost on his pupils, weeded their scales, plucked syncopated snails out of arpeggios, dead-headed dropped wrists, and raked wrong notes into tidy piles. He lured the Czerny bumblebee to pollinate the prelude. Sonatas bloomed beside mazurkas in bud.

Mozart nodded in the sun. Bach unfurled tender leaves. Grandfather sprayed soapy water to keep the aphids away.

This winter he woke up in a quiet flat with a tiny balcony, big enough for a potted Clavinova that sprouts only headphones.

## 12. Spider Salad

A woman with big hair arrives at the restaurant and sidles in at the table next to us. Neo Freedom is staring at her breasts that nestle like a pair of ostrich eggs under a sweater the colour of winter grass. I stare at the spiders, grey and shimmery, that crawl all over her chest. I wonder why she does not scream, but she doesn't seem to notice them.

“Do not stare,” says my mother.

I try not to stare. It is my first time in a restaurant and I have practised eating with a knife and fork all week. My hands are slow but I'm not hungry. While the woman orders her food, a spider climbs off her sleeve and onto the tablecloth and then edges up to and onto the waiter's trousers while he writes her order in his notebook. I try not to stare, but I can't help following the spider that creeps up and down the waiter's leg.

Neo Freedom elbows me, saying, “Knock it off. That staring stuff is rude, okay?”

I watch the waiter, wait for him to flick the spider off his pants. The waiter has breasts even though he is not fat. The spider does not bother him, but I am afraid that if he walks past me, it will jump on me. I pull away when the waiter comes to take our order.

“Ease up,” says Mom.

“Chill, chill, Chickiepop,” says Neo Freedom. He pats my hand, uncurls my fingers and removes my knife and fork from my grip. To Mom he says, “Didn't she take her meds again?”

“Hush!” says Mom to Neo Freedom. I wonder why it's rude to stare at strangers but not rude to talk about your sister in the third person when she is eating for the first time in a fancy restaurant.

“What can I offer my lady today?” says the waiter to my mother. She points to the frittata on the menu because she doesn't know how to pronounce it. The waiter writes '43' on his pad, mouthing the numbers as he does so. The spider watches me from the waiter's elbow. It wears velvet feathers on its abdomen.

“And what would the young master like best of all?” he says to my brother. Neo Freedom wants the woman at the next table, but she is not on the menu. He looks at the spider lady and licks his lips. The waiter nods and winks.

“A burger and fries – well done, please – and double thick chocolate milkshake,” says Neo Freedom.

“Good choice,” says the waiter, scribbling in his notebook with his mouth still open. Then he looks at me and asks, “And what will it be for the young missie?”

I want to ask for an egg salad, but the only word that comes out is, “Spider, spider, spider...”

### 13. Nomsa's Whim

After Nomsa Dlamini matriculated, she accepted a bursary to Grey's Hospital. Mama cheered, Papa grinned at the lobola a husband would pay for a qualified nurse. Her brothers dreamed of large bags of sweets.

The tall girl packed her suitcase, bought a ticket to Pietermaritzburg and waved her family goodbye. At the first sight of blood, Nomsa fainted. Charge Sister Naidoo urged her to eat more pap.

With her first paycheque, Nomsa posed for a modelling portfolio. When a call from the agent at Black Beauty interrupted a ward round to book her, Dr. Buthelezi scowled darkly at the mobile's ring. When Nomsa abandoned a patient on a bedpan, Matron Theron suggested she find another career.

Nomsa's first appearance in *The Natal Mercury* revealed her in skimpy gym gear, bearing dumbbells and a blissful expression.

"My daughter's navel for all the world to see?" bellowed Papa when a smirking neighbour brought him the paper.

The following edition displayed Nomsa waving a wand of celery salaciously across her lips.

"What fly-by-night foolishness is this?" wept Mama. "Can't you be a respectable nurse?"

When her face adorned the front cover of *Pace*, then *Bona* and later *True Love* and *Fair Lady*, Mama sniffed. Papa beamed.

## 14. Zebra Teeth

Two weeks before Petronella's birthday, Pa, who never read *The Star*, began scanning the classified section.

"We can't afford lessons," snapped Ma.

Pa dialled a number, said he'd teach her himself.

Whatever he wanted was always gone already or too expensive. Ma bit her nails. Our butchery in Mogale City was doing badly.

"Petronella might like a canary..." suggested Ma.

Pa continued his mysterious quest.

"... She needs another orthodontic plate."

Pa called Silas and Josiah to the bakkie one afternoon.

"Shouldn't you hire professional transportation?" asked Ma. "Those things are heavy!"

We trekked over a bumpy road near Potchefstroom. We arrived at a farmhouse, where a zebra skin lay underneath the jade velour couch with wagon-wheel armrests. Pa's rough hands played a jolly rendition of *Jan Pierewiet*, then the tender *Sarie Marais*. We drank bittersweet moerkoffie with the farmer. Pa haggled another hundred off the price before we heaved the piano onto the bakkie. Josiah strapped it firmly against the cab with thick rope and tight knots.

"Hold tight," shouted Pa. The bakkie hit a donga in the dark. The lid flew open. As the piano's cracked ivory teeth popped out, I wondered whether zebras ever needed braces.

## 15. Clutter

There is a large ceramic jar on the top shelf of my kitchen cupboard. The jar has been thrown on a pottery wheel. Because its sides were raised too fast, it warped in the kiln and has a slightly elliptical shape. It was a farewell gift from a student who was no better as a ceramicist than he was a pianist. His scales sounded like the jar looks. Uneven, off-balance, speeding. The stoneware has been glazed in a grey-green sludge, the colour of the pustules that erupted weekly on my student's neck. The jar contains a plethora of dead things that would cause palpitations to my next-door neighbour who runs the upmarket Feng Shui consultancy.

Nail clippers, a gift from my ex-husband, abandoned in the jar with a broken spring. Thebe coins from Botswana, no longer in use and valueless, spare Zimbabwean dollars I do not wish to see but do not discard, because I cannot bear to think of friends who have disappeared. The children's milk teeth deposited by the tooth mouse after shelling out crisp ten rand notes. Stale peppermints, business cards not asked for, a rusting safety pin on a frayed red ribbon from the school sports day I left early because it made me cry to be a single mother watching my child come last, and an almost completed course of antibiotics. These things lurk, reminders of my losses, my failures.

A student I taught badly, missed business opportunities, a trip around southern Africa that spelled the last days of a marriage, my children's blighted infancy, my half-baked mothering, my non-compliance with doctor's orders are free-floating genies haunting me as long as that jar remains. I know I should throw it out. The jar *and* all its contents. I wish I could. I cannot. While the jar remains, I hope I will become competent at something one day. I will buy a small pot of chrysanthemums to fit on top of the debris. If I water it long enough, perhaps all the clutter underneath will dissolve in time.

## 16. Epilogue for a Gun Running Son

*Hide your eyes, open your eyes, and see what Papa has brought for his baby.*

*Hide your eyes, open your mouth, and taste what Papa has bought for his baby.*

The ancients warned of the second sighting in a two-moon month. Avert your gaze, daughter; they covered my curious child eyes in a game. Now there are no sweets, and still no father, but a sliver of ice at this first sighting through the summer's steam has chilled my living bones, my blood flows with stones and potshards, soldier son of my womb and the brittle red paint flakes, peeled from your boat, flowing down the Zambezi into the sea. Hunger's lament was much kinder than this blue moon sorrow.

*Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream.*

*If you see a crocodile, don't forget to scream!*

How you loved that song when I jiggled you on my back, beside the tame spruit, on the rough dirt track. Your high hollering, my best baby, made the grandmothers grin. Your blanket is empty now, like your boat they found, reported missing. Where was the action? Did you scream, son, when they came for you. Did you remember my play-play jaws clamped your chubby legs to make you laugh when we were hungry and your father gone? The laughter stilled our stomach's rumble for a little while. From the other side, can you row my still beating heart to the middle of the river? Feed it to a beast below, so that the rest of me may join you soon.

*One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive,*

*Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, then I threw it back again.*

## 17. Kleintjie's Saint

Kleintjie September is already sitting on the rickety piano stool when Miss Marvel limps in. A smell of damp socks lingers because the pipes in the roof leaked during the long holiday. Miss Marvel throws open the windows to let in a breeze. She rests her head on the burglar guards and inhales the scent from a potted magnolia outside her window.

Kleintjie's toes don't reach the floor as she swings her feet. She is playing all the black notes from top to bottom. She curls one foot around the leg to reach the lower octaves, but wobbles, thumping both hands on the keys. Miss Marvel, who is sharpening her pencil, winces at the dissonance.

Kleintjie's music book is dog-eared and dirty. At the last lesson Miss Marvel spent five minutes wiping squashed banana off the cover. Kleintjie opens to 'Oh When the Saints'. A button has popped off her tight school uniform, her shoes almost worn through. Her nose wants blowing and her hair is wild. Miss Marvel encircles one bird-like wrist gingerly in her old fingers. She turns Kleintjie's hand over and holds it up for the child to see.

"Dur! I forgot to wash my hands." A whiff of peanut butter wafts off her breath.

"I see that," sighs Miss Marvel.

Kleintjie dashes to the cloakroom, wets her hands and ignores the soap and towel. She returns with wet smears down the sides of her uniform. The piano has been spared the worst of the playground grime.

"Did you have your lunch time pill, Kleintjie?" Miss Marvel has seen Kleintjie sign the secretary's medication register with a back-to-front K.

"Yes, Ma'am," she says, sniffing. Miss Marvel passes her a tissue. Kleintjie blows her nose, jumps from the chair and knocks over the bin beside the piano. Pencil shavings and discarded papers spray over the carpet. "Clumsy cunt," says the child under her breath. Miss Marvel should respond. She ought to say something. Anything, like Not that ugly word for my special girl. Or, no name-calling at our school. Instead she yawns loudly and pretends not to hear.

"I'll pick up every curly-whirly now, Ma'am." Kleintjie scratches at the pencil shavings that have snagged in the carpet. Miss Marvel wishes the Grade Three class

teacher refrained from telling the head teacher how much music was helping Kleintjie.

Miss Marvel should march around the classroom, stepping behind her, to pat her shoulders in tempo, saying, “Left-right-left-right.” It usually improves a wonky rhythm. Her hip is too sore and she is too old. Instead she says, “Easy girl, let’s beat the pattern now: *ta ta ta ta-ah-ah-ah-ah!*”

They tap with two fingers and sing, “Oh when the star-ar-ars begin to faw-aw-all, oh when the stars begin to fall...” But still, Kleintjie can’t play the melody in steady time.

Each time Mrs September arrives after the lesson, she chatters happily, telling Miss Marvel, “My daughter sings that song every day,” or, “She really loves her music,” or, “Kleintjie just adores you, you know?” Miss Marvel tries not to wince. She could kick herself for her aversion to the child who runs across the quad to hug her favourite teacher, bashing Miss Marvel’s breasts with her woolly mop of braids.

At the year-end tutor forum the head teacher announces the decision to keep Kleintjie September in mainstream education. Kleintjie will not be going to the remedial centre after all. The other teachers smile and nod their heads. Miss Marvel’s hip aches. She limps up the stairs singing, “Oh when the moo-oo-oon turns into bloo-oo-ood, oh when the moon turns into blood...”

## 18. Toy Shops

By day I visit toy shops.

I run my fingers over the little seats of tricycles, test them for softness, rubbing fingerprints off the shiny bells with my sleeve, and pinch the tyres for thickness. I touch Barbie dolls; pick out wedding dresses and pink plastic home appliances. I read the instructions on construction sets and model aeroplane kits. I hold packs of crayons in my hand, tubs of finger paint. At kiddie boutiques and in baby department, I test the elasticity of tiny necklines, ensuring that they stretch easily over an infant's head. I choose matching hats and sweaters, and ponder the merits of acrylic versus cotton, the durability of corduroy versus khaki. I sniff little shoes to make sure they are leather, stare at tubs of lotion, dispensers of powder, a bottle of pastel pink shampoo. But I leave empty handed.

By night I am a toy.

I run my fingers over whips and handcuffs, test for the efficiency that will rub smiles off grown men's faces. I pinch welts for added brutality, and pick up hardened fools. I choose appliances for the torture of cocks and cunts and read instructions to willing slaves – the conditions of their submissive contract. I hold dildoe fantasies in my hands, diddled minds in my stare, tubs of tiger balm, chilli paste, chocolate bodypaint. I test the resistance of buttocks to the paddle and backs to the lash. I select between the crop and the knot, leather and lace, gas mask and gag. I sniff body odour and desire with equal mistrust. I stare at naked fear and disembodied lust. But I remain empty hearted.

After work I deposit my earnings at the auto teller and read the balance. There is nearly enough to buy a little cottage in the country. A few more months and I will be ready for my own little doll.

## 19. Prescription

Tanya crouches beneath the table in the ward, hidden by a long grey cloth. She sculpts soggy pasta leftovers into the crack in the floor, a gaping hole shaped like half a heart.

Pregnant Nurse Patel wears a headscarf and mutters prayers as she knits a striped sweater in bold colours of lamb curry, mango atchar, pimento relish, tandoori fish. Each stitch is a prayer for the soul of her unborn, a pink and green watermelon growing under her white uniform.

Tomorrow night the pasta plug will have shrunk from the edge of the hole and fingernail slivers and strands of hair will have embedded in it. Tanya will drop her pills through the hole again, and will make another plug: mashed potato, mushy peas, or white bread chewed until it's pliable.

She will remove the old plug while Nurse Patel casts on cuffs. She will study the plug's half-heartedness and then will slip it into the hoary curtain where the lining has ripped.

## 20. Viola Practise

Jose's dimples had got lost among the scars and pustules that formed a waffle grid on his fat cheeks. He knelt meekly with his grandmother as she beseeched St. Jude for a miracle every morning. He endured her scrubbing his face with witch hazel each night without complaint.

When the girl who wore a diamante g-string and sat next to him in the viola section poked him in the ribs with her bow because he was pushing the tempo, he told her she was prettier than Kate Moss, and she told him he could kiss her ass.

The next morning he got up half an hour early, poured the witch hazel down the drain, set St. Jude on his brother's skateboard heading down the hill and tuned his viola with a different ear.

## 21. Waiting for the Lotto

Every Wednesday, SABC plays the lotto jingle each hour on every radio station.

“Tata ma chance, tata ma millions...”

Suzette Coetzer turns the radio down as her first class arrives outside her door. She bought a lotto ticket at the Athlone Quickshop when she filled up at the garage. It is hard to tell which will happen first - her winning the lotto or the Good Hope Remedial Centre getting the payout to which it is entitled. Both eventualities seem equally unlikely.

The class jostles to form a line at the door to the studio. Nyiko’s crutch accidentally trips Mpumi. He scrapes his knee on the ground. Suzette dons rubber gloves to wipe the wound clean. It is the last pair in the box. Mpumi bawls. There is no money left in petty cash to buy more.

“Thula, buti,” she croons, opening the bottle of antiseptic. She douses a ball of cotton wool and wipes gently around the cut. It’s possible, but unlikely that he has AIDS. Most of the children afflicted by the disease are much thinner than he is. Their small faces are drawn and pinched.

The rest of the class are taking their places and have started fiddling with the tools on their desks.

“No touching yet,” she yells. “Just wait a moment, I’ll be right with you.”

Looking up from the gravel that is stuck in Mpumi’s graze, she sees Nyiko dig his nails into the lump in front of him.

“Leave it alone, Nyiko,” she warns.

As soon as her head is bowed again, Nyiko pinches off a piece and slips it into his mouth.

Once he has a plaster on his knee, Mpumi hobbles to his desk with an exaggerated limp. The class has started late. Today they will make Mother’s Day presents. Miss Coetzer instructs them to roll out their lumps evenly.

Nyiko drools clay gravy as he rolls out his clay. His movements are slow, precise. He hasn’t been assessed, as the centre can no longer afford an occupational therapist. His fine motor co-ordination was probably compromised by a birth injury. Or perhaps a blow – or blows – to his head. She wipes his face with a towel. He wrinkles his nose, complains.

At the next table, the rolling pin thunks over the edge of Siphó's clay pat. On the radio the Soweto String Quartet plays "Zebra Crossing" on Classic Fm. It is one of the standards played by the station. She likes the children to hear classical music. Usually it calms them.

Today the children wriggle and fidget more than usual. Sarah bumps the table, Nyiko grumbles at her.

"Sarah, Nyiko, quit it," she says over her shoulder.

"He started it."

"Enough now. Have you cut your bird out yet, Sarah?"

Sarah holds the cut out up for her teacher's inspection. It is too thin. The shape stretches. The angry girl flings it down on the board.

"Okay, Sarah, don't fret, just start again."

The girl gathers up the clay into a ball and starts rolling again.

"Is that smooth enough yet?" Miss Coetzer asks Siphó.

Siphó adjusts heavy spectacles, squints at the rolled out lump, pats it. He squats so that his chin rests upon the desk, the clay level with his eyes.

"Yes, Miss."

"Good," says Miss Coetzer as she hands him a cookie cutter in the shape of a bird. She wipes away the crumbs of clay sticking to his moist chin. He presses the shape out of the cookie cutter and lifts the surrounding clay away from it.

"Inyoni!" he squeals with enthusiasm

"What is the English word for 'inyoni', Siphó?" the teacher asks.

"Bird?"

"Right," Miss Coetzer smiles. This is a breakthrough.

Siphó flaps with lumbering wings around the class, sends Mpumi's rolling pin spinning, which knocks Nyiko's pinch pot to the ground. Ten months ago she applied for funding from Uthingo. There is still no confirmation from them. She has made endless calls to disinterested clerks.

"Mampara! Big clumsy fool!" Mpumi shouts, kicking Siphó with his good leg.

Siphó retreats, cowering under the corner table. His teacher crawls in beside him, wraps her arms around the keening boy. The grant the centre receives from the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund barely covers the running costs. Very few parents can afford the fees.

“Settle, boykie, settle down.” Siphó’s heart hammers like a trapped bird under his ribcage. She holds him and watches Nyiko putting clay in his mouth again. Last week the Sunday Times’ headlines announced disheartening news, “Lotto Millions Disappear”. In the careers section there were posts advertised for remedial teachers in the United Arab Emirates.

“Nyiko!” she calls, “Don’t do that.”

The following week the headlines railed at the loss of South African teachers to British schools.

“Clay is not for eating. Spit it out.”

Nyiko swallows, grinning. Her first thought is that he will get worms. Her second is that he probably already has them.

There is a change of clothes folded neatly in the boot of her car. She hopes she will look suitably chic and qualified for the job interview this afternoon. Underneath the table she does not feel sophisticated or confident rocking a frightened boy in her arms. If only she could shower, could rinse the smell of sadness from her.

The health inspector of the Western Cape will close the centre if an assistant is not appointed by next semester. Siphó quiets. He crawls from the nest of her arms. She climbs out from under the table. Stiff. She brushes clay dust from her knees and goes to inspect the birds the children have been working on.

“Nice work, Mpumi... Make a little hole for the hanging thread now, Nyiko... Nice feather decoration, Sarah, you tried hard today.”

Just before the class ends, the radio jingle plays again. “Tata ma chance, tata ma millions...”

Suzette Coetzer stares at the glossy leaflet she received from the educational recruitment agency. In the foreground is a palm tree.

A child joins the voice on the radio, chanting, “Your license to dream.”

Behind it is a minaret.

**22. The McFlurry's Revenge at the Corner of Jan Smuts and HF Verwoerd**

Because I do not attend to carrots, or spatulas and frying eggs, to opening post and polishing shoes, the community of the neglected gains disenfranchised ground, waits in silent discontent, unacknowledged by the important clock.

Because I do not return a friend's call, prepare too hastily for an ill-timed assignment, skate through meetings with too little information, researched too late, forgotten too quickly, I lose my precious fountain pen, my father's gift.

Because I sleep too little, drive too far, hijacked by institutionalised agendas, neglect to smile, or breathe, or record my dreams, the sticky caramel spoon in the McFlurry gets my better attention when I should be slowing for a stationary vehicle waiting to turn.

### 23. The Virtue of the Potted Fern

It's not easy to organise a bookshelf that's been moved from the guest room to your bedroom because your South African relatives are coming to stay. Your skoonma (mother-in-law) is allergic to house dust mite. (The next entry in *Die Suid-Afrikaanse Skool Woordeboek* is 'skoonmaak' – to clean.)

You should get a maid, is what she always says.

Prepare to be ruthless. You're working in the dark. And you write the rules for this activity yourself. Like the rules for entertaining foreign in-laws, they do not exist.

Keep *The Complete I-Ching* (this is fallacious – the nature of the oracle is open-ended) away from *Children Are From Heaven* (they're not). Do not mix *Healing Back Pain* with *The Story of O* (and do not – under any circumstances – try this in your own home).

Similarly, discourage contact between *City of Djinn*s and *Learn to Speak Zulu* (the African and the Indian were never happy bedfellows).

Preferably, set *The Courage to Be Rich* apart from *Music in the Classic Period* (Beethoven perceives that Suze Orman has a tin ear) and specifically, separate *The Wizard of Oz* from both *The Complete South African Health Guide* (references to tinnitus offend the tin man) and *The Kruger National Park* (this bothers the lion).

If you must, group *Conducting the Elementary School Choir* with *The Satanic Verses* and *The 30-Day Fat Burner Diet* with *Good-Bye to Guilt*. (A modicum of tolerance may be temporarily exhibited.) In contrast, whilst it may appear logical to set *The New Oxford English Dictionary* beside *Noah Webster*, an hour of bickering will promptly disabuse you of the notion of their compatibility.

Block your ears when you throw together *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*, *A Pacifist's War* and Lin Yutang's *The Importance of Understanding*. Disregard the howls of protest that emerge when you combine John Grisham's *Bleachers* with J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*.

Experiment with different combinations. Nothing is permanent. However, multiple failed attempts to obtain satisfactory resolution should point you towards the monthly charity book sale held by The Deaf Education Center. They will not be troubled by the raucous clamour, the untuned voices. Be practical. Persuade them to take the bookshelf too.

A potted fern beside your bed will prove a significantly quieter option.

Ignore peculiar looks when, walking around Abraham Lincoln, plant tucked under your arm, you seat yourself on a public bench. Overlook stranger's stares. Now, peruse the ultimate in erotic literature.

Open gently the dusty green leaves.

Decode the delicately furred spine; consult the star signs in each powdered whorl; translate the love letter tangled in the maidenhair.

Finger each fiddlehead with a tender touch; ponder its humble virtue.

## 24. Loaves and Fishes

I learned about the wetlands of the Cape in Standard Three Geography:

*Mention of Zandvlei can be found in Dutch documents as early as Jan van Riebeeck and Simon van der Stel. The original name was Zand Vallei, and documents mention a pan of water that dried up seasonally leaving a huge sand valley, hence the Dutch words Zand Vallei.*

*Rivers flowing from the southern end of the Table Mountain range feed this estuarine dam. Cleansing winter storms open the sand bank annually and the dam flows into False Bay at Muizenberg beach. When the sand bank closes again, fresh salt water and marine life are drawn back into the dam.*

White families picnic there in the howling summer wind on New Year's Day. Around the fire, men laugh. Dad spatters water over flare-ups under the grid. Trains roar past bursting with revelling Coloured men, returning from the Coon Carnival. It seems they ignored the sign erected at Cape Town Station by the Women's Temperance Movement. WINE IS A MOCKER... STRONG DRINK IS RAGING!

Ants crawl through my swimming costume, nipping me in the crease between my leg and buttock. Braai smoke and beer breath wrinkle my nose. Boys on windsurfers glide and bounce over the murky water.

"I told you to pack your sunhat, Kathleen!"

The glare of the sun is unpleasant, but direct – blindingly so – unlike the grudging undercurrent to every sweet female conversation that is vague, indefinite and formless. I still feel car sick from the diesel fumes that leak into the back of the station wagon. Like the wind and the smoke, nausea is definite. One might complain about it, not that it is prudent to do so.

"Isn't this fun?" asks the minister's wife loudly.

"Another perfect day in paradise!" Jenny agrees.

Her scowl melts into a beatific smile. My mother, who is slicing bread rolls, clenches her teeth in what must pass for happy concurrence.

Jenny is my Sunday School teacher. She says we must love the Lord. Her barelegged baby moans on the itchy rug. I had hauled the ancient woollen blanket out the laundry cupboard into the Peugeot, hating the feel of it against my inner arms. It smells mouldy, and snagged in the weave, are dried leaves that prickle. The baby pushes himself upright in indignation and waddles toward the grass. A strip of fringe

is tangled in his podgy toes and he falls. He cries, trying indignantly to free his foot from the nasty blanket.

Jenny is spreading the bread rolls. Her hands glisten with melting butter. Chunks of white flakes fall off the crust and scatter at her feet. I wonder if that is what manna must have looked like? No one picks up the toddler.

“Go on, get him,” my mother orders, pointing the bread knife at me. It’s too hot to carry this drooler around, but I pick him up reluctantly. As I lift him, he lurches arms outstretched toward his mother. I nearly lose my balance and squeeze him tighter. He yells louder.

“Well, play with him, can’t you?” Mum’s tone is clipped.

“Be a good girl, now Kathleen,” says the minister’s wife who chops the cucumber.

I take the baby, fat and heavy to the playground on the far side of the lavatory block. He won’t walk on the burning stony ground and sinks down on his plump nappy sobbing. I walk away, calling his name, hoping he’ll follow. I no longer feel any sympathy towards the baby but neither do I want a clout from Mum. I want to dump him, like Moses, in the basket and leave him in the waterweed.

I haul him up and trudge to the infant swings. It’s not easy to raise him over the safety bar. He wriggles and squirms.

“This is supposed to be fun, dammit baby,” I shout at him, try to tip him into the seat. He thrusts out rigid legs and kicks it away. The thick chains attached to the seat twist and lurch. I try to leap out of the return path but it clunks painfully into my ribs.

I return with the baby, angry and sore. My mother is ashamed of me.

“Doesn’t Jesus’ little helper have a smiley face?” asks the minister’s wife.

I escape to the water’s edge where grey green weed floats, lapping against the muddy sand. My toes are in the sludgy water. Through my tears I see a soggy hot dog roll bobbing bloated on the waves.

It is not a roll. It is a dead fish.

## 25. Eating for Two

Phumla drove her BMW down a muddy track through the Valley of a Thousand Hills, past the clay-and-thatch huts and flea-ridden mutts, to the bottle store, owned by her parents in the tiny village of Ixopo.

After hearing the good news of a future grandchild, Phumla's mother ululated with joy, "Now you will be a real woman, my child!"

Then came the aunts' advice:

"Never eat guinea fowl, or the infant will be born with a long flat head."

"Keep away from rabbit too," said Ma Thembu, the midwife, gesturing elongated ears with her bony claws.

"Oh, and never tie knots in string or scarves..."

And lastly, were the warnings about hospital:

"Aye! Aye!" crowed her grandmother, "truly, babies are swapped while their mothers sleep..."

"And men participate in woman's private business..." clucked her cousin.

"Let Ma Thembu deliver the baby - here, where you were born."

"She will ensure you don't tear and bring your milk in quickly."

"Of course, Granny," she said, aiming for a patient and respectful tone of voice.

The following day, Siphon went with her to the Fairview Private Hospital, where he watched the doctor put a condom over the internal sonar probe.

"Look," said Dr. Pillay pointing to a flickering baked bean in a sand storm on the screen. "Your baby is eight weeks old and 15mm long,"

"Everything looks healthy, doc?" asked Siphon.

"Perfectly!" said the doctor. Siphon gave him a high five.

That night, they celebrated the good news at Durban's premier restaurant, AfriquExotique.

"Tonight's specials," said the tuxedoed waiter, "include fillet of giraffe served in port wine sauce, python cutlets glazed in apricot and braised gemsbok..."

"I'll have the cutlets, thank you," said Phumla, casting aside the old wives' nonsense.

Siphon said, "I'll have the giraffe, please."

“This snake tastes much like chicken,” said Phumla when her meal was half eaten.

“Grandma would have a fit if she could see me now...”

Some 30 weeks later, Phumla gave birth at the Fairview Maternity Home without a single complication under bright lights and clinical efficiency. Dr. Pillay handed Siphso the clamp and told him to cut the cord once it had stopped pulsating. While a nurse washed and weighed the baby, another helped Phumla ease her feet out of the stirrups.

A moment later, Siphso carried their faultless son to Phumla’s breast. The baby opened his sweet pink lips and wrapped around his mother’s nipple a perfectly forked tongue.

## 26. Dusters

Jack has a magic yellow freedom suit that gives him psychic powers. His mother says it's just pyjamas. One morning he whirled his Weetabix around his plate until it disintegrated. While slurping the soggy biscuit, he made a grey parrot with red tail feathers out of plasticine. When he came home from nursery a neighbour's African Grey -- who had escaped from its cage -- was perched on his bedroom windowsill waiting to be let in.

Another morning at breakfast, he crafted a bus from the red modelling clay. Parp, parp! His bus hooted as it chugged around the Weetabix mush that had slopped out the bowl. Parp, parp! It ground to a halt in the traffic at the edge of the breakfast table. Jack took a paring knife and sheared off the front of the bus at a peculiar angle, sliced its roof open at the midline, and flicked away a wheel. He rolled slivers of black plasticine into a disembodied foot, an arm, a headless torso.

When the floor jolted and the windows shook and a smell of burning filled the air, Jack smirked as if to say to his mother, pyjamas or magic yellow freedom suit?

Six months afterwards he moulded a bottle-nosed whale the colour of dark minerals. When his mother turned the telly on, the news anchor announced the rescue effort underway in the Thames. When his mother turned the telly off, she said it was time to buy new pyjamas.

The next day Jack made two plasticine people: the plasticine boy wore a yellow freedom suit and an expression of sorrowful knowing. The plasticine mother's hair hung straight and brown down her back. Her dress, the colour of oatmeal, revealed a pregnant bump. While Jack was at school, his mother used a home test kit, then took out her scissors and snipped the magic yellow freedom suit into dusters.

## 27. Late

“Stop!” I yell, flinging my hands from the keyboard in the middle of a phrase. It is an empty theatrical gesture – like the Christmas symbols belonging to the northern hemisphere that decorate this African classroom in the heat of summer.

It is an empty gesture because I don’t feel the irritation that I’m expressing in an effort to break through my student’s distractedness.

An electric storm is gathering and the fake shaving cream snow, which has been spray-painted onto the windows for the year-end party, intensifies the gathering gloom. Sizwe, who is usually alert, is silent and withdrawn today.

“Switch on the light, Sizwe, perhaps you’ll see the music better.” The rain has come very late this year and although we are well into summer, the keys of the piano are heavy with dust. I wipe my handkerchief over them while my pupil trudges across the room to flick the switch.

The students have painted stylised holly and ivy bouquets on butcher paper and a giant cardboard Father Christmas, which will form the backdrop of the stage. It is slumped behind the piano, but a ghoulish grin protrudes over the top of the instrument. I recommence the opening chords of the introduction, but Sizwe enters a measure before the cadence.

“That was too early,” I say. Sizwe trails off with a dejected look. His flute sags on his shoulder. It is the third time he has missed a simple entry.

“Once more?” I ask.

He nods, lifts his instrument and polishes the mouthpiece with his cuff.

Sizwe is 17, talented and a sponsored student. His parents are semi-literate casual labourers who live in the Diepsloot squatter camp. The year-end recital is a week away. Our first rehearsal with piano accompaniment is going particularly badly.

“Why are you forgetting the eighth-note rest, Sizwe?” The smell of rain blows through the classroom.

My student lives in a tiny shack. He has five siblings and elderly grandparents who share the accommodation. When he practises, the neighbours scream, “O a rasa!” You make noise.

During term, he leaves the flute in a locker at school and practises after classes. The arrangement is not ideal, as he is often locked out of the classroom that I have arranged for his use. The cleaner who is always eager to leave the premises early

was promised a nice Christmas box in exchange for his co-operation, but even the pre-festive offerings of Old Brown don't always do the trick.

“Were you unable to practise?”

He nods, with a barely audible, “I practised,” but looks mournful. I expect him to be the highlight of the concert. I've invited the some members from the executive committee from the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund to hear him. I hope he might be awarded a scholarship to the School of Music at the University of the Witwatersrand.

“I don't understand. You've been playing so well...” A sudden gust of wind heralds the first heavy drops of rain and the music flutters off both our stands. I stretch out to slam the window and ask, “What's up, buddy?” He shakes his head and directs me to the Allegro.

“Ja fine,” I say, “count carefully... enter on the off beat, ok?”

He nods.

We try once more. His sound is rich and round, his intonation perfect. I glance up at him and stumble when I notice his eyes glistening. The tricky spot approaches, I count aloud, “One-and two-and ONE... too LATE!” I lose my temper and shout, “You're late, dammit, you're late again!”

Late!

Oh my God...

Awareness dawns. I feel sick to my stomach. ‘Late’ is the euphemism used locally to convey death. I shudder.

“Is this about Thandi?”

At the mention of his classmate's name, tears form in his eyes. Thandi, an HIV-infected student, left school a month ago. We buried her in the hard earth at Avalon over the weekend.

“Were you...” I hesitate, struggling for the correct word, “close?”

He nods. A flash of lightning reflects along the length of his flute. The lights trip.

“How close?”

He tucks his flute under his arm and loops his fingers together, in the unmistakable gesture of copulation.

I thump my elbows down on the keys, clutch my head in my hands, and groan aloud. I take his flute and lay it on top of the piano, cradling his head against my chest. I run my fingers along the grooves of his fashionable corn stalks. Rain thrashes

against the window that doesn't close properly. The snow on the inside weeps milky trails and pools on the dusty ledge below.

I wonder, fleetingly, if HIV can be contracted through tears. I have no open lesions through which the virus might pass, just a hole in my heart the size of a teenager's coffin.

## 28. My Mother's Diary

*The view from up here is incredible and makes me feel again.*

This entry in my mother's diary is dated 26<sup>th</sup> May 1970. The pages are brittle and her script is girlish and square. She had to leave school in Standard Eight, but she continued reading books she borrowed from the library. These backward-leaning blocks of cryptic print are a tenuous link to the time of which she wouldn't speak.

Or couldn't.

*The straight ridge of Table Mountain, when seen from the highest point of the Lion's Head, is not as straight as when viewed from afar. The Castle, with its suffering ghosts, the rail tracks leading north to where my heart is, and the glittering vastness of False Bay somehow diminishes my troubles. Peculiarly, this vista even seems to diminish the troubles of this aching and wicked land.*

From the date of the entry, I know this is when she met Koos secretly. Yet there is no mention of him – only oblique references to the pickled fish that was his favourite food, which she had packed in the picnic basket. That detail would keep the memory alive for her, but would protect them both when the security police came to call on moonless nights.

*A sugarbird alighted on a pincushion bloom, as I set out the snoek and boontjieslaai on enamel picnic plates. It seemed to gloat at the ease of its existence – the cheeky thing – as if to say, "Look how easily I am sustained here on the mountain... Come an join me; come, come!"*

At the time, I was ten, mortified by my enormous breasts, and I didn't know of the existence of my mother's lover. The boys at Liesbeeck Senior Primary called me 'Tits Tessa'. They taunted me with lewd offers.

"I'll give you fifty cents if you take off your top," said Jaap, waving a shiny coin at me.

"One Rand if you take of your skirt and panties too..." said Smous.

I ran home, blushing and crying. My mother sat motionless, staring into space. I couldn't tell her what the naughty boys had said.

*If the mountain has witnessed atrocities and endured, it will surely witness more and endure a little longer. I can survive this too, like my mother did, and my grandmother too. Like her mother and grandmother as well. The lure of black female skin to a white man's dick is nothing new.*

The first time the police arrived, I pissed myself. After they'd gone I went to my mother's room to get fresh sheets. She lay in a huddle, sobbing under her blanket. I crawled into bed with her. She was wet. It wasn't just tears, but I didn't know it then. I fell asleep, curled against her, and saw the blood the next day when she washed our sheets and nighties in the zinc basin that stood in the back yard.

*I hope they will spare my Tess...*

The police came regularly, looking for Koos. I always wet myself. One night they pulled me out of bed. The sergeant had big white hands. He laughed at me with my wet nightie.

"Such a big girl," he leered, fondling my breasts, "but still you wet your bed, hey? Ag sies!"

He tweaked my nipples. I yelped.

"Will you speak when I take your daughter? Will you?"

"Leave the kid alone," said the captain flipping through my mother's diary. "You fixed the bitch?"

"Ja, Kaptein."

*... but I am afraid they probably will not, or at least not for much longer. The poor child has inherited my chest prematurely. I wish I felt equipped to teach her better about being a woman. My heart is too bitter.*

The next day, my mother sent me with a neighbour on the train to my grandmother in Beaufort Wes. My grandmother told me a month later that my mother was in jail.

There is one more page to this diary that miraculously escaped confiscation. The earlier and later ones all disappeared. I can read no longer. I vomit suddenly and violently into the toilet and wonder whether memories exhumed too rapidly can kill a person. Afterwards, as I hold my mother's ashes in a plain cardboard box, I start to feel a little calmer. I have needed a clue about where to scatter them. I call a taxi, tuck my mother's diary into my backpack and direct the cab driver up the windy street, to where the start of the footpath up Lion's Head.

A little way up the path, a sugarbird darts from a protea bloom. From the top of mountain, I see the castle languishing below, the rail tracks heading north and the vista of False Bay spread beyond.

*I want to capture the scenery from up here. It is just a matter of time before I shall disappear, either into my grave – which would be a blessed relief – or into a*

*dank airless cell. I want to ingrain every strand of fynbos, to outline each cloud of the Table Cloth draping the mountain into my memory forever, to engrave the bright yellow of the sugarbird's long tail. Perhaps if I can hold onto the mountain to keep me sustained in the dark night that will surely come, I shall be a useful – if not actually a good – mother to Tess.*

I, too, begin to feel again as I release my mother's ashes to the wind. She joins the sugarbird at last.

Her story can now be told.

## 29. The Piccolo Blues

*Candide*. By Leonard Bernstein.

The flute part is fast. My fingers are slow. Too much vodka last night. My fingers are usually fast. This morning they are dull. The piccolo player shrieks in my ear. My head hurts. I count the rest bars, and catch the solo entry. I play the rapid quavers. Correct, but loudly. A shadow passes over the music stand. The baton drops.

“Don’t you see the big piano over there?”

Captain Janse is screaming. At me. What’s the piano got to do with this? I look at the piano, unopened. Then I translate. He means *piano*. Italian musical term for ‘softly’. My head clears. Fast.

“From the double bar.”

A shadow passes over the music stand once more. Distracting. I turn to the window. The curtains have been stolen. Inspector Malan is the size of a piano. He waves his wallet. At me. I owe him R50. Last night’s binge. I count the bars until my entry. Eight-and, seven-and, six-and...

“Concentrate!” Captain Janse looks at me looking out the window. He can’t see Inspector Malan. The bar manager from the Police Canteen runs his finger slowly across his throat. Universal sign language every debtor understands. Sweat beads on my upper lip. Two-and breathe-in...

“Flute!”

I’m a bar early.

“You just don’t get it, do you?”

Or a bar too late.

### 30. Treasure Upon Earth

“And it’s number five, yes, we’re staying alive.”

Your first lucky number tumbles down the Perspex chute on the small screen, but you’re not sure. Is it a man in a tuxedo winking at you? Or is it the angel talking, the one whose teeth glint gold? You wonder if he breathed on that jumbling tumbling box to make your little yellow ball with the number five jump down the chute, just to give you a thrill, to play with you, trick you, give you a foretaste of things to come. They say that in the last days you’ll dement with this illness. You’ll see things, hear voices, bat away phantoms.

The man said five. You chose that number for the children, birthed, unready, unwilling. But where are they now? Somebody said they weren’t well.

You can’t see so very well either anymore. Your sight is going and there’s no money for spectacles. There isn’t even money for your TV license. The TV you bought was repossessed, but when the sheriff came to fetch the TV, he didn’t stop the license, so you still get the renewal notices, the warnings, with interest.

“Next we have a nine; you’re in your prime.”

This TV set came from Siphon after the sheriff repossessed the last one. Siphon, your first-born, whose name meant ‘gift’, who brought the curse home, not even 30, not married, still a boy. He was a rogue when he was young, when he was well. You never knew where he was or what he was up to. This TV he gave you, before he got so thin and died, is stolen property, but what is a sick woman supposed to do? You can’t even get to the bathroom by yourself any more.

You chose nine for the abortions you performed for young girls. The blood on your hands can’t be washed away. Maybe this isn’t real, this bouncing of little balls on the TV screen. Nine times you gave them herbs, you pummelled their tight little bellies, bulging slightly. Now nine demons dance on your bed, mocking your lesions, promising you maggots in your last day’s wounds.

“And it’s 49; so you’re just doing fine!”

You’re not 49 anymore, but you’re not sure how old you are either. You look ancient in the sliver of mirror you keep beside your mattress. You’re a skeleton that worries about your unpaid TV license and when the nice man with the honest face says onscreen, “Pay your TV license, it’s the right thing to do,” you wince, you wish you could. You wish he’d come over to your humble home, come over in his smart

blue shirt, so you could show him where the weather comes in through the rain-rusted roof and the empty breadbin and while you explain to him that you would pay it if you could, he would hold your hot hand, pat it and say, “Don’t worry, Gogo, don’t worry about a thing.” You’d tell him that thugs stole your pension again and your legs don’t work too well, and he’d stroke your hot hand and say, “Hawu! Gogo, you are suffering too much.” He said 49, you think, but the numbers churn and boil and you can’t hear so very well.

“Lucky seven, God’s in His heaven,” and you know you’re going soon to glory land, leaving your house with the peeling seven. Siphon painted it on the wall, painted flowers and leaves curling over the number, so you’d remember things of beauty. The social worker asked if you could go to Hospice with them, but you’re not sick. You’re waiting for the seven seals to burst open from below the ground of this tiny hut. The seven angels that will bear you to find again your five babies, your children who walked this road before you, this unstoppable road to the grave.

“It’s the special one. Are you having fun?”

You chose this one for you, left behind, alone now. The children are gone to the place beyond, where neither moth nor mammon doth corrupt. They soldier on in the godless hereafter, where disease and landmines, policemen with hard hats and famine collected the ancestors. You would have visited their graves if your withered limbs could have taken you there.

The last number – it’s also yours, but it’s come too late. Your number is up and now you’re slipping down the chute too.

### 31. **Fist Mountain**

The road from Limpopo Province is straight and empty on a Sunday morning. The yellow police van rattles through the dusty dry plains of the Bafokeng platinum fields northeast of Pretoria. Our unit, the Police Band, Soweto, is heading to Pholokwane for the annual cultural eisteddfod of the South African Police Services.

Visible in the far distance are a few huts scattered at the base of a rocky outcrop. Each of my colleagues has a different name for the hill.

“Do you see that mountain?” asks Inspector Dube.

“Mountain?”

“Over there,” he jerks his head toward it.

It doesn't look like a mountain. I grew up with real mountains in Cape Town – dangerous ones. Our house overlooks the back of Table Mountain, a natural monument that commands photographers from around the world. It is the home of Devil's Peak and Skeleton Gorge where three boys at our school fell to their death on a Boy Scout trip. From the top of our street, the Hottentot's Holland range is visible. They are snow-capped in winter. A friend's brother died from hypothermia while hiking in a storm.

I point and say, “I see a hill.” Dube slaps my hand away.

“What? Why?” I ask, staring at him at my finger that he walloped.

He raises a fist in front of my face in a sudden and startling gesture. I wonder which tribal taboo of the tall Ndebele I have unwittingly violated.

“You must never!” he says, eyes wide and white in his dark face. “That place, we say Ntaba Kayikhonjwa. In English, Mountain-of-No-Pointing because when you speak its name, your face changes, your body shakes. You must never point that side; only show your fist to indicate direction. Otherwise, a terrible thing will happen.”

His words bubble over with a theatrical eye-rolling, lip-wobbling shudder. Everybody in the van laughs heartily. I think they are laughing at me because I am gullible and Dube has just told a preposterous story which I am compelled to believe. Maybe they are laughing because terrifying and mysterious things happen here anyway and are made more bearable with laughter. Children have been found dead, with body parts missing.

“In our culture,” says Sergeant Mboweni, “we call it Fist Mountain. You must not stare at that mountain, because if you do, the ancestors will strike you with the fist.”

Mboweni slams a fist into his flattened palm, “Or they hit the one you love.”

I am astonished. Again, they laugh.

“You do not believe such a thing?”

“I believe, Sergeant, but how do the villagers that live there avoid gazing upwards? How is it possible?”

“No! Is not the really story,” interrupts Constable Mokwoena, who comes from the region. I can’t easily understand his thick accent. “Don’t listen the wrong story. The mountain, we call Modimolle. My grandmother tells me the really story as I’m stilly young. When the father of my grandfather run from the Impis of Shaka Zulu, they hide here.”

Mokwoena points out the back window at the hill receding in the distance.

“The mountain protect the people, so people name mountain, ‘Modimolle’, meaning ‘Blessing of the God’.”

Three days later, we travel back to Johannesburg and my colleagues are asleep in the van. As we pass Fist Mountain, I cannot look away. I stare, riveted. I want to know more about this strange place. I need to understand the ancient beliefs.

I want to believe now, because Merilyn is in hospital in renal failure. My mother-in-law saw fairies when she was a child, and collects miniatures in porcelain and pewter. She plants impatiens in the garden for them. Or used to before she got ill.

“They were swathed in bands of colour,” she said, when I sat at her bedside and asked her to tell me the story again. “Such pretty colours too – lilac and mauve, yellow and gold.”

“How old were you when you saw them, Mum?” I asked. Her dying has been so slow and painful.

“Oh, I’m sure I was five. Mary was four.”

“What do fairies do?” I hate watching her, yellow and bloated, battling for breath.

“They hovered over our heads and waved to us. You know, people still laugh at me when I tell them this, they think I’m joking.”

“But you aren’t.”

“No, I saw those fairies.”

If I stare at the mountain, perhaps the fairies (who are surely relations of the ancestors) will fetch her. I will them to call her to the other side. If I point at Fist Mountain, might I persuade the deities that a cross-cultural exchange would be a fair deal?

The road to Limpopo Province is straight and empty on a Sunday morning. It is three weeks since the trip with the band, and I drive alone.

I stop next to a wire fence that keeps cows from wandering onto the road. I remove a china fairy from my bag and place her beside the creosoted post, pointing her serene gaze towards the jagged rock.

The fairy will remind the mountain god of my grateful thanks for opening the hands of the ancestors who took Marilyn home.

## 32. The Merry Cook

(With apologies to Magdaleen van Wyk and The Complete South African Cookbook)

*Good nutrition is the basis of good health and the old adage ‘we are what we eat’ is largely true.*

There is a strange thought simmering inside my head – floating its way up through interstitial layers of consciousness – not unlike a bay leaf stuck in air, solidified in the custard atop a bobotie.

*Croissants freeze remarkably well. A few minutes in a pre-heated oven and voila - I baked them myself before breakfast!*

When I find a lover in my mourning bed, I shall be the happy housewife. The way to a man’s heart is through his chest.

*Fruit to be frozen must be bruise- and blemish-free. Wash fruit in ice water. Dunk in boiling water, dry thoroughly and freeze immediately.*

Crystal-coated, my heart, is unrecognisable, untouchable in its icy depths. From too hot to handle to cold as death, it becomes unreachable, inalienable. Usually unlabelled and then forgotten. Prickly pears, quinces, kumquats and pomegranates all look the same at zero degrees Celsius. Until recently...

*Freeze drying and vacuum packing suffocate bacteria that threaten to rot vegetable matter.*

Thoughts are mulling again after an age of take-away thinking. I am finding my own flavour of the mouth as I pick and peel, bubble and boil. Through the defrosting compartments I scrape and sort: soup in my psyche, sauce in my soul, an ice-smooth intellect. Such a batch of surprises...

*Remove from freezer. Place on a tray at room temperature. Allow to defrost.*

The pain of thawing is really burning. Feel it and know “I am alive!” After the melting (like a chicken in a bloodied puddle, covered in cling wrap; like a new-born after a difficult birth, caul-covered) I am too tired to cry.

*If necessary, singe off down and stubble. Clean body cavity thoroughly.*

Must I either suffocate or freeze in this kitchen? I want neither. I want too much? I want to stir the cooking pots and throw in hot spices, to squeeze over-ripe fruits into roiling pots of real meat: mother-in-law’s tongue, cardamom, fresh parsley still hot from the summer sun. Not the de-boned, de-skinned, fat-free, individually-

wrapped fillets ready for freezing, but live birds bought on the street with the hawkers' bananas and peaches. Dinged and bruised but tasting in death of life-blood.

*Beat sugar and eggs together; add mustard, curry powder, borrie and cloves.*

*Drizzle over chicken pieces, mango and banana. Broil gently.*

I am tired of all the ready-made sanitised fare that has been spooned my way.

*Cooked poultry freezes well. Reheat still frozen bird at low heat to prevent drying out. Baste frequently with butter or oil.*

I shall fire my freezer and eat my husband.

### 33. Mango Chutney

“What can you see up there, Antjie?”

“Hessian sacks, old newspapers, sixty years of dust.”

“What’s hessian, Auntie Grieta?”

“Antjie, what’s hessian in American?”

“Burlap. Hey Grieta, hold the ladder still.”

“Got it!”

“Jeez. Didn’t Ouma keep a maid?”

“Yes. Her name was Precious. Ouma grumbled a lot about her. She always said she did precious little.”

“Evidently. This place is filthy. Here, take this box.”

“Got it.”

“Careful, it’s heavy.”

“Mind, Katrien. You’re in the way.”

“What else is up there?”

“Dead toasters, broken light fittings, worthless crap.”

“We’ll have to turf it all out.”

“Why, Auntie?”

“Because Ouma was a zealous hoarder, I’m a Zen Buddhist and you’re not taking junk back to Connecticut!”

“Wow, you two, check this old newspaper out! ‘Verwoerd - A Nation Mourns.’ 7th September 1966.”

“I doubt Precious’s family mourned too hard for him.”

“Who was he, Auntie Griet? Was he important?”

“You could say so. They made a play about the guy who killed him.”

“That crazy Greek?”

“Yes. I saw the show at The Baxter. His name was Tsafendas. His mother was the family’s maid.”

“Sheesh! You have to keep your eyes on the servants.”

“In America we’ve an au pair. Her name’s Frieda, from Norway. She likes the boat and Dad says she’s luscious and ...”

“Katrien! Enough.”

“Why Mom?”

“Let’s just say, ‘We had an au pair’, okay?”

“Has Frieda gone, Mom?”

“I refuse to discuss this.”

“Hey, Katrien, what’s in that box?”

“Jam, Auntie.”

“That jam is mango chutney. The label shows February 1975.”

“What’s chutney?”

“A South African tradition. You eat it with curry.”

“Ouma made it with sugar, vinegar, spices and fruit. Usually mango, but sometimes apples or apricots.”

“Can I taste it?”

“Ja, it’s good.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Relax, Antjie, it wont hurt. She might as well have a taste of her heritage...”

“Relax? I’m not rushing her to hospital at midnight with food poisoning. Just throw the whole damn lot out. Can’t she just leave the ‘African Experience’ alone this once?”

“Hey. It’s preserved, Antjie, sugar doesn’t go off.”

“You’ll be driving her to the emergency room, got that?”

“Relax, Mom. Frieda says Mom’s very uptight.”

“Shutup, Katrien. Shut the hell up.”

“Let’s taste it together. We’ll share a hospital ward if we get sick.”

“It wont open, Auntie.”

“Don’t even try Kiddo. It’s off. Pitch it in the garbage.”

“Ouma sealed it perfectly. Let me help. It’s just a wax disk. To keep it fresh.”

“Fresh after 30 years?”

“I want a taste. We’re going to try some, aren’t we, Katrien?”

“Neat! But there’s something in it, Auntie Griet.”

“Ag no. Perhaps you’d better turf it after all.”

“Auntie, is putting money in food another African tradition?”

“No...”

“There’s something in here, like a silver dollar... but gold.”

“A Kruger Rand!”

“Look, Auntie, the man’s nose is covered by a raisin.”

“Ouma never trusted the servants.”

“She could at least trust them not to steal her husband.”

### 34. Song of KwaZulu

*“Wa thint’abafazi, wa thint’imbogedo...”*

In the time of my grandmother’s grandmother, before the colourless ones came from across the sea, the people lived in great happiness. There were not many sicknesses of beasts or men, and the people were seldom hungry in a plentiful land. This, my child, is the story I was told by my mother; who heard it from her mother. Listen carefully, that we may find the rib to which you belong, and let us call on all the grandmothers to honour your song.

May his tongue be soft

His hand gentle

His sex hard

His mind alert

His temper sweet

His appetite strong

His mother kind

His seed keen

May he always remember -

You strike the woman, you strike the rock!

Every year, when the red earth shows the first green hair of the sorghum plant, the recently bleeding virgins entered the lunar display. Thus they were prepared to meet the king. In all the villages from the sea to the mountain, in the valleys and the hills, young maidens wove their hair into tight braids, they rubbed a mixture of fat and clay into their skins to soften it and make it shine. Their mothers put on the woven bands and beaded fringes they had lovingly, but laboriously prepared with their daughters throughout the preceding winter.

As they threaded beads, they chanted together a plea. With each stitch a request, the ancestors lingering in the reeds near the river watched the breeze blow the prayers over the water and they heard each woman team’s song.

The greeting of the king was what every girl longed for. From amongst the maidens, the king selected a new wife each season. The most beautiful were appointed to the bravest of warriors and chiefs. Each girl was to be opened by a man. The pain, it was said, was not severe - like grass cuts your finger, said my mother, inside your sacred place. The thought made a girl excited, said my mother. Do you not

already feel the wetness like a running nose between your legs? Yes, you do! Good. That wetness is my tears, my girl, my tears of joy and sadness. I will be happy you have become a woman, even as I am sad you will go to another clan.

My tears between your legs will prepare the way of the king, the entry of his sword. Do not be afraid, my daughter. You will be presented with a husband; you will be blessed with a child. You will find in the child, the spirit of the ancestors and you will never be alone. Pinch your nipples girl, to make them long; pinch your nipples girl to open your heart for your king.

Although now, the river's fish can no longer be eaten, the men bring AIDS and the children's bellies are fat with water over stick-thin legs. Perhaps the song will yet be heard, so that I may find my rib, and the ancestors will bring a healthy child.

Today, before I go down to the river with the other maidens from my village, my mother and I will sing the song:

May his tongue be soft

His hand gentle

His sex hard

His mind alert

His temper sweet

His appetite strong

His mother kind

His seed keen

May he always remember -

You strike the woman, you strike the rock!

### **35. Recipe For Sedition**

#### **~ The Impotence Of He-Who-Sighs**

At sundown, S'Khalo watches the white man's tractor return to the barn. Heavy clouds on the reddened horizon threaten a thunderstorm. Bees buzz forlornly in the yellow Acacias, intensifying his despair.

The swarthy Swazi cowherd passes behind S'Khalo, humming a suspicious tune. With a long strong stride, he gathers the animals into the thorny kraal then twists the wire latch. He stops in front of S'Khalo, quits his musical rendition, and, as he does each evening, sneers at the feeble fold in the old man's lap.

Once the cattle are lowing, Alpha Centauri mounts the sky, bright and hopeful. S'Khalo pretends to sleep. His youngest, prettiest wife slips out of the hut. S'Khalo groans in sorrow, stuffing his ears against the moans whispering and rising beyond.

Before dawn has turned the night with its promise, his youngest, prettiest wife returns with dew-wet feet and straw-speckled hair. He stares at her sleeping form sprawled on her sleeping mat and watches the light catch on the golden stalks nestling in her tight black curls.

At dawn, S'Khalo watches the white man's wife leave the barn. Soon the cowherd sneaks out humming a suspicious tune. S'Khalo remembers how desire once felt and curses the day he was named S'Khalo, which means, 'He-who-sighs'.

#### **~ The Luck Of He-Who-Roams**

When Zulane left the Swazi Correctional Services in Mbabane, he wanted to go where murderous husbands and avenging fathers would not find him. He wished to avoid miniature versions of his own flat nose and black eyes complaining of hunger. Most of all he wished to avoid a re-arrest for failing to pay maintenance to the numerous wives who always managed to track him down with their endless court orders.

At night, he wandered southeast through the Ezulwini Valley, crossed the border and meandered along the N2 to Hlulhuwe. By day, he lay in ditches, which he first cleared of the snakes that slept in the hot sun.

By the time he crossed the white man's farm he had been roving for ten days. The fragrance of roasting chicken assaulted him so that he could hardly stand to greet the girl who lingered over a cooking pot and the grandfather who gestured him to sit.

“Wife, bring this weary traveller beer,” he ordered.

“Is there work in town?” Zulane asked.

“The farmer needs a cowherd...”

The young girl lifted her full breasts as she placed the frothy brew beside the handsome stranger. She put a steaming plate in his hand and licked her lips.

Looking at her moist pink tongue, Zulane felt for the foil-wrapped prison issue condom in his pocket and blessed the destiny of his name. He thanked the luck of ‘He-who-roams’.

### ~ **Recipe For Sedition**

#### Ingredients

Several million HIV/AIDS positive men and women

Aging impotent husband

Swarthy Swazi cowherd

Light white farmer

Nubile Zulu maiden

Faithless white woman

One laundry

Pair of khaki shorts

One iron

One gun

#### Method:

First, reveal raw frailty of old man. Undress slowly on wedding night; rub his member until your arms are about to fall off. Scorn his impotence and say it is your constitutional right to have and to hold a working gun. Slip into the night while he pretends to sleep.

Secondly, admire musculature and prowess of swarthy boy. Look alluringly over cooking pot at his hunger and promise sweet and tender meat. At this stage, question whether Mr. Cowherd will wear a condom. If he refuses, refuse him too. Watch him battle his manly prerogative to consume his lust flesh-on-flesh. Once he concedes to wear the condom, disclose that you no longer desire him. Leave before resolution.

Thirdly, while on laundry duty the following morning, iron khaki shorts of light white man. When he enters the room, drop laundry item in surprise. Bend to

retrieve, revealing ample thighs and insufficient underwear. Engage advances. Sigh happily.

Repeat third stage as necessary for a week or two, while observing Swazi's would-be seduction of faithless white woman.

Presentation:

Decorate with drollery; serve with savvy. Let slip during post-coital pillow talk about passionate cowherd and farmer's wife.

Clean up tip:

Feign innocence when police investigate.

### 36. Everyday Corporate Gifts

Every day I sing ‘Steal away’ by Ezio. It’s from their *Black Boots on Latin* album:

*Don’t be frightened, don’t be scared*

*It happens everyday*

*You’re only lying to yourself*

*If you decide to stay*

Every day my boss wears teal eye shadow, heavily applied. It matches her two-piece suit, the couch in her office, and the substantial BMW parked in the premier bay.

*And I know that you worry*

*That he might get to know*

*So don’t tell him where you’ve been*

*Or where you’re about to go*

Every day I vacillate between running my keys along the teal paintwork, putting out my cigarette against the teal woolen suit, slashing the teal faux-suede upholstery with my nail file and slicing off her teal eyelids and plucking out her teal eyeballs.

*Just steal away, steal away from him*

*It’s only one commandment and everybody sins*

*Steal away for you to be free*

*I’ve lied for you a thousand times, now you can lie for me*

Every day I contemplate which will make the most aesthetically pleasing trophy: metallic paint flakes laminated into a magnetic fridge calendar; a bronzed cigarette stub affixed to a desk top pen holder; a box framed nail file with the company logo indented on the frame; or a key ring with body parts suspended for perpetuity in Perspex.

### **37. Sakubona Mfowethu!**

There is an empty tub of lemon balm lip-gloss in my bag, a nearly finished disposable lighter that I can't throw out because I am still grieving the loss of my cigarettes. Also, four mashed tissues filled with the tears of snorted anguish, which I cried all over Calvinia's couch all over again yesterday.

There is also the remittance advice for my registration at Wits University's "Learn to Speak Zulu". I don't know if I should throw out the dog-eared carbon copies, or keep them for the tax return I must fill out next month. I hope this time I can progress beyond the rudiments of Sakubona, Mfowethu! "Greetings, my brother!"

There is a card from Samuel Sandwick, the estate agent who asked about taking music lessons, although he hasn't called, and I hope he never will – because he doesn't want to play scales and arpeggios. If he can't get the sole mandate to sell our house, he wants, at least, to ball my husband, the classical guitar teacher.

There are directions scribbled on the back of an envelope to my colleague's home. We travelled together to the Regina Mundi Cathedral, in Soweto, to hold candles at the memorial service for AIDS orphans. While the chaplain read, "And Jesus said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me.'" I wept for my recurrent miscarriages, for the sleepless nights and painful injections, the expensive infertility treatments that end in livery chunks flushed down the toilet.

There is the pamphlet containing the nutritional facts of each McDonalds food item available in every outlet throughout South Africa. It pains me to know that there are 1,833.93 kJ in the Super Size Fries I consumed after my last visit to the dietician. I wish I hadn't ordered the McFlurry with Oreos.

There are the government's free-issue condoms, for which I paid five bucks to the beggar at the traffic light. Suppurating boils covered his face. When I "Sakubona-ed" him, the boil in the corner of his mouth oozed as he grinned. Feeling nauseous, I dropped the change from Ronald McDonald, gingerly into his hand. I didn't know how to tell him in Zulu that I don't want condoms. And I don't want a man either. It occurred to me that I also did not want to think about where else those boils must appear on his body, but I couldn't help myself. I heaved the fries into a garbage can as soon as I could safely stop.

There is the leaflet for a miracle-working craniosacral therapist, which I picked up at the manicurist after my French nail add-ons had set.

*“Jubilate’s gentle hands-on technique assures a deep-healing process whereby every cell in the body expresses a rhythmic movement which is fundamental to life, curing multiple deep-seated traumas...”*

This I will keep. I will not it throw away. For surely now, I will get pregnant, Calvinia will be out of a job, world peace is imminent, and HIV/AIDS will be a distant blimp on yesterday’s horizon?

Jubilate Deo!

### 38. Oprah's Girl

Poplap, said my mom patting the couch next to her, one sober morning before my birthday. Ouma's present had arrived early and I sat on the floor watching Oprah, while I dressed my First Love in the hat and booties of the same hideous mauve that Ouma had used to knit my birthday jersey. Lilac, I'd said to Ouma, lilac is the in colour. But I smiled anyway and said, Thanks Ouma, that's terrible nice. I wished I was Oprah's girl.

Poplap, said my mom, prodding me in the backside with her bony toes, You're eleven tomorrow and you're going to be a woman soon, when the moon shines full, even if you still want to play with dolls. That's oraait, she said, just look after your virginity. You can't buy another if you lose it. And she bought me tampons wrapped in shocking pink plastic for my birthday present. One fell from my purse at the movies and rolled under the seat. It looked like a giant sweet, too big for sucking.

When I complained, she said I was lucky because she'd had to use pads as fat as rolled socks that looped into a gauze belt which stuck out your skirt if your blouse was too short, and before that, Ouma had to sew her own cloth lappies that hung on the wash line for all to see.

But I cried and cried in the toilet at school because I pushed and pushed, but I couldn't get the tampon in, so Desiree told Meisie who told Mieta who told Miss van der Molen, who passed me a neat little package under the door. It folded open with wings and glue strips that stuck to my panties and my pubes, but I didn't complain.

### 39. Terror Hot

My best friend Ziyah tells me she is moving to Terror Hot, a place in Indiana, her husband's home town. She's resigned her job as records keeper in the archives at *Pretoria News*. Don't you mean Terre Haute? It's what I said, she says. I say oh, it sounds bad the way you say it. America's a dangerous place, she says. They do not love Muslims there.

I am in the hospital. The doctor shows me to the ward.

Ziyah is a dissident, she says. She refuses to wear a burkah, but she doesn't want to leave home either. Why did you marry an American then, I ask? I posed at her wedding, a western wedding, wearing a bridesmaid gown of lilac chiffon. Brad was a bear and he worshipped Ziyah. He was also a dissident and never went to Mosque.

I thought I had a cyst making my belly round, but he tells me I'm pregnant.

Her husband made a fortune. He was an importer. We never knew exactly what he imported. Ammaarah reckons he was rigging a drug racket. Naaila says he was a charmer selling fake Nikes to the Nigerians. I figure he was making porn, or at least that's what I told the girls. Ziyah is sweet but stupid.

My uncle has come to stay in the ward. He makes it sound like he's there to look after me, but I know he's come to watch me. There are lots of visitors. I want them all to leave, but they stay and make small talk. They seem to think this is a party. I don't want my uncle to stay in the ward, we are not close. He is not somebody I trust.

Don't worry, Ziyah, you don't look Muslim, I say. You and Brad will make pretty babies, with blue eyes. Ziyah is light-skinned and blue-eyed. Brad is red-headed and ruddy complexioned. He comes from Indiana. His mother married a farmer, a local.

I say I don't want a Caesarian, which the doctor says I must have because I've had two Caesarians already. I want to deliver naturally.

Do you get hurricanes in Terror Hot, she asks Brad. He says no. Just a tornado now and then, and occasional cyclones, and snow. Lots of snow.

I want to leave the ward, to walk about the hospital. I have to dismantle a mirror in the bathroom to leave the ward. Everyone is talking so loudly that they don't notice I've left and they don't hear the noise of me unscrewing the mirror, which is actually a screen on wheels that jiggles and clangs as I move it.

We are having the last supper at “The Spur” near the airport. The cauliflower is mushy and lukewarm. The steak is tough and stringy. Brad says you get the best meat in America, just the best.

I walk through the hospital, recognising it.

It’s a great place to raise kids, says Brad. Ziyah sits straighter, looks more determined. I pick the sunflower seeds out the bread that crumbles when you butter it.

It is where I spent some months recovering from post-traumatic stress syndrome after the hostage drama in the Baha’í Centre, after my divorce, after getting kicked out of Baha’í community because I was living with my lover.

Ziyah’s mother cries at Johannesburg International. It’s February and humid. Stop the brouhaha, Mama, she says. I say don’t worry Mrs Mohammed. She’ll be back soon. Our Ziyah doesn’t like cold weather. Her father plucks his beard and beseeches her to reconsider. Brad doesn’t even look remorseful.

But this hospital is not a regular hospital with a maternity ward.

The plane is delayed because of an electric storm.

This hospital is the psychiatric institution where an Arabian princess lay in the bed next to me. She told me she’d been rescued by a prince on a fine horse. Where is your prince now, I asked her when the woman in the bed across from us took off her clothes and rocked on her back, showing us her cunt? The ward smelled of piss all the time because she was too high to use the toilet.

Ziyah looks scared.

So why am I back here, pregnant, needing somewhere to deliver a baby? I go back to the ward. The party is over, the nurse has cleaned up. My uncle is gone and I say to the nurse, help me.

Secretly, I believe Brad is an Al Qaeda operative.

I’m ready to deliver. Please keep the doctor away from me. Don’t let him cut me. Just give me time, please, give me time.

#### 40. Prometheus's Child

My autistic son won't say his name.

"Why not? How hard can that be?" His father pours another drink. "He's four years old, Goddammit!"

Jim folds small squares of paper into eagles, dragons, and multi-pointed stars. Sometimes he tries to set the house alight.

What happened to the shopping list, electricity bill, pharmacy statement, the cash I thought I left on the fridge to buy our groceries? I search my desk, my briefcase, the hallstand. Perhaps I can remember what was on the list: cheese, fennel, bread ... and use my credit card.

When Jim sleeps I discover the documents in his bedroom, transmogrified, inhabiting a more luminous world. With regret I retrieve these origami angels from that shimmering place. I unfold the owls with heavy hands, maps on my dull path. The monstrous therapy bill and overdrawn account, flashing points of an upcoming migraine peck away my liver today.

#### 41. Halfway Hungry

Halfway through a wilted radish salad that burned my tongue and withered my resolve, the penny dropped through the slot of the divine fantabular, causing picky eaters all over the diner to regain their senses, call for management and complain about the troops of mediocrity blooming on every spoon.

Halfway through a conversation with Mr Grunt, I saw under a lettuce frond the floor of my heart, replicated in the patterned leaf, a bind and grump, bump and grind, and that mediocre management made me stand up say there is no Yum, no mum, no maybe any more, no oh ho! nor whore, no yes please nor no sir. So?

Halfway home through the eve of my fortieth, delinquent lust gusted up through my ovaries and whistled woohoo and yeehi and whyevernot, so I dialled Mr Yum and Miss Knot who swung me from the ceiling tree, managed my fetishist yearning for yams, backside, backslided, praying, poking, pricking, no bump, but a bang, no grind but a gang, floored me, thawed me, more and more-ed me.

Halfway to bed through a post-party sigh that fired up the tired time, the wired day, the dire plight, with my backside roped tender, my lettuce still growing, my radishes showing, my cherry still glowing, I said, Stay Mr Yum, you mustn't go yet Miss Knot. They said salad days are over, we've another restaurant to run, so eat out or suck up, swallow or spit; get a fresh dish, dip loopy fruit, pop pills or pull up your pillow.

Halfway through the fight of the night, Mr Grim, Mr Gaunt, Mr Glum all took flight when I said bring your carrots, cucumbers, your marrow, tonight, not tomorrow, line up at the slot of the divine fantabular. Drop your pennies, drop my panties, under rod your jockies, boys. Rise up for the feast, squeeze your orange, turf out the dead duck. Spoon me, don't spleen me, it's time for the fill up, no foul up, nor fuck up, just eat me and please me, knead me, please need me.

## 42. Mrs Popcorn

She is round and kind and her skin is white like popcorn and her stomach rolls and neck rolls and great hanging arms make you think of popcorn. Her hair too, which is tight blonde curls. Her real surname is Greek and unpronounceable, but she is not Greek, just married to one.

When it is hot, she jumps in the school pool, dress and all, cools off in the water, then flops onto the hot concrete and steams in the sun to warm up again. When the children push and shove to get their sandwiches and pies, she says in a Brakpan accent, "This is not a race. Everyone's a winner. Nobody go hungry by Popcorn's Paleis." Sometimes she slips me a lollypop for free and says, "You can have it, it's kosher." To the Muslim children she says, "Salaam Sonny" and "Inshallah Baby."

There is a glob of mayonnaise spilled on the tiled floor one day. Mrs Popcorn tramps right through it and her foot skids out and her ankle snaps there, right in front of me, while I'm drowning my soggy chips in tomato sauce. The bone pokes out her skin and it is exactly the same colour as my chips, blood like tomato sauce, only it doesn't squeeze out in a gentle leak. It gushes. The children stop pushing and shoving and for once it is silent outside the tuck shop. When the ambulance men come, they cannot lift the stretcher with her on it. We watch from afar. Mrs Popcorn is going to die. We are crying. Mrs Popcorn is going to die.

**43. Motivator**

I select the lilac jeans I bought last year before I could fit into them. Rocco Barocco spangles for the emerging self. I needed a little shine.

I adjust my belt to accommodate my now flat stomach, hungry for love. Burnt sugar lipstick on my husband's shirt means the diet came too late. Perhaps purple sequins for stay-at-home seemed obsequious.

#### 44. Promise

Anita's baby sister wears a lime green fleecy tracksuit with a cross-eyed hedgehog on the front. It is too big for her, a hand-me down from Anita who refused to wear it.

It is the one and only item her mother ever made on the sewing machine – a 'Sprinter' with 63 decorative stitches. There were even more fancy stitches you got if you bought the computer disks that slotted in behind the thread spool. The stitches worked perfectly on the television, but as soon as Anita's mother tried it at home, the threads tangled in the bobbin case and the needle broke. She tried again, but the fabric folded under the presser foot and when she unpicked it, it was punctured with holes.

Then she appliquéd the hedgehog over the whole irksome fiasco. She sewed on buttons for eyes instead of satin stitch embroidery and glued on a patch of felt for the muzzle.

The sewing machine migrated like a pterodactyl fossil to the basement where it roosted beside the bread baker that had worked once, the ice-cream maker that made frozen slush tasting of raw egg, the knitting machine that made scarves of knots and the step walker that was supposed to make your buttocks flat and give you thin thighs.

Anita dreams of dinosaurs watching television where round-bellied women wear loincloths and bake bread on flat rocks beside an open fire. In the morning her mother is ordering a silicone bra that promises to enhance her bosom and enable her to wear an evening gown without plucking at the straps. Anita's mother doesn't have any evening gowns.

#### 45. A Hundred Times a Day

I look down the road a hundred times a day, like a nervous tic, search for you, a sighting, watch for dust, wait for the angel trumpets to herald your return; listen every moment; will not put on the radio or television because I am feeling for your footsteps, in the garden dig and plant, but between thrusts of the spade, around the sound of water spraying from the hose, I try to hear an engine, a car, a plane, a sign; there is no telephone here, no cell phone reception, no computer hum making it harder to hear you arrive; I've studied abandonment in its minutest details for two months, or is it ten years? I am an expert on its unfurling tendrils, hope watered by watching, nurtured by waiting: I am the bachelor, the honours, the master spinster, she-doctor of desertion, professor of the parting ways -- my thesis the improbable yearning that does not die hard or fast, my antithesis births slowly like disbelief -- and even after I have uprooted my nostalgia and trampled it with the tawdry halos, even after my hunger-thirst-ache is scorched in the sun, even after it has become brittle as bird bones, alone and splintery, I still look down the road a hundred times a day.

#### 46. Mustard Chuckle

It was a lark and we should have been caught, Jackie and I. We should have paid a price.

We passed Miss Riveira leaving the Domestic Science lab one afternoon. She was a plump teacher with duck feet, who always drooped and swayed around the handsome games master that the boys said was really gay. We said they were hoofing us because they didn't want us beaming him.

Nobody was about that afternoon. We slunk in to the lab. Miss Riveira's computer was on. We sent the games master an email from her account:

Hunt me, pluck me, mushroom and garlic my thighs, sauté well under even heat. Place edible blossoms between my toes; serve immediately with cherry sauce. I'll teach you how to cook.

Your Hot Honey.

After that she developed a stammer and a nervous tick. Her mouth and eyes would open together, a trio of 'O's, as if she'd received some terrible surprise. We couldn't stop giggling. Jackie said Miss Riveira got Tourette's from that email we sent. I wondered if she felt guilty.

#### 47. Juicy Lucy's Salvation

Juicy Lucy is bored. She thinks I'm just another pretty boy. Her sneer makes it clear that she doesn't know who I am.

The pretty boys arrive each week, needing cash, every month, blind to her scorn, willing to service titillation where they find it wanting, wanton: elite bachelorette parties in Salvation's northern suburbs, or queer uncles needing friction. The pretty boys aren't fussy. They're needy too, will spread their cheeks when supplies for their nasal recreation run out. They'll get it up to re-inflate their expensive habits. They need money for speed. They need quick money.

The proprietress looks at my résumé. Her disinterest discloses that she doesn't recognise me. She doesn't care for these needy greedy men. No, Juicy Lucy has other tastes.

They're easy-come-easy-go, the pretty boys, and she thinks I'm just another courting through her establishment for a month or three. She reads me the rules: "Don't do drugs. Mind your personal hygiene, no body odour or bad breath, got that? Don't bring your partner here; don't brag about your tips. Don't treat the customers with contempt. Don't slag off other dancers. No fighting; no free dances. Don't shag the other staff." They're easy to get rid of, the pretty boys. They can't stick to the rules. And Juicy Lucy takes no shit, No Sir. She'll call the cops just as soon as one gets uppity with a customer, or forgets to brush his teeth.

Juicy Lucy's waiting. For me. I promised to arrive unannounced. She waits for a sign – to hear her own name, and the instruction she yearns for – from the one who makes her blood run cold, her cunt run hot, the one for whom she dances on the webcam, the one who says, "Stop right there, Julie-Lou." She wants the one for whom she drops her eyes, the one to whom she says, "Yes Master."

"So, what can you do, Mister?" she asks. "You brought a tape, a CD? Got a dance routine?" She squints at my résumé again, "Where'd you say you worked before?"

Juicy Lucy waits for the sign – the words she knows, her name, his voice – so she can yield to the man before whom she kneels, obedience with clothes pegs, clamped on her nipples, ginger fingers burning her anus. She's waiting for one who soothes her from her computer's speakers, saying, "A little more pain, for Master, little slave." She waits for him who makes her beg, "Please Master, can your slave

come now?" She wants the one who takes her to the brink of her orgasm, and says, "Stop right there, Julie-Lou."

"So, what can you do, Mister?" asks Juicy Lucy, irritated at my silence.

Juicy Lucy waits for the one who hears her frustrated howls, and says, "Stop right there, Julie-Lou. You've pleased me, slave. Now touch yourself, and come."

"So what can you do, Mister?" she asks, reaching for her cigarettes in her breast pocket.

I put my hand over hers, and before she can pull away, I say, "Stop right there, Julie-Lou."

#### 48. What You Really Need

Jim lounges beside me against the counter in crinkled chinos, a crisp denim shirt.

“Tired?” I ask.

“A little shopping goes a long way,” he says, slipping his veined hand under my sleeveless blouse. He teases my bra strap, plucking it, releasing it.

“We’re nearly done. This is the last item on the list.”

The clerk who gift-wraps the embroidered towels I have selected for our eldest granddaughter looks about the same age. The girl strokes the peach satin monogram before cutting a length of red and green paper. There is a tiny engagement ring on her finger, a wistful look on her face.

“Pretty,” I say.

“Nice and absorbent,” she says.

“I meant your ring.”

“Oh, thanks,” she laughs, holding the ring out for me to admire momentarily, then resumes creasing the paper into an elaborate design. Cutting tape, she flicks it in place with swift fingertips.

I wonder if she has ever shared a tub with her fiancé. I hope he folds her in sumptuous towels afterwards, rubs her softly and unwraps her tenderly.

My eyes rest on Jim’s crotch. He catches my indiscreet staring, twirls his hands through my short curls, and wraps a lock around his forefinger. It is a proprietorial gesture, an ownership. He gives a sharp tug, a private signal, a caution.

“So when’s the big day?” I look up.

“April 12<sup>th</sup>.” She snips a strand of silver ribbon.

“Nice! We had an autumn wedding, didn’t we?” I prod Jim’s tummy.

He nods and smiles. The girl blushes. She deftly twists a many-looped bow.

I wish this girl glorious weather, a beautiful ceremony, and a long happy marriage. If her groom is half as gentle between the sheets, half as patient on the pillow as my blue-eyed lavender-tipped boy, she will be a contented bride. If her husband has anything like Jim’s strong arm and judicious eye for the correct position of the paddle, if he knows when to use a riding crop and when to use his own bare hand, she will grow to be a deeply satisfied old woman.

“Merry Christmas,” she says, handing Jim the parcel.

“You too,” he says.

“Have a nice wedding,” I say.

Later I wished I had whispered in her ear, “Show him what you like. Ask for what you want. Don’t be afraid of what you really need!”

#### 49. Christmas Eve Picnic, Pretoria

Under leafy Jacaranda branches in our private garden I wipe down the slatted picnic table I made for you last Christmas. I throw the embroidered cloth you stitched for me over it and set two earthenware dishes on each side.

You place a round of Brie, pale as your breast, beside a salad of herbs. Oven-baked bread, olives and pretty slivers of cold ham. I bring a sumptuous fruit bowl with summer jewels of the Cape: hanepoort grapes, fat as your nipple, fuzzy peaches, beautiful as your buttocks, watermelon, litchis, plums.

I wipe crumbs from your mouth after you've eaten and we've cleared the table. I undo your ribbon ties, finger your buttons. Your foot on the bench reveals you naked under your skirt. Your hairless flesh is pink as cherry blossoms, inner lips burgundy as the leaves on the prunus. Sandals off, you slip a toe under my shorts. You suck my finger. I run it slowly along your teeth.

My tongue in your ear, I say, "I want you where I want you."

"Eat me," you say.

"Greedy girl, you must wait." I place a gift on the table and tell you to open it.

Tomorrow I will carve a steaming turkey for your family; you will redden as you whip up the brandy butter my mother always praises. Your father will tell us how much he appreciates a traditional dinner. We will all know that what he would really like is a traditional wedding for his only daughter, but we will all let it pass because it's Christmas and the new South Africa and same sex marriages are now constitutional.

My brother will look at your cleavage when he says, "Delicious!" and I will give him a look that says, "Don't even think it!"

Your uncle will stare at my low cut jeans and say, "You girls, um, ladies, surely know how to cook up a storm, don't you?" We will all laugh at the double entendre and you will shift gingerly in your chair.

You will giggle over the Christmas pudding we both detest and remember how I tied you to this sturdy table, how I sliced this mango above your belly. Your panties will moisten again recalling how I dribbled juice from the knife blade inside you. You will blush to think of how I licked this knife before tracing its point around your nipples, a merely preparatory gesture.

You will be glad that I'm giving you your Christmas present now and not in front of our families. You will beg for the gag so the neighbours don't hear because I'm going to test it out, right here under the Jacaranda trees: a heavy flogger made of old copper leather, the one you pointed out in the catalogue. I will refuse you the gag, because you're no longer an initiate, you've learned control. You can contain your screams while I lash your thighs, your belly, your breasts. You maintain the silence as afterwards I slide the handle into your soaking cunt. You hold your breath until lightning forks the sky and a lilac blossom falls into the well of your navel. And only then, as your orgasm explodes, you moan your release. Cradled in my arms again, you weep your relief.

But you will cry when you open your real present – which I will bring you on a tray with your morning coffee and croissant. I will throw open the shutters and the sun will stream in, will shine on the gold wrapping paper you tear off the tiny box, will glint off the diamond you hold up in disbelief, will sparkle a rainbow as I slide it onto your fourth finger.

**50. If Only Marilyn Could have Learned from her Mistakes**

I made myself a white Marilyn Monroe-style dress for my wedding. It was a stupid idea to start with, turning out badly – the dress, not the marriage.

A week before the big day, I stitched the final seam, pulled on the dress, and wept. The crossover bodice gaped, revealing one tit. I fastened it with a dragonfly brooch, studded with garnets. Like troubled waters, the circle skirt swished the wrong way.

I forgot to remove the brooch before flinging my failure into the laundry. The garnets all fell out in the washing machine. At least it was not diamonds that swirled down the drain.

I made another dress, a simple shift in navy silk, sent the brooch to the jeweller and married my second husband.

I wear the unsuccessful dress over my swimsuit at the beach, the repaired dragonfly as a trophy, and the husband as my first prize.

## 51. Green Socks, White Lies

Just out of the shower on a Saturday morning, I rub lotion on my dry skin.

Winter has arrived.

“Pass me some socks, Leigh-Anne.”

My daughter visits on weekends. At 12, she studies my underwear drawer for clues on how to be a woman.

“What colour?”

She will get dull information from my bras and panties.

“Any.”

There are no more Wonderbras, the garter belts are gone. The black lace-and-satin teddy I wore for her father was dumped in the garbage when I left him.

“What do you mean ‘any’?” she asks, disbelieving. “Aren’t you even going to try to match?”

All my undies want replacing. The bras have stretched, the socks have holes, there are tiny filaments of elastic waving from the wrinkled edges of my knickers. Everything is slightly grey from 1000 wash cycles. Without custody, there are no maintenance payments. My salary doesn’t stretch to extras. Next birthday, my mother will send me a gift voucher for Woolies, but I will probably use it for groceries.

“Matching? No, I’m wearing boots today.”

She tosses me an apple-green sock ball, saying, “At least these will be out of sight then.”

Like my underwear drawer, my make up tray is disappointing. She unscrews the stubs of lipstick smeared in cracked dispensers, and grimaces. The eye shadow from a long time ago lies cracked in dusty compacts. About twice a year I need mascara, and wave the sticky wand under warm water to loosen it. It suffices for the odd occasion.

“Jayne wears pretty lacy g-strings,” says Leigh-Anne.

I wore them too when I was her father’s plaything. I do not think about what else goes up his new wife’s crack.

“Jayne is pretty,” I say.

I try to be generous to the woman who will offer my daughter a different role model.

“You really think so?” she asks, hopeful.

I do not. I think her cropped blonde hair and thick ankles singularly displeasing to the eye. Her power-dressing wardrobe is the most overbearing example of female chauvinism I've ever seen. Her clear blue eyes and fresh complexion look like a mask of vacuous sweetness to me.

“Sure!”

Leigh-Anne's eyes light up. She hugs me tight. The stepmother is good to her. Packs her school lunch with little love letters attached to candy bars. I'm happy in a sad sort of way that there is a woman who will finance my daughter's first leg wax, will teach her how to select quality stretch-lace undies, and will buy her first Clinique starter kit on her 13th birthday.

“Dad always liked pretty women.”

## 52. Overture for a Beginner

Janina looked down into the orchestra pit at intermission, and watched the musicians abandon their instruments and walk out.

A solid woman hooked her bow on the stand, lowered her double bass sideways and released her wild blonde hair from a diamanté clasp. It sprung in an unruly halo about her head for a moment before she twisted it back into the clasp. An unlit cigarette fluttered between her lips. She called loudly in Russian to someone waiting beyond the exit.

Janina remembered how she'd stood above the orchestra pit as a child. Her mother would book front row seats for ballet matinees and arrive early. Janina was allowed to watch the musicians tune up and play the overture. Just tall enough to peer over the railing, she'd imagine she was on a ship floating on a glittering musical sea. When the dancers appeared on stage, she would reluctantly return to her seat to wait for the intermission when she could get another glimpse of the musicians.

Out of the blue Janina felt an urge to play the double bass. She imagined she would feel solid and substantial embracing the instrument. She would rent one and take lessons. She would practise and feel brave. It was a preposterous fantasy, and she shut it away as soon as her husband joined her.

"Let's head for the hills, Babe," he said.

"Aren't we even staying for drinks?"

"Nah! Queue's too long. Too many culture-vultures. I've had enough of this classical shit."

Janina fingered the programme's staples. She wanted to stay to the end of *La Traviata*, to witness Violetta dying in her beloved's arms. She wanted to see the blonde bass player return, to watch her stroke her bow across the strings, then tune the instrument, plucking the thick strings that Janina remembered reverberating deep and low. She'd never seen a woman playing the double bass. Her husband tugged her sleeve to lead her out of the concert hall.

A tinny gong broadcast the end of intermission as they entered the lift. Britney Spears simpered over the car radio as her husband sped along De Waal Drive, tapping his fingers arrhythmically on the steering wheel. Later in bed, Janina remembered Violetta's haunting aria, soaring over the bass's steady rhythm.

That night she dreamed she was stranded on a raft at sea. Sharks circled about her. She felt light-headed and was suffering from heatstroke. Instead of a water flask, she held a bottle of dishwashing liquid. Instead of an oar, she held a mop. Looking down at the raft, she realised she was adrift on a double bass, studded with diamonds.

On waking, Janina searched the programme, flipping to the back page, where the names of the orchestra appeared by instrument: First Violin, Second Violin, Viola, Violoncello, Double Bass.

She dialled information. While waiting for the operator, she bent back the staples.

“Number for Goligorsky please,” she enquired. There couldn’t be many of them in the Cape Town directory.

“Initial?”

“P, for Petrouchka.”

### **53. Bathroom Blues**

The winter dash from my pyjamas to under the hot water without exposing my naked skin to the icy air is a ridiculous polka, paralleled by shuffling conversations. The water pressure is low; the geyser far away. When I should be leaving, I am juggling soap and shampoo. When I should have gone, I am still spitting out toothpaste under the shower rose. I piss in the shower to save a minute, when I need a lifetime to escape the quicksand of my horrible decisions.

## 54. Friends of Bill

A sticky table supported ancient trolls and decrepit queens at the Christmas party in the Kenridge Lounge that derelict year.

The Cat in the Hat wore too much bold make up. Grandma Joe from Mexico was bored and grumpy. She had finally stopped swatting the dirty air, because her knitting was in knots. Her sedative had taken effect.

I wasn't so hot myself in tired pyjamas and adverse conditions – that's me on the right – contemplating a plate of cheese sandwiches that should have arrived half an hour earlier.

"Christians makes a gal hungry," said Grandma. I was hungry too.

After Art Therapy my lipstick clashed with my socks. Or so said my Royal Bag Lady companion, who spoke with a hot potato on her bloody blue tongue while she snapped our picture.

"I am offering," she said, "some soothing ice to the former fabulous, the high society spectacular, smarting still from the rock bottom rock fall."

I accepted. Her husband sounded much like mine.

"I know a high sosatie when I smell one," I said.

The stoned assemblage listened to terrific tales of outrageous parties, fine food, better wine, and laughing, laughing, I imagined diamonds bobbing like ice in solicitous gin.

"But frozen Fabergé makes bad omelettes," said Her Majesty, "I tell you. Especially at the CEO's Christmas party."

"Where Gucci gushed and Dior splashed, jaws got bashed and noses mashed, until we all fell dronklap into the swimming pool. Or at least I did. That was the bottom of the rocky day I woke up on the pavement outside my mansion."

"Your backward glamour appeals to me," I said.

The overdressed bookshelves wore nurse's uniforms and scowled. The Cat winced. Grandma Joe's displeasure was amply evident.

"That's unfunny," said the bookshelf nurse.

Bag Lady Babe said, "It works if you work it..."

"... and you give a lot of love," said the Cat who looked like he would puke in his hat.

It was a Big Book bad passage sin and sun day, that Christmas in the Kenridge Lounge. It read like Sunday School. I listened to the empty plates' singing We wish you a Merry Mazeltov above Grandma's intrusive lament. The teapot's wail was a juicy protest, adding to the heated outcry of the uncracked crackers.

Nurse said, "Behave! A watched chair never boils..."

I wanted to, but the imperious Cat meowed his patronising smile. A lamp badmouthed the doctor, who hovered above my head. I remonstrated with the chair. That faux diva smirked at my unused cutlery.

"Go fork yourself," said the serviette. The battered piano whistled. The table gasped. The orange juice on the verge of a panic attack sloshed over the edge of Grandma's glassy Mexican tequila longing.

Back in the ward, I told Her Majesty to go to hell.

The ridiculous beds swapped recipes for eggnog and sang to the tune of Silent Night, "Go well on a shelf, down a hellish hand basket to find your abandoned self."

**55. To a Guitarist Playing Études by Salzedo in a Smoky Melville Café**

How shall I say, “Goodbye!” when I don’t even know your name, yet the deep chords you strum with long fingers collect stray beats of my heart, stroke a base passion I thought had died?

I listen in silence to your lonely sighs between each sheer cadence. I want to fold myself into your velvet-lined case, so you will find me waiting to be plucked, wanting to say, “Hello!”

## 56. The Science of Curves

“Introduction to Fractals is intended for students without especially strong mathematical preparation, or any particular interest in science.”

I stare at the outline of Dr. Henderson’s breasts as she turns from the board. Beneath the tight orange jersey, they are snug, so much smaller than my own.

“Fractal geometry offers a new way of looking at the world.”

By agreement, I don’t question her in class. I do not need this credit; I want simply to observe my lover. I sit in front, noting how the cerise and aqua stripes on my socks swell and flatten as I flex my ankle.

“We are surrounded by natural patterns, usually unrecognised, unsuspected. Sensuous irregular configurations occur in, and relate to, the arts, humanities, social sciences.”

Her rounded buttocks sway as she walks to a window. Filtered light falls on her oval face. She throws the shutters open. Agitation flutters across her features.

“Examining the fractal curve, we see traces of complex dynamic systems self-organising into familiar natural shapes. Our understanding of the underlying mathematics enables us to model eroded coastlines, snowflakes, or the human vascular system, in which patterns recur at progressively smaller scales.”

She ignores my gaze, hides in her notes on the lectern instead.

“The determinism of chaos describes partly random phenomena such as crystal growth,”

Last night she wrestled her wedding bands off over her bent finger, her mouth a guilty twist. I imagine a supersaturated sucrose solution crystallising around her diamond.

“...fluid turbulence,”

Bath oil capsules dissolved in pink swirls releasing the scent of vetiver and honey into the steam.

“...and galaxy formation.”

I unclipped her suspenders, peeled off her stockings, sucked her toes, kissed the arch of foot. Her pelvis rocked in the water. Afterward she said, “I saw the stars, the planets. They are so lovely.”

## 57. Prognosis

Miss Dangerfield's legs dangled over the jetty at Lake Pleasant in the late afternoon sun. It was March and summer was dying. Her old feet looked like strange underwater flowers. She prodded the blue vein that coursed snake-like up her calf. She should talk about what the doctor had said, the medicine he'd prescribed, the prognosis. Over at the fire, Mrs Pinto slurped her whisky and soda. Sparks flew as she tossed on logs.

She had wanted to stay at Pine Lake Marina, where there was a beauty spa and a tennis court, but Miss Dangerfield said the water-skiing was too noisy. Mrs Pinto grumbled that nothing exciting happened at Lake Pleasant, and the chalet was full of spiders, and the long grass full of ticks.

Just then the cry of a Knysna Loerie rang out. Its lurid scarlet wings and brilliant green body swooped over the water. They sat together in silence for an hour.

After sunset, Mrs Pinto lifted the sosaties and boerewors onto the braai grid with knobby hands. When a flame leapt up, Miss Dangerfield sprinkled it with beer. They debated whether to be adventurous and go to the Wild Coast. The potholes will wreck your tyres, said Miss Dangerfield, dabbing mosquito repellent onto her lover's forehead and ears. Let's stay here till Christmas, said Mrs Pinto, let's stay here forever.

## 58. New Word

Candice's father is a retired minister and my next-door neighbour. He sits with my baby girl on his lap, while I hand Candice the nappy bag with Ally's bottles. She has just started to talk. She can say, 'Mama', 'juicy' and 'more'.

The old man interlaces his fingers in front of Ally and says, "Here is the church, here is the steeple..." Ally watches fascinated.

Candice was one of my first year Education students last year. When I was 19, the age she is now, she played hopscotch on the pavement in front of my house. This year, she didn't return to campus. She stays home to look after her father.

"Open the doors and there are the people!" Ally laughs when he wiggles his fingers. He repeats the rhyme again and again.

Ally sticks her finger into the growth on Candice's father's head. He winces, pulls away. It used to be a mole the size of a little pea. Then it became an acorn. Now it has a dimpled scab, like a chocolate golf ball. Every time it is cut away, it grows back bigger. Candice says it's growing inwards now. He can't see properly any more. His balance isn't good. Ally reaches for the growth again.

"Dirty," she says. It is a new word.

I blush. Candice looks away. The old man laughs, takes Ally's chubby hands in his and interlaces them, "Here is the church..."

I know he wants me to baptise her. Soon.

## 59. Goggles

Andrew is studying metalwork at school. Last weekend he persuaded my dad that the old geyser propped up in the corner of the garage should be cut in half to make a first-rate braai grill. Barbeque, said my mother. She refuses to use the Afrikaans word.

We drove over to Slang's place, my brother and father and I, to borrow an oxy-fuel cutter. Slang owns the Magalies Panel Beaters. His name means 'snake'. It is a good name for him. Andrew needed the cutter to make the discarded pipes he'd found in the rubble of the old police station into equal lengths. The next stop was Oom Piet where they fetched a brazing torch to weld the pipe legs onto the casing.

He stared at his reflection in the car mirror and squeezed a pimple. It will look good on the stoep, said my brother when they got home. Verandah, said my mother. It better not be ugly said my mother

We'll braai lamb chops and sosaties and Boerewors, said my brother. We must buy charcoal, said my father. You better invite Slang, said my mother, who owes him because he fiddled her insurance claim last month when he fixed up her car. She had driven into a pole after her mid-morning G&T at the Ladies Bar.

We invited the neighbours whose African bluebells grow taller than ours. They are not really bluebells, but my mother won't call them Agapanthus. The other neighbours with the twins were invited too. Michael and Ronald are six and stupid. I call them the Micron Intelligentsia. Their noses always run. My mother says they have faecal alcohol syndrome. Andrew reckons they were dropped on their heads.

I said they're sick again, they won't come. What ails them, asked my father. Cowpox, I said. That's not possible, he said, backwashing into his fourth beer. He leaned too close to the flame. His hair was singed, creating a bad smell that mixed with the gas from the brazing torch and odours of molten metal. It must be chicken pox, said my father. Andrew said they had already had chicken pox. You can see the scars and you can't get it twice. Probably AIDS, says my father, they've got that funny head shape.

I know the scars on Mike's arms and Ron's legs aren't chicken pox scars. They get them when their mother stubs out her cigarettes if they've been naughty. I'm seven and smart. But not so smart that I contradict my father wielding a blowtorch.

If you knew their mother, you'd know it was cowpox.

## 60. Fan Mail

Dear Ms. Sasha King,

My husband just presented me with a gift of your most recent CD for my birthday. I told him, “No chocolates this year, Buddy Brown. Chocolates are full of treacherous cholesterol. Do you want me to have a heart attack?”

Yesterday, I was 37, a conventional housewife, doing boring chores, used to sex in the missionary position - and, most significantly, I had never heard of Sasha King.

Today, at 38, I think I have been reborn. I have, and I hold, your newest album, *The Boy Next Door*.

I took one look at the line-up of songs and I thought to myself, what class of chick sings guys' songs? I thought chocolate was hazardous. Hoo-whee! I didn't know there are significantly greater dangers under crepe paper and satin ribbons than Côte d'Or can ever deliver.

It made no sense, the concept of a woman singing a man's song, that is. I didn't believe a gal could sing Frank Sinatra, Dave Brubeck, or Perry Como's love songs. It made no sense that the female voice would tackle lyrics made irresistible by Sammy Davis Jr., Ray Charles and Louis Armstrong's masculine aura. Then I listened to your voice singing the words once sung by Dizzy Gillespie and Nat King Cole to the women they loved. I suddenly realised. You are no ordinary kind of woman.

I'm listening to you sing *Too Darn Hot* and I feel my nipples tingling. *Makin' Whoopee* makes my clit start to throb. I'm enchanted. Captivated. Enthralled. *I Got It Bad* too, Ms King. This music should come with a warning label.

Today I am looking at your picture on the case and inside the booklet. I can't get you out of my mind. I am a changed woman, and I am holding you responsible. Today, I realise that *The Boy Next Door* just doesn't do it for me anymore. It isn't a boy I want any longer, not that I particularly wanted one before, but looking at your elfin features, your laughing face, your long thin arms, your edible toes, I realise it is a girl I now desire. Never before did I even look at girls, but I'm looking at what there is to see now. Right now.

It's you I desire. *Ooh-Shoo-Be-Doo-Bee* – I do, I do!

Now, please understand, I'm not one to write fan letters to anybody. But then again, you are not anybody. No, I'm sure you are an incarnation of Freya. I've been

reading a book on the Goddesses and you'll be interested to hear that Freya didn't discriminate in her choice of lovers. That's a right, gods and goddesses alike were fair game. How about that? Freya and Frigga are the two aspects of the Great Goddess. Freya was the maiden, Frigga, the mother.

Do you realise that in all four pictures printed, you don't look once at the camera? Why would that be, Ms King? Are you truly demure?

Do you hide your eyes because you realise the effect you have on people? I can tell that my husband would like to ball you. He looks lecherously at your chiffon skirt that reveals so much fine thigh. He figures you are a lesbian dyke who just needs a good schlong where a schlong fits best. He would like to rip those feathery garments off you and give it to you good. Maybe he bought the CD so that he might perve over you too. I don't ask. Or didn't. I told you I was, until yesterday, a boring housewife stuck in the missionary position. Maybe I will though.

But wait, another question before you quit in disgust. Did you anticipate the response you would evoke in women? Did you know what you would do to me? Is that why you avert your gaze?

Can I tell you, that I would like to look into your eyes? Not just at a photo, but right into your eyes, as I unstrap those simple, elegant sandals of yours. I want to watch your expression change as I massage your instep, as I rub the ball of your foot with a steady deep pressure. I want to see your mouth open as I trail my fingers through your short, cropped hair, as I trail my little finger through the curves of your ear. I want to see if you smile as I remove the voile blouse you wear, untie your beaded corset. I want to see you blush; perhaps stare away, as I hold your breasts in my hands, as I suck your nipples.

Don't be afraid. This is where it begins and ends, Ma'am. *I Got It Bad*, but I'll recover. Of course I will. I'm not ready to throw out the husband on account of your pretty hands, your demure little breasts. Don't be afraid. I'm no stalker. The truth is, I don't even know which capital of the world you inhabit. I'm guessing you're a Brit, because you are so classy. And because the album was recorded in London. But singing American music, you would do it with the right accent. *You're The Top*, after all.

Don't worry, I'm not going to follow you, or even send you pesky emails. I'm not going to make a complete ass of myself, behaving like a teenage dolt swooning over a pop star. Would you believe that I don't even know how to surf the Internet?

My kids help me if I need to know something, like if I want a recipe. I understand that in theory, I could get a picture of you from the world wide web; I could get an email for your fan club.

Oh no, Sasha King, I won't though. That's not nearly good enough for you – or me. This fan mail is confidential correspondence. It serves my housewifely need to put pen to paper, to keep private my unexpected yearning, to offer me maximum pleasure with minimum fuss. Besides, I have always managed without you. The proposal is that *I Get Along Without You Very Well* from now on too.

You see, pretty lady, you gave me so much more than music. You gave me a whole new world, a world where a girl can make love to a smoky-voiced girl. I knew it was possible in theory. I even know lesbian women. I just never gave it very much thought. But you've given me an idea, of how it might be, and so, here, in my private diary, I can write my beautiful fantasy.

*Say It Isn't So!*

I will buy myself roses, light candles, run a deep, scented bath. Alone I shall open a chilled bottle of wine. I shall turn on your voice and soap my breasts. I shall tease my nipples, thrust my fingers between my legs. Sasha King, don't worry about me.

*All I Do Is Dream Of You.*

Once I have climaxed, and rested, I shall start again.

*The Best Is Yet To Come.*

## 61. Lollipop

Mr Wall stood under the tree at Mostert's Mill with his back to us so we wouldn't see him sneaking a smoke. What we did see, with his foot resting on a low knoll in the trunk, was the outline of his briefs pulled taut across his perfect buttocks under his khaki chinos.

Susannah told us he had switched the brand of cigarette he smokes. I said Camels give him donkey breath. Ankara giggled. Susannah said it didn't, but that's because she wants to shag him. I know because she wrote a graffiti heart with his and her names in it on the bicycle shed.

The fat lady tour guide, who was explaining how they climb the ladder to put up the sails stopped to scowl at us. Mr Wall ground out his cigarette stub and wandered back to stand right behind us for the rest of the talk.

Before we got on the bus we bought strawberry lollipops. I made slurping sounds while sucking mine and whispered to Ankara, "What am I sucking now?" Ankara giggled because she knew exactly what I meant, and she said I'd better not because Mr Wall has Aids. "How'd you know?" I asked. "He wears a red ribbon on his jacket. All people with Aids have to wear that ribbon." I said that was crap because all the teachers wear it and some of them aren't even sick.

Susannah started to cry then and I felt kak because I'd forgotten her father died last year from cancer, but everyone knows it was really Aids.

## **62. Sun Dried Tomatoes**

My mother hangs droopy carrots on the clothesline with snapping pegs. If I challenge her she says they are orange socks. But it is clear to our neighbours passing by: nothing is normal in our house any more. Most people no longer stare over our wall at the old motorcar abandoned on bricks. Weeds have climbed through the chassis out of the windows since my father went away. Passers-by cross to the other side at the top of the road and back again at the bottom to avoid witnessing my mother as she plants father's socks and shirts in the vegetable patch. Mother says they cross the street because the drains leak outside our gate, but I know that nobody in this neighbourhood likes to see tomatoes and peppers flapping in the breeze.

### 63. Under My SAPS Star

At Diepkloof's Aliens Investigation Unit a kindly captain recovered my heart from the defunct fountain. Alerted by an uncommon rustling while she filed a repatriation report she knew immediately whose heart it was. So pale, so underdeveloped it could only be a white girl's heart. And she knows hearts, that full-breasted captain.

She told me she often finds lost ones on the train to Mozambique. Illegal aliens lose them all the time at Johannesburg station. But black folks' hearts are big, she said, holding her hands apart the size of a dinner plate.

And so I love that captain who held my heart under warm water, washing away the cigarette butts, the lizard shit and fallen leaves. With gentle fingers she unbuttoned my blue blouse. You must be more careful, Constable. She lifted my left breast, pale as pap. The State will not be held responsible for such silliness in future.

She slotted my loss back into the tiny hole where it now beats under tender black fingerprints. Where she patted my SAPS star back in place my misshapen ventricles pump, yearning for her touch. My buttons quiver, my nameplate shakes.

I salute her on parade with a restless longing. Like a deportee planning an illicit return, my little heart holds a sliver of hope.

#### **64. The First Time**

Mister Pan wore a silver jester's suit, trotted up my cottage wall and plucked a planet from out the heavens. He licked and stuck it, winking on my window. It left a star-shaped hole on a passing cloud, a ragged gap that should have bled black ink.

Instead a laughing rainbow filtered five shades of violet's friends skittering across my ceiling: purple, denim, lavender, lilac, mauve. He flicked another fifty kisses, whistling green-blue indigo.

Glittering stars upon my bed shone down on the street below where once-white daisies danced under a red rain of fragrant sparks. Camellias burned in singing flames, fanned by a saxophone scented with cinnamon, orange and a ginger violin.

One thousand vibrant planets reflected off the goat's gold tooth as he piped my pip, as he nipped my tip my nibbled flesh knew his glorious horn and heaven's span spun as he ate me.

**65. Fog**

When Cora was dying, I plucked the two fullest brinjals from the vegetable garden, wiped off the red earth spattered by the rain, and polished their purple hides. I folded them in foil and arrived at my therapy appointment ready, I thought, to say goodbye. The fog had lifted. Six months earlier, Cora had told me what I already knew. I can't accept these, she said, handing back my parcel. But what is the meaning of your gift, she asked. At five I wrapped my favourite doll in torn out sheets from my mother's unread *Fair Lady* to give her as a gift. She could not accept my offering either.

## 66. No Outlook, No Express

Every night I get into bed and discover my email inbox filled with instructions, undertakings, contracts I should read, sift, print, sign, and I'm tired of dreaming I'm awake while I try to find a file I've lost, the one with the image they want, the important link, the clue, the one the important ones are waiting for, so I promise to sort it in the morning, when I'm alert, when I can decode what it is I promised or was promised, when I recall who they are, beg for an extension, be patient, I'll find it when I awake, but I can't sleep, for remembering that jpeg someone sent me, although I don't know who or when or why, but they want it now and they're important, and my fingers are typing, wrong letters into search fields, looking for the image I can't forget, can't find either, hitting backspace instead of delete, jumping from window to window, accidentally striking enter, but remembering the strange image, lost, the terrible image, the child lying amongst her porcelain dolls, as if napping on a picnic blanket, the basket nearby filled with rag dolls in a fading light, I hunt her all night, running searches on the LAN, file by file on my PC, combing web pages, googling 'girl asleep', googling 'dead doll', googling 'holiday tragedy', but I never find her because the missing child has my face and she appears lifeless, but still I want that photo again and in the morning I want to see inside my eyes, try to look at my face in the mirror with my eyes closed but on the inside of my eyelids a web of longing constructed from embryonic symbols, like drawings created with infinitely slow gestures by a blind child's hand, as she strokes invisible ciphers into being, a web of longing.

## 67. Strelitzia

Yesterday you moved into Anthony Mansions, our old block of flats in central Johannesburg where us Nigerians disappear. I showed you the building, which shifts and sighs in the wind, should have been demolished long ago.

Sewage fills the basement, the corridors have cracks that let in the light, the kitchen floors slippery from leaking pipes. The lights flicker and go out, and the lift stuck between the ninth and tenth floor forever.

Below it, empty mine shafts collapse, rearranging the earth. The building judders during earth tremors, promises to swallow us up, to secrete us one kilometre below in the Earth's hot belly.

Anxiety Mansions, you said, would be a better name. We cannot leave because the street outside is occupied by Onward Christians in green berets firing salvos up the stairwell. We walk along the bookshelves until your mother gathers us up and points out the miniature poses of aggression.

Toy soldiers. Plastic moulds. Their flames are flowers; their cartridges, empty blanks. But Auntie, those flowers – Strelitzia, South African flowers – they eat children.

I have seen the bones.

**68. Vocal Warm-up at the Co-Op**

“So what you been up to young lady?”

“Niks, Oom.”

“Is that right?”

“Ja, Oom.”

“How’s your ma doing?”

“She’s home from the hospital but she never sleeps, so she wakes me in the middle of the night saying, Fern, you must audition for the lead role in the opera, they want a lyrical soprano for the role of Lucia, you’d be perfect, and Pa comes to put her back to bed, he tells her, no Nellie, there’s no opera anymore, the State Theatre is finished doing opera, they only do ‘Phantom’ now and she clucks her tongue, shakes her head, yet the next night it’s the same and in the morning when we wake up she’s boiling three pots of bones doing vocal warm ups and Pa rolls his eyes and goes to fix a hole in the garage roof, or so he says, but there’s not really a hole, not one you can see, while Ma’s grilling the corn black while she sings, “Bel-la Si-gno-o-o-o-o-o-ora!” with perfect pitch, gouging holes out the back of cucumbers with the potato peeler, to let the air in, she says, like when she’s frothing up egg white with the beater till it’s stiff and she’s drenched in perspiration, air creates overtones from the nasal cavity, but the new pills Doctor Bezuidenhout gave her don’t really work, so Pa has hidden the razors, all the belts and the sharp knives which makes it tricky to cook, not that one cooks with belts, but you know what I mean, Oom?”

“What would your ma like today?”

“Four bottles of Panado.”

“Is that right?”

“Ja, Oom.”

“That’ll be eighty bucks. Anything else?”

“Nee, Oom. Dankie, Oom.”

## 69. Boasting

I was boasting last night.

I said, "I don't have a problem flying. I fly around the world." This I told the ear of the Mayor, the foot of the Minister of Transport and the bruised ego of the former Deputy President who is now looking for a new job.

I whizzed around the Union Buildings, flying up and down, with the greatest of ease, over and over. In the garden I fluttered up over the azaleas, around the roses, up and over the jacarandas.

I flew through the Cathedral, low and thin through a stained glass window. I flew along the aisles, under the pews, over the baptismal font. There was a youth group saying prayers. The girls looked like fashion models. The boys were ruggers. One grabbed hold of me, caught me by my paisley tie.

But I got away and laughed.

I quoted Jack Beatty from *The Tyranny of Belief*, singing it in plainchant as I hovered in the chancel:

"Whether exploited by traditional religions or political religions, psychological totalism -- the unquestioning fealty to one God, one truth, and one right, embodied in one faith, one cause, one party -- has everywhere provided the tinder of persecution."

The priest arrived. He stood, stationary and pained. "Go," he said, sounding cross. The Minister, the Deputy President and the Mayor took their children out the church. There and then.

"You should watch it with this flying around story," said the priest, "You will get into trouble."

I pretended to stare through goggles or binoculars.

"You're going to keep doing it, you will."

I got off quite lightly, flying like a bird. That's the bit I wish remembered now. I would fly myself somewhere nice, on a trip, like Professor Haslam did. He was a pilot and the Head of Orthopaedics at the Medical Faculty. He flew his wife all over the place when he wasn't teaching doctors how to amputate soggy limbs. He would shoot down the coast to Mhloti, zap upcountry to Botswana, trailing fingers, elbows, ankles in his wake.

When I remember again, I will do likewise; I will stop boasting.

## 70. No More Surprises

There is a pale pink bunny jacket, the colour of candyfloss, on sale. Discounted, no less, so I can afford it. It would match your ballet skirt, dancer daughter. It is simple, elegant with a salmon satin trim on the pocket and a matching corded tie around the hood. I imagine your darkly curling wisps escaping from your tight bun, despite the tub of gel we combed in first.

I vacillate, wanting to surprise you with a pretty gift, something to tell you how much I miss you, how much I wish you were here – with me, not him. I vacillate, not wanting to anger you again.

I finger the soft velour, imagine your willowy form, snuggled beside me under my duvet, cocoa breath and nail polish. Or could I get you the puppy you always wanted?

There is space now, in my new place.

But, no. You said after I left your father one unexpected afternoon, that you wanted no more surprises. And I can no more lick your hand for your affection than I can buy your forgiveness.

## 71. Napkins

Two women sitting on the on the restaurant balcony feed each other oysters from the same plate. Paros Taverna in Melville is having a Valentine's Day special: Eat all the oysters you can for sixty bucks. The blonde with the big silver watch and heavy necklace licks her fingers noisily. The brunette with bad skin giggles. It's easier to daydream about what these two get up to than to face my daughter, back from Cape Town on varsity vacation. She flew home last night.

Iris picks the lettuce out her sandwich. I don't know if that means she will skip the sandwich and eat only the lettuce, or whether it is a less ruthless day, and she will eat the chicken on rye without the lettuce. A rat scurries under the verandah across the street. I wish I hadn't seen it. The blonde takes the brunette's hand and sucks her fingers. I wish I hadn't seen that either.

The sun filters through the last few feathery jacaranda fronds still left on the tree, casting a dappled shade on the napkins still in the holder. Autumn has come early this year. One tiny leaf has landed in the sugar. I do not blink when Iris grasps a handful of napkins. She started spitting out her food discreetly last summer when her sweet little belly curved over her hipsters and a boy in her class called her podgy.

I stare at the fake mosaic on the wall, trying to fix on something other than my daughter's plate. The mosaic is a round-bottomed nude carrying a luscious urn. The psychologist at Tara Hospital said I should back off, I must allow Iris to regain control over her life, so she doesn't have to act out.

The picket fence surrounding the restaurant balcony is Aegean blue. It matches the tablecloths, the color of Iris's eyes. A string of wooden fish, hanging by twine through their gills, like children's toys, is the same brilliant shade.

Iris reaches into her handbag for an envelope, unfolds a letter and reads aloud: "Dear Ms Iris Sonnenburg, I am pleased to announce that your application..."

My stomach lurches. She never told me she was applying to varsity. The spanokopita goes dry in my mouth. Which university? The sesame seeds are pebbles in my throat. How much will it cost? Iris sneers at my alarm. I gulp my water and splutter. I don't know what she wants from me anymore. I reach for a flake of the bread crust that has fallen on the tablecloth. I try crumbling it onto my plate, but it is brittle, unyielding in my fingers.. The fish hanging from the string are silent.

"... your application to work..."

A job? I gulp my wine. She never said she wanted to work. I've swallowed too fast. The pebble in my throat burns my chest. She wanted to study medicine. With seven distinctions for Matric and her position as principle violin in the Youth Ensemble, she was offered a music scholarship, she accepted a place at the School of Medicine before she was hospitalised for force-feeding. The woman on the balcony are leaving.

“... as a packer in our Alaskan depot has been approved,” says Iris, gloating.

Perhaps if she gets sufficiently far away from me she will finally gain control over her life. If she faints and collapses into a freezer of freshly caught fish, she might find a lesbian lover to make her round and happy again. Iris toys with the lettuce.

I should validate her adulthood, says the psychologist at Tara, I should celebrate her choosing her own path. My eyes water from the bitter wine. I should smile. If I appear happy for her, perhaps she will eat the sandwich.

**72. Stones**

Under a green canvas umbrella, where fallen foliage makes shadow art, I sip sour gold, wine dry leaves swept by a grass broom brother. From the mouth of a giant pot, water bubbles into a pond below, where a blonde baby catches an executive fish seducing a mermaid who is dressed in a business suit, who doesn't notice her ankles are fins – delicate in silk stockings the colour of autumn.

I am too tired to wait for you, too needy of your listless embrace, so I order smoked snoek and watch the toddler play in the dirt, fill the quilted table mat with flower bed stones. He offers them to me, a proud gift – I accept and recognise: These stones are the rocks that lie under our mattress, the pebbles that grate at the bottom of my heart, the gravel that sticks in my teeth when you kiss me.

The sweeper rakes them back beside sculpted lavender bushes. Soon the mermaid will slip into the water to sing to her friend – the one who frolics on your lap while I hunger for you – a siren's celebratory song about a jealous wife who choked on a fish bone.

### 73. Infectious

A woman waited in doorways, stood under arches, listened at windows for the magical abracadabra -- a combination she knew would arrive.

The doctor said it could come at any given time, so she listened to the September wind, waited for Jacaranda blossoms to fall and pop underfoot in November. She heard hadedahs shriek at dawn in December, but by February, there was still no sign, only sighs and post gathering unopened on the mantel and her nails chewed till they bled and throbbed.

The taxidriver with flared nostrils said it would come soon.

It would be a cryptic code: the right words whispered by a stranger wearing lilac eyeshadow perhaps: "light of lime, purge of pipe," or a message flashing on an electronic hording over the highway: "inner circle infant, don't drop the dog."

How will I know if I've been called? she asked at confession. The priest said to open last year's umbrella. She consulted a palm reader, a gambler, a hungry vagrant to whom she offered a tin of beans. She handed over her questions to those who would take them, gave them away for free.

The radio bumped onto the indigenous language station by accident. In that moment of not knowing who the Radio Xitsonga DJ was, she heard the answer in a leech voice: answer your phone, please and dammit, or at least open your post.

#### **74. Career Change After the Orchestra's Closure**

I would like to leave the squeal and squawk of horsehair and gut, animals in instrumental distress. Inside this cubicle, the smell of rosin and tired piano. A sticky piglet would rather rap kwaito. His mother insists he become learned, refined - like the whitened sons of Joburg's scholarly saints: Stithian, David, Crawford and John.

Her clenched jaw instructs me to continue casting my Eurocentric pearls. I would prefer an abattoir granting absolution for butchered Bach, bloodied Beethoven, a funeral parlour for instruments laid down in red velvet coffins with anguished ghosts of royal performances from memory before the orchestra's demise.

From the pit I conducted my State, my Theatre, my futile future with failed sparks. Now I yearn to drive a hearse, or dig Aids graves or play, at least, the organ at funerals – a lucrative business, unlike herding recalcitrant bows across strings.

Easier too, than extracting payment from a sow's ear yearning to be an American-Afro.

**75. Rosebank's Mimes**

In upmarket shopping centres strange blooms sprout the one step to a silent swing. Count Basie's fox trots to the clink of coins falling in a shabby suitcase. Peach satin roses wearing cloche hats sashay beside high-waist pants suspended. A bow tie does the soft-shoe shuffle in spats. And a Roedean baby who practises Debussy on a Steinway going to see *Shrek* asks, "Mummy, are those Golliwog's Cakewalking?"

"Shhh, darling. We don't say that word anymore. It's demeaning, like *nigger*, like *kaffir*."

But black bottoms Charleston with the soundless Duke in white clay faces because small change keeps the street's cold suitcased for a little longer.

Small change has been a long time coming.

**76. The Corner of my Eye...**

... is an unreliable square, a questionable source of information, where leaves turn to scorpions, sticks to skeletons and blossoms to flames. When I turn to stare full on, there is no ostrich, but a persecuted black bag, stuffed with rubbish, no neck, but a mop mocking my insecurity. Beneath my feet are stones not bread. How could I be confused when only pebbles rattle this underfoot rhythm? Yet, glass eyeballs do so too. I should like to pass a boulder in this wasteland and be sure it is not a backpack, because there is no fisherman in this desert, no farmer in this field. Only an owl alights on a rock to hoot derision at my need for fresh water, not waves. I wish the corner of my eye were round, like my longing for the moon.

## 77. Mr Fixit's Lament

My father, recently retired, flies in to Johannesburg Airport on free Voyager Miles, with spanners in his suitcase, a voltmeter in his hand luggage and tap washers in his top pocket. I have forestalled the plumber with a bucket under the cistern to catch the slow leak that started right after Dad's last visit. And I have staved off the electrician by not running the oven and the bedroom heaters at the same time.

Like I did when I was a girl, I pass him tools, hold one end of the measuring tape and stabilise the ladder. I learn the respective purposes of gland screws and grub nuts. I rediscover mole grips and shifting spanners. I ask about drill bits and plug cutters. Dad's purple tinted veins protrude from the back of his hands where liver spots have appeared that weren't there before. I look at my own hands, fingers splaying just like his. My thumbs also solid, unyielding. My knuckles bear his genetic imprint.

When my father flies home, the toilet behaves again, and the taps, not the electrics, will sparkle. We've saved a grand, but our retired playmate grumbles into his G&T at the airport bar, that we kept him from wild women and the casino. I say, Pop, your wild woman is waiting for you in Cape Town.

On the M2 homeward bound, my husband looks hangdog. I stare at his hands gripping the steering wheel - hands that know the landscape of the piano like a mystic weatherman, finding chords and keys by feel. His thumbs rain the repetitive rhythm of shaded accompaniments; pass over the notes, pick scales, pluck melodies from the keyboard like a conjurer. He rests one hand on his leg. Freckles and fine ginger hairs catch the sunlight coming through the windscreen. I reach over to stroke it. It is the hand that rests on my belly at night, that ruffles my hair, scratches my back, stirs my coffee and makes the sandwiches I take to work.

My husband sighs. He wishes he could replace gutters, remedy sagging shelves and coax an ornery kettle into submission. But pianists understand the mechanics of uneven rhythm, unstable harmony. They know about tonal blending, texture and balancing dynamics, suspending a cadence, accelerating a climax.

I remind my musician how he found the shattered slivers of my divorce-betrayed heart, picked them up, held them tenderly while I buried old roles: scapegoat, scarlet woman, parish pariah.

Custody cheated I mourned my children, while, with meticulous care, my best boy pieced and placed the fragments of my broken heart back together. I tell him again how he seamed them, sang them – slowly, beautifully back in place.

## 78. Bassoon Lesson

My battered Ford Escort rattled along the Hartbeespoort road. A visiting American bassoonist had moved into Uranium Street, near the dip in the valley and the trickling spruit. I crossed at a low bridge where wait-a-bit thorn trees grew and brand new houses had been set about the brown veld overnight. Swimming pools glittered like aqueous kidney beans in the barren earth and waited for designer grass.

I arrived in a cloud of dust for my first lesson. My teacher opened the door and ushered me into his kitchen. I unpacked my Püchner on the table beside a bowl of apples, slinging the bocal into the bell, before pouring a tumbler of water for my reed. The centripetal force in the glass spun the submerged reed in a whirling water ballet.

“Not that way,” he chided, “You’re using too big a glass. Take an old film canister with just an inch of water. Soak only the blade and don’t get the binding wet. You’ll rot the string.”

I stepped into the sunken lounge to fetch the music stand, and was startled by a gentle hissing. A small cobra reared up on the step, its brown hood flaring. I cried out in fright. It stared and swayed a moment, then slithered behind a bookshelf. Later, the American chased it into the swimming pool, where he spent the rest of the afternoon drowning it.

At my next lesson I said, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I surely did,” he said. “I’ll have you know my lovely wife is pregnant. I don’t want no Affercan cobra hissin’ ‘bout my unborn child. It took me four hours to kill the pitiful critter. I pinned it down in the leaf skimmer, but ever time I thought it must surely be dead, it wriggled back to life. Just like Lazarus. Stupid serpent.”

I spat out my scales in perfect staccato triplets, barely able to contain my disgust. He cautioned me against being prideful, and showed me the relevant passages of scripture. “See?” he said. “Those there sections underlined in red are the words that our Holy Lord said his very self.”

“Did Jesus bleed his words, or did he just speak them?” I asked, wondering whether snakes have red blood too.

“Now you just mind your mouth, young lady, or I might figure to give you a lickin’.”

I hadn’t known, when I first started studying with the American, that he was a missionary as well as a musician.

He was very knowledgeable about sin, that bassoonist. I wanted to tell him that a snake's reflexes remain active for hours after its death and that the correct adjectival usage of 'pride' was 'proud'. Instead I told him that in Africa, we eat missionaries. He liked that, but oh, how I regretted shouting out when I saw that little snake.

If only I'd told him how the eddies of the Sand Spruit join the Braamfontein Spruit at Witkoppen. The snake could have glided out while I described how the river winds westward into the Jukskei, meanders into the Crocodile River that has no crocodiles, then passes through Hartbeespoort Dam and on into the Marico, finally reaches the Elephant Child's grey-green greasy Limpopo all set about with fever trees. I might have told him how the river opens into the Indian Ocean at Xai-Xai in Mozambique. I'd have played a charming tune for its humble exit.

For many nights I dreamed about my snake betrayed.

He taught me a lot, that bassoonist: mostly about scraping reeds and the sins of the flesh. "Kissing," he said, "strengthens the muscles of the embouchure."

## 79. Perfect Timing

Marja unstrung her violin in anticipation of its repair. She informed the orchestra's management of the hairline crack just behind the fingerboard. She removed the violin from its black velvet bed and laid it on Steven's workbench. Its nut-brown body looked like a naked girl resting in the sun.

When she first saw the extended solo passage in *Temporal Salutation*, the newly commissioned symphony composed by the resident conductor's new toy boy, Marja decided she was too old for ridiculous virtuosity. Triple-stop harmonics, cross-string arpeggios, left-hand pizzicato were a sight for sore tendons. Rhythmic shifts between every conceivable time signature made her sigh. Marja was not one of those leaders who thought themselves indispensable.

The timing was excellent. Marja's left hand was taking strain. Chiefly, her ring finger. She needed a break. With Clive. She blessed the contract her late husband had drafted stipulating that she would perform only on her own Stradivarius.

"A crack in the varnish?" asked Steven.

"One that will take a month to fix," said Marja in her most authoritative voice.

It was the perfect work for her deputy to present his virtuosic ability to the world. Raoul was like the piece – athletic, muscular, aggressive. She could bank on his intention to steal the maestro's new toy boy. Raoul would play the solo with dedicated lust while she lay naked on the beach, a nut-brown Madonna, receiving temporal salutations of another kind. She would lead Clive into new territory for a month. She wouldn't be missed.

## 80. Shosholoza

Last Christmas we drove to Cape Town – 1 600 kays in a Mazda Soho – Stuart, the kids and I.

It was a three-day camel ride before we could leave the house, starting with the birds.

The cockatiels went to Oupa. The canary, named Egg, went to Cousin. But you can't foist parrots onto just anybody.

Parrots are highly strung, so I begged our neighbours to take in our African Greys. They know parrots, Bob and Verity. They keep an Amazon called Spark and a conure named Hagar, who makes a truly horrible noise. Bob and Verity also have a neurotic cat that cringes when Spark cries Mouse! They own a print shop with temperamental clients. I figured they'd cope.

The day before we journeyed, we visited the library, bought a stash of colouring-in books, new crayons and playing cards. At the grocer I collected fresh rolls, fruit juices, biltong and sucking sweets. Kyle said he wanted chocolate too.

"No chocolate," I said, "chocolate messes up the car."

That night, the children removed their schoolbooks from their backpacks, replacing them with the stuff for the trip. Without my knowledge, Grace included her school lunch box containing her uneaten chicken piece.

Before we were outside Johannesburg, Grace started singing 'Shosholoza'. She couldn't remember the rest of the song, so she just repeated that line, over and over.

"Do you have to sing that so often?" Stuart asked.

"We learned this song at school. Miss Botha said work songs help workers get through long days of boring work."

"That's very interesting. Do you know any others?"

She didn't.

I rather like the open desert punctuated by the occasional windmill and sleepy sheep. The children do not. When we stopped at the Orange River to stare at the water below, Kyle stepped into an ant nest beside the road. Great black ants with sharp pincers ran up his legs and hid in his socks.

"Ag, quit the hysterics. It's only ants."

Then I got bitten and started screaming too.

After leaving Bloemfontein, I dozed off. Grace took the opportunity to finish her yesterday's chicken. Stuart nudged me awake, asking for more.

"No chicken on car trips, Stu, it goes bad too easily."

"But Kyle wants chicken too."

"What you mean 'too'?"

"Grace was eating chicken."

Four hours away from Cape Town, Grace vomited all over her library book. Then the diarrhoea started. We tried stopping quickly in the middle of the veld, to help her squat fast enough to avoid further calamity, but not so fast that she didn't end up with thorns in her backside. To no avail. I washed her down with all the sparkling mineral water and threw the empty Evian bottle and soiled knickers into a thorn bush.

She sobbed for those knickers, her favourites, covered in glitter butterflies.

I unpacked the entire boot to find fresh panties. The heat coming off the tar at 6.00 pm was enough to make a soldier faint. If only my child's undergarments were not in the bottommost suitcase. I wished there was something other than warm coke to drink.

On our return, Egg had quit singing. Probably from the trauma of being kept beside Cousin's rat, Cheddar.

The cockatiels learned to unhook and up-end their seed bowl, throwing their food onto the bottom of the cage.

Next door, Spark escaped from his perch, which had been moved closer to the window to accommodate our birds' cage. He moseyed down the curtains, sauntered across the carpet and chewed through a cable while a last minute wedding menu for a cabinet minister's daughter (who was scheduled to go to the maternity home for an elective caesarean the following week) was being printed, the day before the wedding.

When the photocopier seized in the middle of the print run, her eyes widened in alarm. She slumped onto a rickety wooden chair. It swayed perilously beneath her.

When Verity rushed out clutching a still twitching parrot, the cabinet minister's daughter, who was phobic about birds, appeared to wet herself. A great puddle of something appeared beneath her chair. The something was amniotic fluid, not piss, and her baby wasn't going to wait for the wedding.

On our return, our birds had plucked themselves naked. They shriek incessantly copying Hagar's high-pitched screech. They no longer wake us with the sound of the kettle whistle emanating from under the bird blanket.

Instead we hear a curious clanking that sounds precisely like Bill's photocopier.

It doesn't stop there. We get the full performance:

"Lickety-shick-lickety-shick-lick."

"Bwadah!"

"Oh hell. Veriteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee..."

"Whazzup? Whazzamatter? Whadappened?"

"She-hite."

"Noooooooo..."

"Fucking Spark just popped his clogs."

I bought three tickets at Johannesburg Station last week. The kids and I will Shosholoza by train to Cape Town in Easter.

Stuart stays behind to mind the birds.

## 81. Haunting

The brass plaque bearing my father's name turns and sighs, wakes me from shifty dreams. I enter my old bedroom because I can't sleep, because the flap and rattle inside the room - in the absence of a hard wind outside the room - is unbearable.

Instead of the piano where once I stuck Zulu vocabulary lists on the lid - to memorise between F# and G melodic minors - the difference between 'buka' and 'bhuka' (look and book... or is it book and look?) there is now a clock for measuring 50-minute hours.

Its pendulum swings like an obsession a twisting motion that accelerates to the right then unwinds to accelerate to the left. In the corners of the pressed steel ceiling churlish remains of badly played Chopin linger with the anguish of my father's faceless clients.

The cracks in the Oregon strip flooring accumulate stranger's tears, like germs, like wrong notes.

Ghosts don't emerge from coffins but from weekly airings with a familiar view of the Hillbrow tower. In the morning my mother tells me she found me sleep walking again.

I say I want the piano back. She polishes the 'd' in Dr. and says, let dead cats die.

## 82. Learning to Read English

The old taxi was a good place to hide when Uncle Chippa was at the shebeen. When he returned from The Joker's Tavern, he always gave Tulip the bad secret - if he could find her.

She liked to curl up on the taxi's long back seat and remember Mama, alone in her safe place. She liked to talk to her. Sometimes her mother replied. That was Tulip's good secret.

One night when the stars seemed close enough to kiss, Mama said, "Tulip, remember how I chose your name..."

Mama had worked a cleaner at a florist in Bryanston, where they sold tulips in vibrant colours: gold, pink, orange and purple. She had never seen such flowers. The label read: Imported from the EU.

Mama bought a huge bunch. Even with the staff discount, they cost nearly half a day's wages. She wrapped them in moistened toilet paper for the long ride home. Their delicate heads bobbed on long stems as the taxi bounced over the rough roads. That night Uncle beat Mama because the money was short. She expected that. What really upset her was his crushing all the beautiful blossoms.

Just one escaped his angry boot, falling behind his chair.

"I hid that one from him until it died," whispered Mama in the quiet dark.

She never bought flowers again, but when her tiny girl was born, Mama named her Tulip.

The old taxi was a good place to recover when Tulip awoke with the bad secret burning between her legs, her chest hammering. Inside it she could breathe again. Her uncle never looked there. The rusting vehicle was invisible to him.

It had stood in the yard since he burnt out the engine one rainy Monday morning on the Soweto Highway. That had been two years ago, just after Mama died. The Taxi Association boss towed it to the Molo home later.

"Chippa, you are a big stupid!" screamed the boss.

Tulip and her classmates were walking home from school. They raced up the street to investigate the commotion. Tulip hid in the crowd, sucking her thumb.

"You drunken fools give us a bad reputation." Spittle flew from the man's mouth.

Women selling fruit on the corner left their stalls to watch. It was worth having an apple stolen to witness Chippa's humiliation.

"Didn't you see the warning light, you babalaas idiot?"

People living on Seshaba Street knew better than to provoke Chippa Moloi. They had all heard Mama's cries and crossed to the other side of the street. But Uncle was not so stupid as to shoot the taxi boss in front of the crowd. He merely fingered the holster under his jacket and glared through red-rimmed eyes past the boss. When Uncle spotted Tulip across the road, she thought she was going to vomit with fear[NCI3]. Somebody had to pay for his embarrassment - and Mama was gone.

"Fix up this vehicle," said the boss, leaving in the tow truck, "and get back to work."

That night Tulip got the bad secret for the first time.

"You my protection," said her uncle, slurring his words. "A virgin a day keeps the AIDS away..."

As soon as she could wriggle out, Tulip crept into the cupboard that still smelled faintly of Mama. Her ribs felt bruised. Wet stuff trickled down her leg. That was the first time Mama spoke to her.

"Not the cupboard, Tulip. Hide in the taxi..."

The old taxi's windows were caked in dust. WASHME had been inscribed beside an initialled heart. Tulip lay on the back seat, staring at the graffiti. She was learning to read English. She sounded the back to front words aloud: EMHSAW, em saw, am sore...

The old taxi was a good place to hide - until one day somebody wrote with a fat finger, 'Chippa Moloi has AIDS.'

### 83. Balloons

When Meisie's old aunty overheard the lady in front of her in the queue say to the child beside her who was licking the coloured shell off her Smartie to reveal its white interior, "You may have coloured balloons at your party, but not Coloured children – even if this is the new South Africa – and that's that, so please don't ask again if Meisie can come to your party," the old lady thought she would have a conniption fit.

The lady in front did not know that the fair skinned, blue-eyed woman standing right behind her was Meisie's aunty. She did not know the old lady was Coloured too. She did not appear Coloured. But that's the way of Coloureds. Sometimes they don't look it. They look White until they talk. That would have been the clue – if Aunty had opened her mouth. The lady in the queue did not know – as she plonked the balloons down on the till, beside the ingredients for the cake and jellied oranges, the candles, the crisps, the cooldrink – that the old aunty couldn't talk because her heart was bursting.

When the old aunty's heart had burst properly she fell to the floor just as the till packer was putting the last of the balloons into a strong packet, one that would not burst when the lady in the queue put it into her station wagon.

When she saw the old aunty on the ground, the lady in the queue remembered her professional calling, the vocation of her heart. She was a registered nurse. She loved her job; she loved to save lives. She bent over the old aunty and took her pulse. The lady in the queue in front of Meisie's aunty took command: ordering the manager to shield the suffering victim from the crowd, to bring a blanket, to call the ambulance, and not to bring sweet tea because sweet tea is no earthly use to an unconscious patient.

The lady in the queue in front of Meisie's aunty loved to rescue people from the brink of death. Kneeling beside the victim, not knowing she was not White, she cleared the old aunty's airways, gave her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and compressed her chest just above the spot where her heart had burst. The child who was licking the coloured shell from her Smartie stopped eating to watch. She stared at her mother saving the old aunty's life and hoped that somebody would give her a 'My Little Nurse' set for her birthday. She would put Smarties in the pill bottle for her

patients if she received such a set, because she knew that children should not play with real pills.

The lady who'd been in the queue in front of Meisie's aunty was not pleased when the doorbell rang, late on the afternoon of the party of the child who had been licking the colour off the Smarties. All the guests had arrived, carrying gifts. Somewhere underneath all that coloured paper the birthday girl hoped there was a 'My Little Nurse' set. Her mother was not pleased when the doorbell rang again. Insistently.

She was not pleased to discover the brown Meisie standing on her doorstep like an enormous turd bearing a posy of small white daisies. The lady in the queue in front of Meisie's aunty said to her child – who was still licking the colour off a Smartie, “I said you may have coloured balloons at your party but not Coloured children – even if this is the new South Africa – and that's that, so why has Meisie come to your party?”

The child shrugged.

Meisie held the flowers up to the lady who had stood in front of her aunty at the Spar and whispered, “Thank you for saving Aunty's life.”

#### 84. ... At the Bottom of Hunchback's Pond

Inside the house the phone rang. The bouncing smack smack smack of the new basketball on the driveway drowned it out. Robin had turned off his cellphone. His ipod lay on the towel on the grass. Power surged through him with each bounce and catch. He hoped Sarah would be at the match that night. Now he needed to focus. For half an hour. Absolutely. She was unpredictable.

Inside the house the phone rang. A bus roaring past in the street drowned it out. Robin was the only white boy on the Wits Rebels squad. It was sometimes lonely on the court -- especially after his spectacular fumble last week that had cost them the match against the Soweto Peppers. Tonight he must show his true colours. Sarah had been acting strange lately.

Inside the house the phone rang. The thud of his sneakers and his ragged breath drowned it out. Maybe Sarah had PMT. Focus. He could never remember her cycle. Keep focused. It changed all the time anyway.

Inside the house the phone rang. His pounding heart drowned it out. He looked at his watch. He'd been going for 29 minutes straight, without a break. Sometimes she didn't bleed for months. Ten more dunks. Nine, eight, seven. She been looking pale recently. Maybe he could encourage her to take up jogging with him.

Inside the house the phone rang. Six, five, four. Maybe Sarah was doing drugs again. Keep your eye on the ball. Three, two. And there were all those weird poems about drowning. One! Shit, he hoped not. Robin flopped onto the grass on his back. He didn't understand poetry. The clouds were shaped like breasts.

Inside the house the phone rang. Ten rings. It was bound to be her. Sarah could wait a moment, till he caught his breath. The phone stopped. Maybe she'd stopped sulking. That would be nice. She'd been moody all week because he refused to go to the Van Reenen's party with her. The guys always got vrot there. Somebody got a finger broken at the last party. A smashed jaw at the previous one.

Robin had quit drinking when he got selected to the squad. It improved his performance. In bed too. Sarah said his sperm tasted really good. Very sweet. Her mother liked it that her daughter had a sports nut boyfriend. How's my favourite health freak, she would ask, making him a yoghurt smoothie. Some sacrifices were worth it. Robin's groin throbbed pleasantly. He rolled over on the grass, heaved himself up, looped the ipod through his little finger. Dry flakes from last week's

mowing stuck to his sweaty legs. He flicked them with his towel. A cool shower. He'd jerk off under the water, then call her back. He wanted to placate Sarah, suggest a movie after the game. Or dinner. Robin opened the front door. The phone rang. He lifted the receiver.

“Hey darling...”

“Where the fuck you been?” It was his sister.

“Jeez, just shooting hoops.”

“I been trying to get hold of you for hours.” Her voice rasped.

“What's up?”

“Sarah. They found Sarah at the bottom...”

## 85. The Thirteenth Train

There are 13 trains a week from Berlin to East London in the Amatola region of the Eastern Cape.

Nosipho sits at her desk on a Sunday evening. She's studying interior design by correspondence. Or rather, she's trying to study. She is trying to be calm and still to optimise her memory retention. She knows how many trains there are because she counts them as they pass each day.

She painted her desk a pale salmony pink, the colour of the Dawn body lotion her grandmother would rub into her old skin if there were money. It is the colour of the ice-cream she will buy Gogo when she is a qualified interior designer. The desk is the colour of her once white underwear after she left it soaking with the new red face cloth she bought on sale from the Indian shop. She forgot how cheap dye runs. Maybe her memory retention would improve if she had something to cook.

She used to attend the Nowawe Senior Secondary School in Tshabo village. Before she got sick. Now she reads good advice in old magazines, like 'Redecorating on a Shoe String'. That was not easy to decode. She translates these articles using the English-Xhosa dictionary she stole from the Bisho library when they went on a field trip. English has many idioms that are difficult to comprehend. She reads *Garden & Homes* and *Women's Value*, which she finds at the rubbish dump.

The article explained how pink induces advanced states of relaxation, evoking the serenity of the womb. The translation took a long time. Sometimes she forgets to cook. Even when there is food. Gogo forgets too. Maybe Nosipho will study translation after she has become an interior decorator. In *Fair Lady* magazine she read, 'Discover Your Hidden Assets'. It revealed wonderful ways of developing a mindset for success and motivation.

Once a month Nosipho's CD4 count is checked at the clinic. The sister there says it is decreasing steadily. Soon she must start antiretroviral therapy.

Nosipho tried to use the power of positive thinking to calm Gogo down when she cried because the food money was spent on paint.

'Use your Imagination'. It is a good tip.

Nosipho will take the thirteenth train one day. All the way to East London. From there she will catch a bus to Port Elizabeth. And then she will fly to

Johannesburg. From Johannesburg it is a small hop to Berlin in Germany – if you know how to ‘access your hidden assets’.

But if you can’t access them, then it is good to have a desk that induces advanced states of relaxation. Meditation is scientifically proven to enhance the immune system.

**86. Where is Boeta's Skedonk?**

Last year there was a Ferris wheel here. On the empty lot outside Riebeeckstadt. Boeta and I stole raspberry kisses in the gondola, wishing it would stop – break down – with us midair, staring over the satellite dishes on the old warehouses below. Vehicle tracking systems to recover hijacked trucks. Spun sugar fluttered from the candyfloss stall and popcorn kernels stuck in our teeth. Sober still, we sang like drunks. Later three hundred pondokkies popped up, squished together on the ghosts of fairground merriment. Housing for the masses. Perhaps the previously disadvantaged are happy now? I reckon they might find Boeta's skedonk here. I look at a shiny tin roof, with a car tyre on it. Lightning protection. That's what the police captain told me. Is this what a hijacker's house looks like? I wish the Ferris wheel were here still. Maybe I would find Boeta in a gondola now.

## 87. The Air of Words

A pale pink slug emerges from between Josie's teeth onto the dental floss that is wrapped so tightly around her thumbs, that they bulge like purple grapes. Her teeth are too close together. That's the reason she gets cavities, said her dentist. She went to see him three weeks ago. When she tries to pull the floss between them, it snags. It always does. Josie pulls the floss tight, wiggling it back and forwards under pressure to ease it through the gaps. When she gets it right, she manages to ease it down. Other times, the floss bites into her gums. They bleed. The slimy accretions of the day smell grim even though she hasn't eaten anything at all. When she manages to get the floss through without bumping her gums, the slugs are a pale creamy colour. When her gums bleed, they come out pink. She squashes them between her fingers and smells them. Even as she does so, she knows she will regret touching them. Her fingers will stink all afternoon of the terrible things she wanted to say, the terrible thoughts that stick between her teeth, seeking protection from the air of words. The dentist referred her to an orthodontist who suggested braces. This is not going to happen. She drops the skein of floss into a rubbish bin overflowing with tissues and empty toilet paper rolls. It is three weeks since she took out the garbage from the bathroom bin. At night the slugs slither up the edge of the bin, joining forces, they emerge as a giant entity, creeping slowly up the passage, over the carpet, a pink and cream zebra-striped monster. It approaches her bed and covers her face. She wakes just before the slugs crawl back into her mouth. This, she tells her therapist, is why she can never have braces, why she cannot throw out the garbage, why she stopped eating three weeks ago. There are things she cannot say and the slugs want to stay in her mouth.

## 88. Ride the Tortoise

Milk spurts in one pale arc onto the hot tar, where it turns to steam. My left breast is cool and pale, the right, shiny and red – an angry apple. My nipple has disappeared. The baby wouldn't latch when I tried to feed him on the front seat of the car. I lifted my shirt, but his angry fists pummelled my unyielding breast.

Inside the bright red Audi both children cry, accompanied by Thomas Hampson singing Mahler's *Kindertotenliede* on the sound system.

I stand beside the car, refusing to cry, waiting for the angry apple to flow. I look at the telephone poles on the road between Sesriem and Helmeringhausen. Our destination is Eis-Eis.

My husband said, "Get out, I don't want a sticky mess in my car." How far it is to somewhere when one is in the middle of nowhere?

The doctor's prescription has increased my milk flow. My son is cutting teeth and doesn't want to drink. My husband adjusts the volume on the car stereo to drown out the baby's hungry screams.

*"Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgehn..."*

The soloist sings over marching violins.

*"Now the sun will rise as brightly  
as if no misfortune had occurred in the night."*

The telephone poles disappear into the Naukluft Mountains in one direction and into the bleak Namibian desert in the other. How long will my husband wait? He turns the music up a little more, which means he is irritated. If he drives away, will he leave the children with me? If he takes the children and leaves me alone, I will plod from pole to pole, listening to the Baron's voice sparking along the cable:

*"Sind Sie dort?" Are you there?*

*"Ich bin nicht hier!" I am not here.*

*"Wo sind Sie?" Where are you?*

*"Es gibt niemand hier." There is no one here.*

My hard breast dribbles one reluctant tear. I press the hot spot and massage downward, toward the nipple, like the clinic sister showed me. Once before I had a blocked duct. Hot compresses helped. If I could stand in a shower and massage it, the blockage will pop out and I will be fine. Last time, I stood under the hot water and stroked and stroked. Eventually the plug pinged against the glass door. The release

was instant. A solid jet of milk drummed against the tiles. I watched the blue-white swirl flow down the drain.

If I can hold out to Eis-Eis, there will be hot water there.

I look at the telephone poles. I need that plug to work its way out, now, so that the baby can latch again. I press and press but nothing happens. I twist my nipple between my fingers, hoping to roll the blockage out. I want to scream at the pain, but it will scare my little girl who sits in her car seat, with her fingers in her ears. She also does not like Mahler.

We left Duwisib castle in the cold dawn. The journey has been an expensive trip undertaken in a bid to get to know each other again. Eight months after my baby's birth, my husband wants the bedroom back to normal – baby in the cot next door, wife offering him her breasts instead. The trip was supposed to do that. We have driven 5 000 km without speaking to each other, this silence untouched by crying children and heavy Mahler. One month ago I started banging my head on the sharp edge of the shower cubicle to make the noise inside it go away.

“The castle was built by Baron Captain Heinrich von Wolf in 1909,” the tour guide said yesterday as I stared at the vast chandelier. Last night, an infinite number of crystal drops hung in the black sky. We watched shooting stars. My heart beat as if the Baron's one hundred feral horses were galloping through it.

“The Baron returned to Dresden after the Nama-Herero uprising and married the step-daughter of the US consul,” said the tour guide.

I heard the beating of his heart. It echoes still in the castle's 22 empty rooms. Does it beat from hope or horror?

“The Baron and his wife,” said the guide, pointing out the severe oil portraits, “commissioned an architect to build the castle. It was to reflect his commitment to the German Military cause. After landing at Luderitz, the building materials, which had been imported from Germany, were transported 600 km by ox-wagons.”

My daughter wanted to feed the tortoise that the baron left behind. I was scared it would eat her hand. It was a giant beast. The tour guide said the tortoise was four hundred years old.

The Meerlust Cabernet we drank under the shooting stars tempered the cold night air but not my despair. The bungalow that overlooked the sandstone castle was without electricity. I tried again by gaslight, to help my son to latch. Last night he got croup and the hot tap of the shower trickled just a feeble stream.

I thought about those telephone poles at 2 am and wanted to phone my mother. I knew she would tell me to keep the baby upright, so I sat him in my arms, chewing on my nipple, to keep him from crying, to keep his airways open a little longer.

*The misfortune has fallen on me alone.*

*The sun – it shines for everyone.*

“Stonemasons from Italy, Switzerland and Ireland were hired to build the castle,” said the tour guide. Did they leave their wives and babies at home? Was I the first woman to nurse a sick child at this castle? Were there even any ghosts left here to tell me what to do?

“While travelling to Europe in 1914, the First World War broke out and the ship carrying Baron Von Wolf and his wife was diverted to Rio.”

At 3 am I called a doctor 150 km away. I hoped he might tell me how to humidify the desert. I thought he would tell me to sprinkle milk on the stars or tears in the dust, but he said that the Baron’s wife had found passage to Europe on a Dutch ship, and the Baron had disguised himself as a woman to avoid arrest. On arrival in Europe the Baron rejoined the German army.

“Keep the baby on the breast and disguise yourself as a man,” said the doctor. “How will I get there?” I asked.

“Ride the tortoise to my rooms. I’ll see you in the morning.”

*You must not keep the night inside you;*

*you must immerse it in eternal light.*

At 4 am I called a priest, to ask him to perform the last rites telephonically. He told me he was occupied, on the battlefield of the Somme. He said he was giving the Baron the last rites and suggested I bang my head a little, to quieten the voices inside it.

“The noise,” he said, “is bothering me. How can I give last rites if you are making such a din?”

I wanted to creep through the dark, over the rocky ground, back to the castle to open the vast armoire where all the antique weapons were stored, but the Baron had climbed into bed with me. He refused to open the door.

“Was wollen Sie?” he asked. *What do you want?*

I wanted a gun. It seemed a good idea to have one close by in such difficult circumstances.

“Ich brauche ein Gewehr,” I said, unaware I could speak German. I didn’t even know the word for ‘gun’ was ‘gewehr’.

“Haben Sie ein Gewehr?” he asked. *Have you got a gun?*

I did not have a gun. He told me I should do my wifely duty. I said it wasn’t practical, the trip. Not with a baby and a toddler. I said we should have stayed home. The castle could have waited.

“Wife, do your duty.”

I wished I were a Teutonic Kali, wrapping my legs around the Baron’s head, biting it off. A gun in each arm: one for my daughter, one for my son. One in my mouth, one thrust between my legs.

*A little light has been extinguished in my household;*

*Light of joy in the world, be welcome.*

Beside the bright red Audi, I study the telephone poles on the road between Sesriem and Helmeringhausen. The Baron’s heart beating from those 22 rooms of his castle, beats in the hooves of the feral horses galloping through my veins, beats along the telephone wire, beats from somewhere to nowhere. Inside the car, the babies cry, accompanied by Thomas Hampson singing Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* on the sound system.

Outside the car one breast’s milk sizzles on the hot tar.

“Es gibt niemand hier,” hisses the fragrant steam, “*There is no one here.*”

## 89. Under-9 Cricket XI

I tell my captain I must go to the dentist, produce the appointment card as proof, cancel the dentist and go to watch my boy play cricket instead. My boy does not know I have come to watch his looping slow left arm spin. It is sweet to watch my boy play cricket even though he can't see me because he is down on the pitch below, my son, down there in front of me and I on the bank above, with the sun in my eyes. I stand with the other mothers watching their boys field that hard red ball flying fast and sharp. The mother beside me waves to her boy, waves with her hand full of diamonds, waves to her boy who knows where to look for her, knows she is there. But my boy does not know that I am watching him so he does not look my way.

After her boy has waved back she says, we didn't expect to see you back. Then asks me how I am, how are you *really*. Fine, I say, just fine. She wants to know how my new posting is going, politely enquires if things are still so bad in Soweto. But I do not want to talk to her, or notice her surreptitious stare at my uniform, don't want to acknowledge her wondering whether I'm as corrupt as the constables caught on TV. She chews her distaste like a nervous tic. I do not want to take my eyes off my son, do not want to envy her pretty polished toenails, manicured like rubies in strappy sandals.

No, I do not want to think about my ugly boots and my painful feet. I do not want to say, yes, it is a safe job for a white woman in Soweto, because it isn't. I do not want to say, no, it is hideous and horrifying because her phoney concern makes me feel small, feel less than this mother with a hand full of diamonds. I do not want to look away from my boy, to make polite conversation, but I do. I would not look away if my boy knew to look at me, to see me looking back at him, but he doesn't. And when I look for him again, my boy is gone.

The Cricket Eleven is now only ten, but the game goes on. It is nearly finished. Soon I must go back to my captain and rub my jaw, feign a thick lip, slur my speech and appear in pain. I walk down the hill to the edge of the pitch and ask the coach where my boy is. I tell him my boy was fielding and then he disappeared. What boy, ask ten boys standing around, staring at my uniform, making boy salutes, marching like clowns. I say where is my boy.

One boy says he turned into a giraffe and stalked back to the bush, two say he flew away with the pigeons, three tell me he hopped into the grasshopper's grass.

Four pull their sunhats lower over their eyes and look sideways at each other. An eleventh child returns from the change room. It is not my boy. The coach is new, he looks bewildered, asks my boy's name, says Ma'am, I'm sorry, your son didn't play today, says let me phone the games master to find out if he's playing at another venue. He makes a call on his mobile, but before the games master has answered, I turn to leave. Ten boys laugh at the police officer that has lost a child. It is never sweet to lose a child.

**90. The Friend of a Donkey Company Must Expect Many Kicks...**

~ A Tale Of Two Zebras ~

Zulu and Zeus sit on plastic chairs that were left outside last summer. Their shiny hooves swing backwards and forwards. Zulu's haunches form unnatural angles with the floor. He struggles with the rhythm.

"Sit further back," says Zeus.

Although not a fat beast, like Zeus, the sun-brittle plastic splits beneath the wriggling Zulu. The chair's legs splay. Zulu spins across the floor on his back, kicking Zeus's shin.

**91. Would You Kindly...**

Dear Fred,

Thanks so much for agreeing to housesit while we are in Cape Town for the Christmas holiday. We really appreciate your kind offer.

*That you're still in your sister's debit is a measure of your capacity for emotional extortion and double-dealing manipulation. I objected vociferously to your presence after the last fiasco. Your sister says that blood is thicker than water and that the responsibility will do you good.*

Would you kindly note the following?

1. Please empty the post box daily.
2. Please close the curtains and switch on the outside lights at night to deter vagrants and thieves. *It might at least deter the ones that aren't already house sitting for their relatives.*
3. The windows on the west side – Candice's room and the study – should be kept closed as the rain comes from that direction. Please leave the kitchen, dining room, lounge and main bedroom windows slightly open at all times though. *While I concede that you feel that bathing is a ridiculous western convention, inappropriate for the African soul, a little through draft to rid the place of your body odour before our return would be nice. Alternately, take a daily shower. There is plenty of extra soap in the cupboard beneath the basin.*
4. Please water the plants in the window boxes every three days. There are ashtrays in the kitchen cupboard beside the fridge for your convenience. *Spent condoms, like cigarette butts, should ideally go in the garbage, not the window box.*
5. Help yourself to the contents of the freezer *Was that the neighbour's missing cat you left in the freezer last year?* and the liquor cabinet where you're sure to find a good nightcap for your first evening here.
6. Please empty the kitchen garbage bin into the outside wheelie bin and push it out on Monday night. The garbage collection occurs very early on Tuesday. If you miss this week the garbage will only be collected in two weeks time because of the Christmas holiday. *I trust that this time I shall not*

*have to deal with the rotting vestiges of your orgiastic indulgence. Did you honestly use 76 condoms in a two-week period? You alone?*

7. Please do not undertake any home improvements in our absence. *You may have thought the pale lemon bathroom looked nicer after you had ragged the walls with lobster-coloured paint and other indistinct bodily fluids but we rather liked it the way it was. It took a lot of scraping and three coats of paint to restore it to its former state.*
8. There is a list of emergency numbers on the kitchen wall beside the phone. Grammy across the road knows you're coming. She'll probably just pop her head in to invite you over for shortbread and a pot of tea! *I had a word in Inspector Kotzé's ear about your pot of pot. Why couldn't you book into the rehab centre this time of year, by the way? It would have been a whole lot more convenient all round.*
9. There is an internet café on 4<sup>th</sup> Ave for your convenience. *I'm sure the management will be agreeable to your googling of 'donkey sex', 'fisting' and 'dominatrix Pietermaritzburg'. Regrettably my computer is being serviced while we are away.*
10. The bed in the guest room has been made up for you. Please make yourself comfortable in that room. Our double bed is not for your use. Fresh linen is kept in the hall closet should you need a change of sheets at any stage. *There is rather a sweet green mamba that I have deposited in a pillowslip between your bedclothes. Once you have made its acquaintance, you have at most a few minutes to get medical attention. The panic button has, regrettably, stopped working. I will have to reinstall it on our return. I'm sure you will not be alone long, though, as Inspector Kotzé has assured me he will keep an eye on you.*

I trust you find your stay at 34 Louw Street very peaceful.

Warm regards,

Oliver.

## 92. Drawing my Childhood with my Left Hand

The group leader says we should draw a picture from our childhood with our left hand. This exercise unnerves me. I am six again, playing in solitude. In this world, the sheep go where I tell them to, unlike my sisters. I do not have to do anybody's bidding because nobody knows where I am. In the hydrangea bed below the veranda I am hidden from sight.

Amidst the plentiful leaves and lilac blossoms I turn the slope of the flowerbed into a farmyard and engineer the drip from the gutter above into a gentle stream that flows into a watering hole for my miniature cows. Pebbles reinforce the dam wall. I have woven a kraal from the spines of Jacaranda fronds I collected below the shady branches. My name is being called, but nobody can find me. My sisters do not find me; my mother does not find me.

As I play, Henny-Penny, the silky bantam comes to pluck earthworms from the damp ground beneath the hydrangeas. Go away, Henny-Penny, I say. You are too big for this game. I show her the tiny plastic rooster from my baby sister's new Fisher Price barnyard set. MADE IN HONG KONG has been cast in tiny print under his left wing. I have just learned to read and I like school.

Henny-Penny says that it is time to go to church and my mother is looking for me. She points out that my dress is splattered in mud and my new patent leather shoes are spoiled. Henny-Penny tells me to hide my shoes under the lawn mower in the cellar. There is a swallow's nest on the ceiling of the cellar. It is made also made of mud.

This left hand journey unnerves me. I am six again and I cannot hold a crayon very well. My fingers slip around the fat stubs when I press down hard on the paper. My letters are not neat or pretty. I am sure the girl sitting next to me is copying my good idea. I know it is a good idea because my picture is much better than hers. I hope Sr. Anne will give me a gold star. I like school ever so much.

Perhaps if I finish first, she will let me light the candle at the little altar in our classroom. It was my turn to bring flowers for the altar. I brought the fattest purple hydrangea bloom I could find in the garden, but it was too big for the little vase and water spilled on to the white lace cloth. The Blessed Virgin got wet too. I started to cry. Sr. Anne is kind and beautiful. She says I am a good girl, a clever girl. She lets

me help her, but it is not like helping my mother, which I do not like. My teacher shows me how to cut the stem shorter so that the vase would not overbalance.

I am six again and trying very hard. I want to get this picture right. Just right. I want Sr. Anne to tell my mother that I am good and clever.

I am six again, and for the first time in a long time, I am very happy.

### 93.   **Rocker Surgery**

Pop brought home a rocker from Paradise Parlour, which was not a second hand furniture shop. My sister was seven months due. My mother said junk smelling like a thousand unwashed bums wasn't welcome. It didn't rock. It squeaked, as it lurched drunkenly to the left. She didn't want a repository of other people's bodily fluids in her house, she said, glaring at my sister.

In the countdown to his first grandchild, Pop performed open-heart surgery on that chair. He unpicked the upholstery, threw out the brittle foam. The dog chewed it, littering the living room. Pop replaced a broken strut with a piece of the old banister that had lain in the woodpile for years. He bought a new spring and three yards of industrial denim to staple a new cover in place.

When he was done, the chair sang and danced and smelled of cotton. Blue dye rubbed off on my hands where I gripped to ride it. But my sister was superstitious. She refused to sit in it. She cried when my father forced her to.

Later they tried open-heart surgery on the baby. It worked better on the rocker. My sister said the chair remembers how it stole her luck.

#### 94.    **Psycophant**

Dear Mr Dutch Joop Bersee

In my last correspondence, I expressed some anxiety that I was not praising your poems highly enough. I said I was concerned that you might consider me a fawning sycophant. I didn't want you to think I was attempting to praise my insincere way into your good graces, and hence, into an acceptance on your esteemed poetry site.

I was greatly reassured when you said I should not use words like 'sycophant', because your wife had torn your dictionary in half and S-Z is now being used to bolster up your couch. I realise what a fortunate twist of fate it is that the word starts with an 's' and not a 'p', like 'psychology'.

I'm sure the couch likes the dictionary very much. It is probably learning many satisfactory new words. Perhaps it is even discovering that couches do very much better when they are sycophantic to the bums that sit upon them. Not that I'm suggesting you are a bum. I'm sure you are a very nice Dutch man.

I would go and do likewise instantly if I had a couch. But which dictionary would I use?

The Afrikaans dictionary would do the trick. It is certainly thick enough. No reflection of course on that nationality that are descendants of your noble forefathers who are also ancestors of mine. I could try that dictionary. But for one thing – the Afrikaners are not great into service. I wouldn't trust a dictionary like that not to deliberately spoil your day if you sat where they had been forced to serve.

No, I will save the Afrikaans dictionary for the day I need a ruler. I don't actually possess a ruler. The life of a poet is hard. I cannot afford one. I use my credit card when I need a ruler. But it is groaning from overuse right now. The Afrikaans dictionary would prefer to double as a ruler very much better.

The Zulu one then? It might suit the purpose better. Zulus have very nice bums – as a generalisation. They are sturdy monuments to an ancient culture. If one has never had the fortune of decent buttocks, then this proud attribute is the source of very great envy to a pale-faced slack-backsided individual.

But no. No. No. That is way too politically incorrect. King Goodwill Zwelethini will take offence. He will lose his good will, will send his impis to massacre me. It will never do have Inkatha Freedom Fighters toyi-toying outside the

window where I would put the couch if I had one. At least I have a pretty window. I am grateful of that, let me assure you.

I own a tatty French dictionary bought at a kerkbazaar, where they also sold good koeksusters. That was when I was in high school. It did not serve me well then, bringing me a pitiful D for French. I don't imagine it will serve me (or the couch I would like to buy) any better now. It will not be the French dictionary I select for this job of couch bolstering.

Now, I must leap from my pondering of which dictionary I would destroy for the couch I do not have.

You will get a nice letter from me later today telling you one of two things: Either I will have bought a couch that requires no dictionary for stabilisation and I will have bought ear plugs to shut out the sound of the groaning credit card.

Or I will have bought the Reader's Digest Multi-Purpose dictionary in anticipation of the couch I will buy when I am a rich poet because you have paid me handsomely for all my poems you will publish on your nice internet site.

That would be the best solution, as I am very keen to emulate your style in home decoration. Now that I know you don't know what sycophantic means, I rest assured that you will not think less of me if I say: You are my hero.

Poet-in-Waiting, South Africa

## 95. Arms and Wings

Yesterday I had arms that moved and did things. In the morning my limbs lifted the girl child above my head and twirled her. I think she giggled, but it wasn't clear. Then they dressed and fed her, and washed her messy face. She scowled at the cloth, or that's what it looked like. Later the arms drove me to the high school, where they held a flute, and showed a teenager how to play études and scales.

Those arms drove me back to the house in the suburbs. On the stoep I opened the door of the parrot cage and scratched the bird's head. Its beak bounced as it mouthed, "Polly put the kettle on." It's a new trick that, the bird mouthing the song it once could sing.

At 4 p.m., I crossed the veggie patch and pulled out a blackjack plant, growing in the spinach bed. It buzzed and snapped at me -- angry at its decapitation, then whining, the weed wilted on the hot stones. Then I opened the latch of the toyhouse post box, bolted with a rusty nail. I wiped my palms, sweat-dusty on my jeans. The postbox exhaled a heavy sigh. I sorted the mail while the baby slept, and opened all but one note. I never held paper that weighed so much as that one envelope, heavy as a coffin.

I put it, unopened, under my pillow, and ran water for the baby's bath. I tested the temperature, like I always do, but my inner wrist registered neither hot nor cold. The baby seemed happy though and she fusses if the water's too hot. So, I suppose, the water was right. But it's been bothering me that I might accidentally hurt her. I don't want to burn her. I try the water again for a signal. But it will not speak; it no longer sings the lullaby it did when I bobbed in the bath, heavy with child.

I started making supper, but dropped the Bunnykins plate. It cracked into bite-sized pieces. I took the carrot from the broken Peter Rabbit in my left hand and grated it against the peeler in my right. I watched the paper-thin strips of the vegetable flake and fall, but felt neither metal nor moisture. I tried ice and the just-boiled kettle for a point of reference. But neither made an impression. They too had fallen silent.

When I stroked the grater, it was no longer vicious. The texture was smooth; it might even have been comforting. I think that was the last thing I felt. I saw I had finished grating the carrot when red spots marked the counter and stained the little orange pile of gratings. My fingertips looked ragged—not a pretty sight.

I remembered salt. Someone once gave me salt for my wounds. But the salt had no sting. I vaguely recall something scriptural in that: What can be done when salt loses its sting? It surprised me to see that my hands still managed pegs and shoelaces, car keys and padlocks. I was perplexed that they still functioned and served me.

This morning I woke and my upper limbs were gone. A black woman had tied the baby on to her back and the child slept. I went to the toilet, and I'm sure I was alone. Yet who removed my undergarments and wiped me dry? My car keys are gone and the grater too.

Today I am restless and confused. Probably I'm mourning or perhaps I have leprosy. There's a nurse here, or two. "This is a leper colony?" I asked. She unpacked my pyjamas into a steel cabinet on castors.

"You see, I liked having arms," I said when she didn't answer me.

"They say grief does strange things to one. I never knew grief could eat fingers and palms," I tried to explain to another nurse as she rolled back the blankets and patted the mattress, indicating that I should sit down.

"I may be grieving for the dropped Bunnykins plate; but perhaps I'm sorrier about that than I am about my departed elbows and hands."

Is it the loss of coldness, or the absence of heat that makes the wet pricks come unbidden to my eyes? Shall I see Jesus if I shout, "I am unclean!" I look again at my arms and they are wings. Perhaps I have died and am now with the saviour in heaven.

Should I yell "Hallelujah!"

The nurse says no. My tears flow now; but am I weeping with joy?

No. When I taste my tears, I remember a little again. When I taste my tears, I remember a loss.

I am sad because I gave my wrists away. I offered them to a big man, who I thought was nice. I asked him to look after them, but he took them away. He sent me a baby in exchange. I forget his name, and I lost his address. Now I'm remembering a little more and perhaps I'll find him again. He wrote me a letter, but I don't know where I put it.

Tomorrow I shall ask the wings to write for me, requesting that by return of post, the big man send my wrists back to me. The angels will carry the letter to him and return them feather-wrapped, safe and sound.

Then I shall lift the silver flute, plant carrots in the rough red earth and fold the washing, crisp on the line. When I hear again the song from the tap, I shall finger the water, warm and soft. I'll splash bath-time games with the gurgling infant and cover her in kisses. When I have my wrists once more, I shall wash and nurse my baby again.

## 96. Diamond Nights

Your Johannesburg knows how you search the night with star-bright teeth. It stops buzzing for a moment and watches in awe, as you comb dark water looking for diamonds. It waits for the moment when you engrave your song upon glass, and your Johannesburg holds its breath.

It also knows you endure the dusty dry days with a Zulu-black mood and not enough sleep. You look at your milk skin, cold as the moon, but under the sun, liquid gold pours and sets a solid nugget shaped like a heart.

You leave your iced bed, white with despair, and slip away from your grief for two candle-lit hours.

When your mind stalks bedroom minefields and your war-zoned body recoils from the fierce glare of searchlights, you need something more to live for - just to survive.

And, when security guards patrol your street in bullet-proof vests and you wait in the tattered shade of the peppered rainbow, you must have a lover to get through the night. Where terror and white cells compete in your bone marrow and interstitial dim spaces fizz with fear, there the frozen moon is eventually eclipsed. By the tropical vigour of a heart-warm place and an eye-bright pace, you were restored.

That was your working time, though a dangerous secret. You escaped from your home while nobody needed you. Children slept, dirt lay down, dogs snore-wheezed and your husband dreamt about eigen values and algorithms, co-linearity and the mathematics of co-dependency.

During the lunar months of the summer sphere the nightly impatiens glowed silver under the ivory climbing rose. Camellia petals were platinum angels bringing incense to earth as they floated over the ticking electric fence. In the cooling autumn, the leafless boughs of the Loerie tree formed moon shadows in dark-sharp clarity and dropped their noisy-bird fruit in a delineated mess.

By the middle of winter, your private rendezvous with your lover-screened computer brightened the silence. Warmed in candlelight, the nightly thrill lent supreme completion. So much more so than the face cloth win or victory in the hairbrush fight. Your hard-won serenity in the traffic and the kitchen (not to mention other minor mother-miracles) pale in comparison. But you forget, it was only a loan.

Your midnight purpose yielded your heart happier than the welcome boys do. You fetched them from school and their aeroplane hugs landed you on the grass, wrapped you in laughter, and infused your delight. Fuller than a shopping trolley, other mothers stared at your pride; envious, they watched your unrestrained glee. They saw the trio, the boys and you, walking arm in arm to buy coke. You collected the day and revelled in its sticky-faced offerings, and you wished this threesome might prove enough to keep you. But snuggling only in your sons' dreamy embraces and ducking the barbs of their father's sharp tongue was never enough to hold or protect.

Like a reverse Cinderella, it is only after night's noon that you emerge. Full-creamed in the coffee hour, to dance and sing, you weave your body of words and pluck colours from the dark. Scarf-hatted and quilt-wrapped you are nearly winter warm – heated just enough to melt the forming bruise and shifting shapes that harden your bedroom, and grow bold in daylight.

But tonight was so much darker than usual. You slipped through the key-squeak without making a sound, but no latticed cobwebs patterned your doorway like a magic carpet. Only dull blinds formed a chilly welcome on the footsore mat. Behind the thin-lipped sneer of the old mean moon, the Southern Cross had little clout. Orion held his breath, he felt terribly faint. He was too weak to defend you against the moon's derision. Your absent lover left you quivering and frail, and thin as the sneer on the geriatric mother's face.

Jealous of your passion, mother moon cast a shadow over your enchantment. She leached your energy and bleached your hope, sapped your strength and died a little more. Neither dogs nor crickets deterred the dangerous stillness. Tonight held no joy in your key-strokes, your finger fall; neither ecstatic discharge, nor tearful release.

Your lover stood you up under a razor wire snigger. His absence a rebuff harpooning your hope before his distant denial assegaied your heart.

And by the Goddess, you are cross. You want to eat him alive. You want to torch his hair with hellfire and damnation; you will singe his lips in rabid fury. You want to swallow paraffin and strike a match. And even if like a meteor you burn up doing so, you will die as you light once again the night sky.

**97. An Owl at my Ankle**

Today is the first day, my new teenager, since you left me as a woman. I wear your socks to work – the ones with gold stars, weird birds. Your feet are now bigger than mine, but the socks fit nicely. While I teach Grade Two to sing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, a turquoise owl alights on my ankle, grooms its pink-spotted wings with an orange beak, eyes blinking, polishes its glittering purple halo on its puffy breast.

It drums on the tambourine, dances on the xylophone, shakes its shoulders and flies out through the triangle dangling from the music stand. A small boy finds a curling feather under the piano stool.

“Your owl left you a message,” he says, handing it to me. I look at the plume, look at the boy.

“I can’t read the words,” I say.

“Don’t you understand Owl-ish?”

“No.”

“It’s easy,” says the boy, “if you hold the feather to the light.”

He stares into the sun, squints at the minute ciphers inscribed on the spine, and reads aloud to me, “I never said you could borrow my funky socks.”

## 98. Dead Heads

Oupa was deaf and forgetful, becoming more so. He clacked his teeth while tying the climber rose back onto the front porch railing, tweaking off dead heads with his sharp nails as he worked. Sometimes he left his dentures on a chair or in the drinks cabinet. His skin was like tight silk, inclined to split at the smallest bump. He often walked about dripping blood.

Dr Deek stopped by wearing red plaid trousers the day after Ma had whispered to Mrs Deek in the aisle where the pumpkins were sold, that Oupa was doing strange things at night.

The doctor greeted him twice. Oupa stood straight and blinked rapidly. He towered over the doctor. Before offering a handshake, he wiped the blood off his fingers where the thorns had scratched him. In his best English he said, How might I be of assistance to a stranger on this fine day? Mama appeared at the railing and said, Pa, this is Dr Deek, you know him. He stitched back your finger when you fought the lawnmower; remember? Remember?

Pleased to meet your Dr Geek, said Oupa. Ma pursed her lips in disapproval -- perhaps because Oupa said the doctor's name wrong, or maybe because Oupa had wet himself again, or because I was giggling like a ninny. It was the pursed lips look that signalled me to disappear, sharpish.

I ate the last six koeksusters, which I would say Oupa had given me if I was asked. But Ma never asked about the koeksusters. Not that day, or the next. Ma had other things to think about, like buying adult nappies, and fetching Oupa back from the other side of town, and making him put his clothes back on when he took them off in the middle of the day.

## 99. The Christmas Box

I am in a box. The box from the new fridge makes a good house. Bennett said I must smarten it up. He is my stepbrother. On one wall I draw curtains and a window. I want to ask Bennett what color scheme he likes, but he's busy at work. I'll have to decide myself. He says I must stay home to cook because that's woman's work, like home decorating. And making babies. He says we will make a baby together. When Bennett returns, this place better be ship-shape. He won't come home to a tip, no sir.

There's no rush to cook because we just ate. I don't like stringy dry turkey, but Grandma's roast potatoes were crispy and delicious – I gobbled down six! After dinner we had ice cream from the new freezer section, even though I felt stuffed. The old fridge's icebox didn't freeze, so Mum never bought ice cream.

On another wall I draw a TV with Batman on the screen. Bennett will like that. Mum and Bennett's dad are napping. Grandma watches TV with her hearing aid unplugged. It's difficult to draw lying on my tummy. My arm cramps. My crayons from Santa snap. I hate that. I want to show Bennett my broken crayons, but I mustn't disturb him. Men's work is terribly important.

I draw a clock next to the TV. Men's work takes so long. This place is ship-shape, Bennett, please come home.

Maybe he's out riding. Bennett disappeared last time we played hide-and-seek together. I hid for hours. He called me a crybaby afterwards. Perhaps he's away on business, traveling to see a client – but his bike is still in the garage. Maybe he's smoking in his office.

I won't tell, I say, knocking on the old fridge door. No answer.

Come out now, Benn, I say. Silence.

I can't open it. The old fridge door is too heavy to lift lying on its back like this.

## 100. 100 Papers

Joe had an hour before his piano student was due. He was not looking forward to the arrival of Jayde Cilliers' mother, with whom he had 'had words' last lesson.

Jayde was a sweet six-year-old with missing teeth who started piano lessons three months earlier. She could play C, G and D major scales perfectly over one octave, hands together. She was nearly finished John Thompson's *Easiest Piano Course*. The little girl had made excellent progress. Her grandmother had returned from her holiday. The week before, all the letter names had been pencilled in to her book below each note, and all the fingerings written above in the old woman's spiky script.

When he challenged Mrs Cilliers about the intrusion, she said they merely wanted to fast-track their daughter's musical career.

"It's taking much too long," she complained. "Maryna Hertzog will perform a Haydn concerto with the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra next month. I'm sure Jayde is far more talented than she is."

Joe rolled his eyes. He wanted to say that the fast track was for athletes, not pianists. He wanted to say that Maryna's precocity was a measure of her mother's monkey tricks, not the child's inherent musicality, but Mrs Cilliers interrupted him, pronouncing her mother-in-law quite competent to assist Jayde.

"Ouma has been a church organist for fifty years. Music runs in the family..."

He tried explaining that Jayde needed to develop reading skills that would enable her to play unassisted. He suggested in a conciliatory tone that Ouma should perhaps assume the responsibility of Jayde's musical education. He liked that idea. No, Ouma travels too much. The interruptions would be inconvenient. He tried to say that Jayde needed consistent, not conflicting, information. His opinion was spurned.

Joe had spent the morning practising the hefty score of *Footloose* and already, it bored him. Six weeks of rehearsals were scheduled to commence that evening at the local high school. Page after page of extended hammering chords was a recipe for tendonitis. So far, the glissandi had blistered the back of his index and middle fingers. His head hurt. There was neither beer in the fridge, nor chocolate in the pantry.

Joe pocketed the shopping list that Marcia had scrawled on the fridge and headed off to the Spar five blocks away. On the way there, he sung, 'Been working so hard, I'm punching my card, eight hours for what?'

Joe entered the bottle store adjacent to the grocery section and picked up a six-pack of Castles. He was glad Marcia had left a short list. Next he grabbed three bars of dark chocolate and then he put the bread, milk, eggs and cheese into the basket. He looked at the last item on Marcia's list: 100 paper. Or was it papers...

He wondered what Marcia meant. He battled to read her doctor's scribble handwriting, but knew better than to return home without it, whatever it was. He asked a cashier. They were usually pretty good at figuring out what his wife wanted. If the cashier couldn't work it out, he would call Marcia on the cell phone, but she didn't like interruptions of her ward rounds. The cashier seemed to know what the mystery item was, and walked with him to the stationery section, where she squatted beside the envelopes and wrapping paper and removed an exam pad from the pile.

Croxley. A4 Examination Pad. Feint & Margin. 100 pages. It looked right. He collected a *Beeld* at the till and paid for his goods. Back at the studio, he had time for a beer or a crap. Not both. The beer would keep.

Joe took his newspaper into the bathroom and got comfortable. He read the leader article and sighed. South Africa's rugby bosses were rubbishing each other publicly. The Minister of Sport had intervened in the ruckus. Joe folded the newspaper into a readable square, held it with one hand and reached for the loo paper with the other. The empty cardboard cylinder spun on the dispenser. He studied the glob of hardened glue that held the last scrap of double-ply in place. He studied the shameful headlines: 'Rugby-skande!'

The doorbell rang. He looked at his watch. The Cilliers were due at 2.00 pm, four minutes time. They could wait. The lavatory window was open a chink. The familiar scent of Nina Ricci's 'Lucky Day' perfume wafted into the room. He recognised the notes of gardenia. Marcia had a bottle on her dresser and wore it often. Jayde chattered away in Afrikaans.

"Wil Ouma nie in die kar wag nie? Dis lekker warm in die son?" *Don't you want to want to wait in the car, Ouma? It's so nice in the sun.*

"Nee, nee, ek kom saam." *No, I'm coming along.*

"Maar Ouma sal nie, soos Mama, met Meneer baklei nie?" *You won't fight with my teacher, like Mama?*

"Beslis nie, Skattie, ek moet net hierdie Engelse onderwyser kêrel leer les gee..." *Absolutely not, Darling, I must just show this English teacher fellow how to teach.*

Joe unfolded the newspaper. He ripped the first page in half, right through the scowling André Markgraaf. Joe tore it in half again. He crumpled the glowering Brian Van Rooyen with the rubbing washing action that he'd used on telephone directory pages in the long drop of his childhood.

He was glad of the newspaper. The exam pad would not have been as soft.

## A THEORETICAL POSTSCRIPT

### Prose Poetry and Flash Fiction

Prose poems. Flash fiction. Just two of many names given to the emerging genre of the briefest prose writing, the short-short story. This genre spans a terrific range of sizes, styles, eras and voices. From Gary Cadwallader's three-word story "Splat!" which emerged out of a digital publishing project that commissioned ultra-short fiction for wireless and internet distribution in March 2002, to short-short stories like Kate Chopin's 1 011-word "The Story of an Hour" published in 1894, and much else falling between and outside this time frame. Biblical parables, Aesop's fables, the prose poems of Baudelaire and Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, a novel comprising a series of inter-related short-short stories, all combine to contribute and enrich this genre, which possesses no single agreed upon name.

For the purposes of clarity in this essay, and because of the extensive variety of names given the form and the absence of a clearly agreed upon definition of what precisely constitutes this vast genre, I am coining the name proposed by Connors and Tursi, in the first online issue of *The Double Room*, a journal that publishes some of the most exciting examples currently being written in the form.

They take their inspiration from Baudelaire's "Le Chambre Double" published in *Paris Spleen* in 1869 and suggest that the interface between prose poetry and flash fiction opens up an intriguing and complex conversation between poetry and prose, fiction writers and poets:

... we are intrigued by the space that the prose poem/flash fiction (pp/ff) occupies in a literary, historical, cultural as well physical context. The doubling of prose poem/flash fiction and the etymological roots of "stanza" from the Latin for "room," as well as, the poetic unit, is yet another layer of intrigue that we hope adds more fodder to the debate over these genre tensions. (¶1)

In essence these and other editors publishing the form are saying there is an unique and inimitable intensity, urgency and immediacy inherent in pp/ff that subverts and

challenges conventional genre distinctions while simultaneously attempting to embody the conflicting and paradoxical compositional criteria of both:

...prose poems and flash fictions are, by their very nature, polemical, dialogical, oxymoronic, and contradictory. This of course almost always implies a subversion, or some attempt to undermine and disrupt certain ideologies, traditions and assumptions within literature and language. (¶2)

They concede that this “oxymoron argument” is useful and compelling, but also cliché and threadbare, relying on conventional literary categories:

In other words, the notion of “inherently subversive” and “oxymoronic” actually returns the pp/ff to the very constraints and restrictions it supposedly undermines; i.e. formal literary convention. Definitions for prose and poetry are not universally agreed upon, and therefore, it follows that a definition of prose poetry or flash fiction would prove equally as slippery. (¶3)

As a musician looking at their choice of the abbreviation pp/ff -- which may ultimately prove to be a coining of a new word and name -- I hear a delightful musical analogy that echoes this literary endeavour. Using musical dynamics, *pp* is an abbreviation for *pianissimo* the very softest notes and *ff*, or *fortissimo*, represents the loudest. The implication -- if one permits the connection -- is that many of these stories create the effect of starting softly, getting loud quickly and in turn creating a startling sound effect that lingers in the reader-listener’s memory.

While I choose to lump the varieties of form together, there are those who see them as separate. In a discussion on naming the form in *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, DeWitt Henry (254) believes that works created in the short-short form are organically complete units, standing independently:

... about the short-short *form*. It exists, clearly. It is fiction and not “prose poetry.” I prefer the old-fashioned word “vignette” to “blasters.” But the point is that whatever you call the form, it does have validity. Just as a short story is not an episode or except from a novel, the “vignette” is not a “fragment” from a short story. There is completeness, and when it is achieved, a fullness of reference that is self-sufficient.

George Myers also keeps the categories discrete:

The prose poem in particular, with its essential, inborn ability to criticize and be skeptical of itself, is a utopian, implosive genre that seems to want to stretch itself, to embrace previously excluded types of disquisition.

The short-short fiction also has been a highly politicized genre – the more extreme the mode of composition, the more fundamental the belief in (and largely unrealized) utopian possibilities that dwells behind it. (¶3&4)

Rachel Barenblat (¶3-5) also explores this interface between the prose poem and the extremely short story, but takes an opposite viewpoint:

What distinguishes prose poems from microfiction or the short-short? And what makes them so absolutely wonderful, since wonderful they clearly are? My answer may frustrate you, but it's the only answer I have: there are no distinguishing rules. The line between the prose poem and the short-short is invisible, if not nonexistent...

Microfiction and short-short are both names that convey the substance of the form. Microfiction is to ordinary short fiction what short fiction is to the novel or novella: it's an attempt to tell a story, a good story, in an even smaller package than usual.

“Prose poem,” on the other hand, is a strangely unsatisfying term, since it seems to elide the boundaries of genre by combining prose and poetry.

However, that elision is precisely what a prose poem does, and precisely what makes it so interesting ...”

The above commentators are agreed that there is a short form, pp/ff, and that it contains dynamic, creative possibilities for the writer. The prose poem and short story should perhaps be viewed as twins, siblings born of the same intention and vision.

Pamelyn Casto (¶9-11) traces the roots of the form back to antiquity: the writings of Ovid, Petronius's *The Widow of Ephesus* to Cervantes suggestion in 1699 that the epic might be contained in verse or prose; on to Bertrand and Baudelaire's 19<sup>th</sup> century symbolist experiments coined 'poèmes en prose'. The form is further established in the vignettes of de Maupassant, Chekov and Henry, the parables and paradoxes of

Kafka. Amongst contemporary writers, Borges, Barry Yourgrau, Bernard Cooper, Donald Barthelme, O. Henry, Thaisa Frank, Daniel Boulanger, the fables of Elizabeth Bishop, Italo Calvino, Yasunari Kawabata, Richard Brautigan, Russell Edson, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Jerome Stern and Raymond Carver can be read as practitioners of the varieties of pp/ff. More recent writers that have been anthologised as representing the form include: Lydia Davis, Diane Williams, Dave Eggers, Steve Almond, Grace Paley, Mark Strand, Jamaica Kincaid, David Foster Wallace, Stuart Dybek.

### **Pp/ff as a term which subsumes other categories and reflects the impact of Information Technology**

While pp/ff is the name coined by the editors of *The Double Room*, and is the simplified name I choose to use, there exists a plethora of other names given to the genre which convey its substance and represents the variety of expressions of the minutest forms of storytelling: Micro-fiction, sudden fiction, half-story, vignette, smoke-long fiction, little short story, pocket-size story, minute-long story, palm-sized story.

This proliferation highlights a contemporary issue of classifying pp/ff, and evokes significant insecurity in literary circles and an industry where a certain snobbism exists between purveyors of the printed word and their revolutionary and fast-moving counterparts at the cutting edge of electronic publishing.

There is little dispute that technology has dramatically impacted on the recent evolution and popularisation of pp/ff. Because the average computer screen enables a viewer to read approximately 400 words without scrolling down or clicking onto another 'page', editors of Internet publications have discovered that reader 'stickability' statistics improve when content is thus limited. Similarly, because of reader fatigue and 'screen blindness', where a reader is unable to read for long periods onscreen, there has been a demand for pithier text that concentrates information -- and fiction -- to its absolute essence.

Technology is a dynamic entity, constantly evolving and fostering new forms of expression and creativity. To this end, the name 'flash fiction' is problematic because it encroaches onto the territory of the multi-media phenomenon, known as 'flash player' which, when downloaded and enabled, permits sound bytes, video clips, and text and graphic interaction onscreen. The permutations and ramifications of the continued evolution of digital storytelling are beyond the scope of this introduction. However, publications like *Locus Novus* and *SnowMonkey* are redefining the boundaries of pp/ff in the realms of hypertext.

A simple and practical shaping of the form is found in the writers' submissions guidelines from print and electronic journals. This unscientific method reveals tremendous diversity in the required word counts for pp/ff. *The Phonebook Dot Com*'s stories were sent to British mobile telephone subscribers via single text messages. These had to adhere to the 150-character limit imposed by the digital technology. *Writers' Digest*'s Short Short Story competition has an upper limit of 1500 words, while Canada's *Maisonneuve* calls for theme-related fiction between 8 and 800 words. The annual University of Maine's Binnacle Ultra-Short Competition calls for stories under 150 words; the now defunct *Green Tricycle* insisted on submissions less than 200 words, and *Vestal Review* and *Staccato* -- both branded as microfiction magazines -- cut off submissions at 500 words. *Flashquake*, another magazine specialising in pp/ff, accepts work up to 1000 words.

That still doesn't answer the question of what this seemingly arbitrary number of words a given editor will accept for publication constitutes. Most readers, writers, and editors agree that within these concentrated limits a unified narrative entity is expected. Some would say that pp/ff aims to achieve in one page what the novel accomplishes in one hundred.

### **Literary forebears**

There are two ways of thinking about the emergence of pp/ff. One view perceives its emergence as a concentration or distillation of the larger form of the short story, with its origins rooted in the novel. Robert Shapard states:

Brander Matthews claimed to be the first to identify the short story as a separate genre from the novel in 1901, in fact the first to name it, although it had been developing throughout the nineteenth century... with this as the model, it seems reasonable to assume that something called the short-*short* story must be an even younger form than the short story. Short-*shorts* must be a sub-category. Or maybe a sub-sub-category. (1986: xiii)

Early to mid-Victorian literature was written for the leisured classes with time to read three-volume novels. As the industrial revolution progressed, a new class of reader with fewer leisure hours prompted the development of the single volume novel and later magazines and serials. Most of Dickens' work was serialised and written to precise word lengths, hence the extended sections of description in his novels. Serials were heavily padded to fit the production requirements of the magazine. Authors were paid by the word, hence their motivation to expand the narrative.

Printing costs reduced the number of pages publishers could afford to produce in any given volume, and economic dictates continued to impact on literary style, necessitating progressively more concise writing. The print volume increased as technological capacity developed and publishers -- or their accountants -- were required to consider market influences. Value for money began to define a writer's word count.

Ever evolving printing and other technologies are inherently part of a literary transformation from the conventional past where narrative was often ponderously described, to modern advertising slogans where a few succinct words hint and gesture, conjuring a vast range of related images and begetting commercial activity.

An alternate way of comprehending pp/ff is to see its prosaic origins in the condensed aesthetic and sensibilities of poetry. Grace Paley articulates some reactions elicited by this unfamiliar form:

The truth is people are kind of scared by very very short stories -- just as they are by long poems. A short story is closer to the poem than to the novel (I've said that a million times) and when it's very very short -- 1, 2, 2½ pages -- it

should be read like a poem. That is slowly. People who like to skip can't skip in a 3-page story. (253)

Tursi and Connors (§10) suggest that contests held in different literary journals and the appearance of anthologies like "Sudden Fiction" are responsible for the genre's growth. They note Donald Barthelme's somewhat ironic suggestion (that the novel is dead and is being replaced by what existed before) complicates the entire historical process. They pose the questions to what extent pp/ff is an extension of early fables and fairy-tales, and to what extent they are a reaction to and against the novel and short story? George Myers sees other cultural phenomena as the source of pp/ff:

Short-shorts in their authenticity are not further examples of minimalist fiction, the dread blankness of the 1930s. Rather, short-shorts are direct descendants of magical realism, of wonder, the musical fugue... (§12)

I believe parallels exist in other art forms, supporting the contention that pp/ff is a valid and independent genre in its own right. The photograph is a sliver of a full-length film, with its own set of compositional and aesthetic criteria, and its own unqueried standing as a legitimate and independent art form. Similarly the cameo is sculpture in miniature, with tools and techniques different from those used to create a statue.

Like these examples from visual art, musical form displays are number of extremely short works on the opposite range of the spectrum from the symphony and operatic cycles. Beethoven's Bagatelles are just a page long and some of Chopin's Preludes are just a few lines. Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words, Schuman's character pieces from Carnival, the Klavierstucke of Stockhausen emerging in the 1950s are page-long works. Numerous extremely brief orchestral works by Anton Webern and Alban Berg challenge conventions of length and duration. Schoenberg's Op. 19 contains six pieces for solo piano, each just one page long.

More recently, the miniatures works of contemporary British composers, Howard Skempton and John White are examples of highly condensed work. The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music recently commissioned pieces from international composers as an introduction into contemporary music. These works last

less than a minute. The fourth volume of the series “Spectrum 4” contains 66 pieces for student performers’ examination purposes, and includes the work of the South African composer Michael Blake.

These various parallels suggest trends which can be read as genealogies of the impulse to miniaturisation in creative endeavour, leading to pp/ff in literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Critics and naysayers**

However one understand the origins of pp/ff, the form is set against the backdrop of contemporary culture where Oatso Easy and Nescafé reduce the leisurely cooked breakfast of yesteryear to the worker’s snatched repast. One-day cricket concentrates a five-day recreational affair to its marketing, promotional and commercial essence, and MTV provides consumers with instant bubblegum entertainment. Against this backdrop, pp/ff is establishing itself on the literary scene.

James Thomas (1992:13) highlights the faddishness of pp/ff. He notes that public taste for brevity in fiction has fluctuated over the years:

Fifty years ago very short stories could be found in such magazine as Liberty, but fifteen years ago it was most unusual to come across a story of under five pages in the respected magazines and literary journals of this country.

He suggests that editors declined to publish very short fictions, considering them “slight’, if not whimsical.” Further, he contends that when big name authors like Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates offered them for publication, established literary magazines began printing them, which in turn precipitated interest by writers, editors and readers alike.

Its detractors complain that pp/ff is little more than a manifestation of fast-food culture, providing McStories to customers who no longer have the time for a short story. Jason Sanford highlights the mediocrity and sameness of many short-short stories, and reflects that not all pp/ff is exciting or profound. He points out that in the

same time taken to read a regular-size short story one can read over ten mediocre short shorts:

being a writer in today's lovely world of fiction and creative nonfiction is like reliving 70's TV hell, where that Nair commercial jingle has been conveniently rewritten into "Who writes short shorts?" Poetic vision rarely shows up. After all, how can you express vision in 100 words? As for plot and character development, give those antiquated goods to Goodwill. All that matters with short shorts is a competent writing style and a desire for lots of publication credits. (§2)

He concedes that not all exhibits from the canon are bad, citing Jerome Stern's "Morning News" and Tim O'Brien's non-fiction flash "LZ Gator, Vietnam, February 1994", as notable exceptions. Sanford notes that "instead of demonstrating depth and vision, 99% of the published short shorts are merely sight gags, inside jokes, scene descriptions, or scattered details from some writer's life."

Would Sanford lump Hemingway's famous contest-winning six-word fiction, "For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never worn." into the 'gag' category? Does this work constitute scattered details? Is it a story? These questions are beyond the scope of this essay, and certainly there are numerous pp/ff examples that leave the reader bewildered and irritated. Sanford blames the problem on the glut of MFA programs:

A main reason short shorts are all the rage is that they are a quick road to publication. After all, why write a 6,000-word short story when you can write ten 600-word pieces in the same time? (§19)

This is a disconcerting accusation with which pp/ff writers must wrestle. Is it indeed easier to write shorter and quicker? Would critics suggest to poets writing haiku and other condensed forms with strict constraints, like the sonnet or the ghazal that these forms are easier to write?

Tom Hazuka reflecting on the criticism defends the possibility of brevity and quality's co-existence:

A few dismissed it as fiction for the MTV generation, pabulum for dolts whose attention span is challenged by even 750 words, but a simple question

usually silenced these critics: Is poetry therefore fodder for idiots? The vast majority of poems fit on a page, or at most two, and no one accuses poets of pandering to the masses. (“*In A Station of the Metro*”? Good God, what drive!—not enough words!) Obviously, length is not the distinguishing feature of quality. ¶4

Perhaps reader reluctance can be explained by an unfamiliarity with the extremely short form. Chinquee notes in an interview by Forrest Roth that the very short story form continues to be the subject of critical attention, citing Norton’s current preparation of the *Flash Fiction Forward* anthology due out in 2007. She proposes that readers are unaccustomed to having a story finish before it really gets started. Because not much formal consensus exists other than the lack of traditional narrative devices and a small word count, a growing number of writers have seized the opportunity to stake their own aesthetic territory. She describes pp/ff as “A burst of emotion on the page, evoked by a sensory detail, whether it be sound, image, texture, taste,” and refers to it as “a snapshot, some type of photograph (and not necessarily visual).” ¶4 She contends that readers have to work harder:

In short narratives, readers focus on a few very specific images, sounds, or aspects and are left to figure out the rest... They might be told what the story involves, yet there are many things ‘left out,’ which the reader may have to find on his/her own. Whereas, in a more ornate narrative, they may be more guided. I believe that the reader has more responsibility in reading short narratives. ¶5

I agree that reading this highly condensed form requires a greater sensitivity and attention from the reader. In my experience re-reading the best examples of these genres heightens my reading pleasure.

### **How does ‘flash’ flash?**

Short short prose within the parameters referred to above does in fact flash. If present at all, characterisation, narrative arc and resolution happen fast, spiking, sparkling, twinkling, exploding. Spare and sparse, the language used is typically a combination of prose and poetry. Using implied back-story, layered meaning and insinuated action,

as in Gary Cadwallader's two-word story "Splat!" the writer shoots his story in a flash of insight.

SPLAT!

Sorry, Tinkerbelle.

The effectiveness here lies in the universality of the experience. The backstory is immediately familiar and identifiable. Every reader recognises Tinkerbelle. Every reader has made that random gesture, swatting a mosquito that buzzes in the dark. In the words of the author, "we can see it and feel it and even hear it and it touches our collective consciousness." (E-mail to author, 6 February 2006)

The creativity within restrictions of a minimalist form are a response to the speed and uncertainty of modernity and post-modernity, which is perceived in speed and unknowability. The tip of the iceberg implies that which is hidden below the surface, instead of attempting, or assuming the possibility of comprehensive description. Pp/ff is a development of a modernist interest. It is at home in the post-modern, globalised world where the links of comprehension occur at speed, in a blink, a flash of the eye. It is the epitome of modern communication, and echoes with the buzzing of cellular phones, ADSL cables, reality TV, online banking.

Irving Howe (qtd. in Wallace 41), in the introduction to his own anthology entitled *Short Shorts*, says:

It is fiercely condensed, almost like a lyric poem; it explodes in a burst of revelation or illumination; it confines itself to a single overpowering incident; it bears symbolic weight.

And Shapard, in his foreword to *Sudden Fiction – American Short-Short Stories* suggests this:

writers who see the contemporary short-short as an emerging, entirely new form are those who insist that the form can only be established, can only be born, when its proper name has been chosen. Others explicitly or implicitly agreed: we create our world through language, through naming. (1986:xv)

Yet how does one select a name when there are so many types of pp/ff being written, such different devices being used? Pp/ff as a form flashes in so many different ways. Pamelyn Casto (Electronic mailing list, 3 February 2006) identifies a range of story types using an assortment of techniques, all of which can be described as types of pp/ff.

Franz Kafka's "A Little Fable" is really an anti-fable, a disturbing metafiction offering morals and anti-morals, with a clear beginning, middle and end.

Alice Walker's "The Flowers" is a symbolic reworking of the myth of Eden, which also follows the three-part schematic, as does Ursula Hegi's "Doves". Richard Plant's "Flatlands" is also a symbolic story, however it is a plotless story, where the lack of a narrative arc adds another dimension to the flatness of the narrator's existence. Another plotless story is Margaret Atwood's "My Life As A Bat".

Satire features in Milos Macourek's three-sentence work, "Jacob's Chicken" and in Ron Carlson's "The Tablecloth of Turin", which is also a monologue, as is Mary Swan's "Where You Live Now".

Madison Smartt Bell's "The Naked Lady" is a dialect story, using misspellings and dialogue without quotation marks, and Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is a story in dialogue, which shows few dialogue tags and repeats the motif in patterns of darkness and light.

One- and two-sentence stories include Joanne Avallon's "All This" (one sentence), Fielding Dawson's "The Vertical Fields" (two sentences), Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" (one sentence using "you" commands/ imperatives) sit alongside the ultra-shorts of Lydia Davis, and Diane Williams.

I contend that the lack of a tidy name or neat categories create no obstacle to the writer practising the form. Anecdote, character sketch, slice of life, letter, 'laundry list' or incident. These and others types are valid expressions that must sparkle at an

artistic, aesthetic and creative level, and adhere to the arbitrary constraint of the word count as defined by editorial expectations. Camille Renshaw agrees:

Micro Fiction, by nature, is defiant. It defies length, boundaries, and expectations. But tight, provocative fiction requires analysis and editing.

Taking an idea and distilling it into a “micro”- cosm [*sic*] of its original self is challenging. (¶1)

Pp/ff is an artistic concept that finds consistency with the essentially anarchic nature of the Internet, that ultimate democracy, where form begs to be bent and twisted and reinterpreted continuously with each technological development. A staple feeding the MTV generation’s capacity and inclination to relate to the world in a non-linear way, micro-packaging enables the sampling of literary snippets whilst multi-tasking. It eliminates the need to focus on a single task for any length of time, and finds a voice to these attitudes and attributes in artefacts of youth culture, for example the graphic novel and in slam poetry.

Borg (¶10) suggests that “Flash fiction unleashes its potency because it mimics our minds - the truth comes to us infrequently and - well - in flashes.”

I suggest these are all the writer’s relevant considerations – if not at the genesis of a work, at the point of selection of a suitable publication. As the form grows in popularity, so the list of available publications expands and the competent writer is likely to find a compatible publication once the work is polished.

### **A personal experience**

In my own artistic process, creating work to meet arbitrary criteria as defined in workshop challenges has been a satisfactory launching pad to explore the form. It is not in the writing or the editing that I define a work, but at the point of sending it to an editor once I have studied a publication’s requirements.

It is the mindset of playing that underpins my work, where the game stipulates that the player shall include a set of given words, or use a specific photograph as the source of inspiration, or will begin with a given sentence or reveal a surprise ending. This is

much like the 17<sup>th</sup> century form, the *bouts-rimés*, where one writer selects a set of end rhymes and a group of writers create poems using the words in the same order. In 1864 Alexandre Dumas curated a volume of *bouts-rimés* composed by 350 French poets – all with the same rhymes.

If we create our world through language and naming, it is the inner world of imagination and possibility that has been given form, rather than the external one of literary constraints requiring the specifics of classification. It is the articulation of my own meanness, recovery, idiocy and humour as expressed through the actions and dialogues of my characters that has been named and given form. In the naming and identification of these themes, I express my own polemical, dialogical, oxymoronic, and contradictory self.

In 1998, I began reporting for a small community newspaper that required stories' adherence to a word limit of 200 to 500 words. The discipline of a weekly deadline and word count served me well. I found the minimum word count comforting when I was not enamoured of the subject and the maximum figure offered sufficient space me to express my enthusiasm on matters closer to my heart.

When I heard Marcia Preston, the editor of *Byline Magazine*, describe an emerging form she called 'flash fiction' at the California Writers' Club conference in San Francisco in July 2000, I sensed this genre was where I might find my creative writing voice.

Within a year of that conference, Francis Ford Coppola's online creative writing workshop Zoetrope.com opened a new section named 'flash fiction' where members could workshop stories in the 200-1000 word range in a password-protected safe site. Soon 'flashers' congregated and formed focus groups.

In one such focus group, to which I still belong, and where much of the work presented in "100 Papers" was birthed, informal daily or weekly challenges encourage participants to write to a theme, adhere to such specific structural demands as an exact number of words or open with a given sentence. The products of some challenges could be submitted to journals like *lichen [sic]* and *Mississippi Review*, which issue

specific themes for writers, or *The First Line* which provides a given opening sentence, and *NFG* and *Swank*, which requires stories of exactly 69 and 83 words respectively. Participants exchange market and contest information, and lively discussions are held.

Group leader, Kim Chinquee is a practitioner of the form, who offers a daily list of five prompt words, which members aim to incorporate in the day's exercise. She selects words with some oddity, either in sound (puddle) or taste (mushroom) or visual image or tactile impression (concrete) or a combination of sound and action (flop) or something with a staccato effect (kick).

Each member posts their work and then reflects on others' works, asking questions, clarify meaning, querying intention, noting typos, offering editorial suggestions concerning potential character or other developments and highlighting sub-texts and secondary plot lines. (See Appendix A.)

In this nurturing environment, I discovered a form and forum, where collaborative critiquing and respectful discussion both stimulated my own creativity and enabled me to hone my writing skills as a writer of pp/ff.

A significant achievement of this group of writers was the collaboration to collect, edit and publish a collection of pp/ff and short stories of fellow workshop participant Bob Arter, when alerted to his serious illness during the latter part of 2004. In a gesture reminiscent of the Jazzmen of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, some 35 writers expressed their collective faith in the importance of his work. They clubbed their financial and literary energies together, with each writer preparing an introduction to one of Arter's stories.

### **Influences on my writing**

Bob Arter personally offered me constructive, informative critique in my own efforts as I ventured into the unfamiliar and shifting waters of pp/ff. It is his story-in-a-sentence "Psyche Asea", however that both inspired and challenged me to imitate him. Arter challenges the reader to hold conscious a variety of shifting aspects

simultaneously. Meanings shimmer on its surface and just as one catches a glimpse of one, or some, the illusions merge, never yielding altogether at the same time. Literal truths, psychological symbolism, fantasy and fable swirl through this tight, 286-word text that leave one beholding dangerous possibilities.

Similarities exist between this work and Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" which first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1978. Arter explores alienation and the imagined perception of the other in "Psyche Asea". In both works, the use of rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and an intense urgency whirled the reader on the narrator's same eddying trajectory. Without the anchors of the full stop, the signboards of new sentences, Arter recreates the floating, drifting, shifting of miscommunication, missed cues, lost clues, and Kincaid replicates the pressured expectations of her 'laundry list' of womanly duties. Despite the initial disorientation evoked by reading without full stops followed by capital letters, the chaos is contained by the narrator's honest and consonant lyricism (Arter) and the harsh but constant suspicion and criticism (Kincaid). These unconventional works provoke a reader's personal confrontation with his or her own essential cluelessness and incapacity in the sea and psyche of relationship (Arter) and working class motherhood (Kincaid).

This fluid form stretches a genre that inherently defies conventional definition and can be considered a prose poem because it defies the conventional rules of prose and takes one to a place that is simultaneously bewildering and familiar. Any reader that has been powerless in the face of a loved one's suffering may hear in this work the unfinished cadence of one's own impotence. And any who has been thus humbled, may well have been profoundly inspired by the tenacity of the beloved's struggle. For such a reader, these dissonant chords will resonate:

#### PSYCHE ASEA

It's not so much the continent between us as the feeling I can never shake that here I am afloat between the sand and surface of some unnamed sea and up above she beats and flails in wordless torment, backlit by an ancient star a pallid sky a godless void, and I am tethered here in the ignominy of barely moving currents, drifting, safe, protected from the storm she's bare to, bared

to, borne by, slamming her from wave to rock from peak to trough from peril to perdition, slowing now but steady moving stubborn little bitch refusing this much help, no sir no succor nothing doing, far above me far below I watch and wait and wonder how long can she keep it up how many plates aloft on spinning sticks which wave what magnitude will crush her will it will it must and then just at the moment when I know she's done for finished beaten broken by the years the tears the weather that is when she glances down, her slight disdain apparent and with nothing more she measures out the madness of the cruelty of the manifest unfairness of her youth and shrugs into her labored crawl and faces down the Beast before her calling her reviling her inviting her contempt and this I see from down here in my cringing-place my soft safe haven: she with perfect disregard with perfect passion pure precision, she who knows I watch I wait I all but pray I see her, see! her left leg scissors past the right propelling her toward another stone an egg in brine a tiny death I'll never know and this I think is harder than the continent between us. (168)

This story-in-a-sentence inspired my own attempt at the form as represented in “A Hundred Times a Day” and “No Outlook, No Express”.

A well-established writer I perceive to have influenced me is Lydia Davis, who writes the following 46-word story:

#### ODD BEHAVIOR

You see how circumstances are to blame. I am not really an odd person if I put more and more small pieces of shredded kleenex in my ears and tie a scarf around my head: when I lived alone I had all the silence I needed. (¶3)

“Odd Behaviour” surprises the reader because of its extreme brevity, which puts it in the category of ‘ultra-short’ or ‘micro-fiction’, where a story comprises less than 50 words. (Perhaps this is one of Shapard’s sub-sub categories – outside the scope of this report, but a topic one might contemplate for PhD research.) In these few words the author discloses the depths of the narrator’s aversion to noise and intrusion. The story reveals ingenuity in coming to terms with the source of distress.

This story twists all the way through, turning every presupposition about normality on its head. One is left wondering whether the narrator is truly disturbed, or whether the person with whom she must interact is the one who is so troubled or talkative as to necessitate the extreme measures of stuffing kleenex into one's ears and wearing a head scarf. It is extremely thought provoking because it opens a window into human relational dynamics, where partners mirror madness and it is impossible to know who is to 'blame'. The narrator cleverly announces up front that 'circumstances' are at fault, rather than an inability or reluctance to interact with the other.

This work centres on the word 'if'. The narrator says indirectly that if s/he does not stuff her ears with shredded kleenex, the noise becomes so provoking that s/he behaves peculiarly. Blocking out the world in an unusual fashion is normal by comparison. Living alone was a preferable condition under the current circumstances. One is left wondering whether the narrator is incapable of forming good enough human connections or whether the existing relationship is simply too flawed to succeed without odd behaviour from either party.

The only visible character is the narrator. The other, with whom the narrator now lives, is insinuated, but the reader doesn't encounter him directly. The only objects are tissues and a scarf. The setting is veiled because it is not central to the story. Very little detail is provided, yet every item weighs heavy with meaning. Tissues, which one uses to clean up mess, blow one's nose when sick, wipe away tears become a symbol representing a messy, sick, sorrowful experience. The headscarf is a protective cloth veiling a woman from public scrutiny. While this item has specific cultural and historical references, it can universally be assumed to have the power of concealment. In common experience it rescues women from 'bad hair days'.

The story is ambiguous and the reader is left pondering what constitutes normal behaviour and how pathological behaviour is expressed in seemingly normal ways. It is perhaps the psychological equivalent of the saying, "There are none so deaf as those who will not hear." It ends as a conundrum worth pondering over and over.

This work has the quality of a zen koan. The first sentence alone is technically a statement although a question is implied. Paradox is a tremendously effective technique in writing because it ensures that the attentive reader participates in the exchange. I identified very strongly with the narrator as I too wish for much solitude and silence in my life.

Because of its brevity, this story can be consumed in one gulp. The second person 'you' who is addressed in this narrative may be either the reader or the noisy partner, or indeed perhaps this multi-layered work addresses both reader and invisible partner simultaneously. As the narrator explains her difficult position, the reader is propelled to the ending by a desire to understand the narrator's need to block her ears.

Conflict is implied by the mention of 'blame' and the unlikeliness of resolution under the circumstances is well explained. The relationship is at stake and yet one wonders whether the noisy partner is blaming the narrator. Perhaps this statement is the only defence the narrator will make.

There are only two sentences in the story. One is simple, the other complex. This structure mirrors the content of the story. Simple problem = noise. Complex causality and outcome = pathological need for solitude and inability to accommodate the other. Simple word choices and sentence fragments are used to heighten the fractured nature of the narrator's peace of mind. A minimalist use of adverbs and adjective reinforces the directness of the narrator's despair by the simplicity of the story line. Three adjectives are used. 'Odd' define the narrator's defensive position person, and 'small' and 'shredded' shift the focus onto her self-protective activity.

Another layer of meaning is invested in this story because it is impossible to discern whether the narrator is male or female. Perhaps it does not matter. For the purposes of this analysis, I'm assuming a woman tells her story because it is less likely that a normal man will wear a headscarf. Yet according to stereotypes, women tend to chatter. In essence this is a tale of intrusion and the gender of the narrator is not central. The experience of being assaulted by noise or verbal abuse is a key experience and may as well be told by either gender.

The mood of the piece is one of wistful despair. The narrator has found a way to endure what must be borne. There is a defensive tone and attempts to justify and explain the ostensible 'oddness', which evokes sympathy precisely because the author refuses to allow blame to be apportioned, other than externally on 'circumstances'.

This is 'ultra-short' storytelling at its finest, using the symbol of shredded kleenex to represent breakdown into progressively smaller pieces. It is the model, which informs my ultra-short works "To a Guitarist Playing Études by Salzedo in a Smoky Melville Café" (69 words) and "Motivator" (60 words). Whether I succeed in balancing an imagined dialogue that twists back on itself in these two stories, or whether I address the second person sufficiently artfully in "No More Surprises", "Christmas Eve Picnic, Pretoria" and "Stones" is not for me to judge. It is however an ambition that I might write something that lingers in a reader's mind.

Another writer whose work I admire is Utahna Faith, editor of journals publishing pp/ff, *Wild Strawberries*, *N.O.L.A Spleen* and *3AM*. This story creates doubt in the reader's mind whether the dialogue is real or fantasised. It may indeed shift between a real time conversation and an internal monologue, or it may in fact represent the inchoate distress of the victim of a crime of passion. The setting of the pharmacy implies a level of clinical sanity, so the reader's sympathy is garnered for the woman with the burn. However, as she tells her tale and becomes less and less credible, progressively 'unreliable', so the reader begins to wonder whether she was the victim, or whether she got her just desserts. The pharmacist's cool professional disinterest is a scenario with which many readers will identify, and acts to switch the reader's empathy back to the narrator. One gets the sense that this is the second time in one night that she has not been taken at her word, and the reader's disinclination to trust her, makes it a third experience.

#### IN THE PHARMACY

"Excuse me, where are the adhesive bandages?"

"What kind do you need?"

“Um...”

“We have big ones and small ones and round ones and ones with smiley faces or peace signs or cartoon characters, or the serious hospital kind back by the drug counter or just the regular -- “

“Okay, do you have the ones that say, ‘I’m wearing this bandage over a cigarette burn given to my by a nasty, skanky bitch who was pissed that her boyfriend was coming on to me, even though I told the boyfriend he shouldn’t be coming on to me when he has a girlfriend and that he better appreciate his girl but the girl got mad at me instead of him and yelled at me in a bar and I tried to explain to her that I didn’t do anything and not only that I didn’t do anything but that I also stuck up for her and that he’s the one she should be yelling at not me but she didn’t care about that and she pushed her cigarette into the right side of my chest just above the cleavage where the skin is the most delicate and now I have this nasty burn that I hope won’t scar and I’m trying to let it breath as much as possible but when I leave the house I need to cover it with a band-aid?’”

“Aisle four, bottom shelf.”

“Thanks.”

This work inspired my attempt to create a story in dialogue. I copy the setting of an exchange between a shop assistant and a supposedly sane customer who recalls a conversation with a disturbed person. My attempt to copy this style “Vocal Warmup at the Co-op” appeared in *The Mississippi Review*.

### **By implication and intertextuality**

Much of the success or failure of pp/ff depends on the presence of encoded and implied thematic material. This has existed since the Renaissance, and has surfaced recently in such books as *The Da Vinci Code*, which is all about hidden meanings in Art and literature. For example Shakespeare is full of coded ideas, puns and word play. In *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream* Bottom is given an asses’ head by Puck, Peter Quince says, “Bottom thou art translated.” One interpretation implies that Bottom has

become an ass (arse), while another interpretation offers ‘translated’ as a malapropism of the word transformed. In other words the joke worked both for the Groundlings, the lower orders standing in the theatre’s pit, and the Gentry who were seated in the Galleries.

The relevance of this to pp/ff is that by its nature it requires an understanding of certain conventions and alternative meanings so that more is suggested than is actually written. In my story “Bridge Work” a dental procedure becomes a metaphor for repairing relationships. In “Litter-bugs”, an ear infection becomes a symbol of imbalance.

To fully appreciate the following story by John Ritchie, it is necessary to understand the associations of the word cherry and the conventions of erotic literature.

‘Tumescent’ simply means swollen, but by frequent association has become synonymous with male sexual arousal. Similarly an awareness of the meaning of ‘Schadenfreude’ will add another layer of meaning as the cherry-eating teacher takes pleasure observing Billy’s emerging sexuality. Or is the student taking pleasure from taunting the teacher with the taboo held out of the younger lover?

#### CHERRY RIPE

Billy loathed Modern European Languages: a compulsory credit for Sophmores [*sic*] at Beechfield High.

Fraulein Kappel sat out front eating cherries from a brown paper bag: a clear example of malfeasance.

Now Billy had come to a caesura in the Goethe poem the class was struggling to translate, and he had a question.

Er, Maam. I mean, Fraulein. Do you know what Schadenfreude means?

The tumescent purple of another cherry slipped between soft, red lips as Billy watched: mesmerised. He looked up and felt the gaze of her ice-green eyes penetrate him.

Ja, Billy.

Intertextuality as a device adds another layer of meaning to stories, and this pp/ff hints at two other works of art. Firstly, Thomas Campion's poem "There is a Garden in her Face" (1617) and the traditional English folk song "Cherry Ripe". Further, the teacher's name 'Kappel' is the German word for 'church', thus implying a sense of forbidden immorality, however, the pronunciation of her name, sounds like the English word 'couple' -- another veiled implication of their exchange.

Ritchie's play on the double meanings of names, is a device I have tried to use in stories like "Prognosis", "Kleintjie's Saint", "Goggles", "Everyday Corporate Gifts", "Recipe For Sedition" and "The McFlurry's Revenge".

In contemporary storytelling, text messaging offers a further compacted form when alternate spelling conventions combine letters and numbers, for example, 'D8 @ 8?' instead of 'Will you join me for a date at eight o'clock tonight?' This alternate use of language is creating a meaningful expression and requires a reading between the lines for contextual clues, to know whether 'LOL' means 'Lots of Love' or 'Laugh out Loud' when both are widely understood. This is intertextuality at the cutting edge of language technology.

In my own work, intertextuality (frequently referring to musical texts) adds a layer in "The Organist", "Epilogue for a Gun-running Son", "Kleintjie's Saint", "The Virtue of the Potted Fern", "The Merry Cook" and "Ride the Tortoise". The following pp/ff are written in the erotic genre, where the intense virile energy generated in the pp/ff reading experience fits well with the potentiality of intertextual layering: "Perfect Timing", "Halfway Hungry", "Toy Shops", "Song of KwaZulu", "Recipe for Sedition", "Juicy Lucy's Salvation", "What You Really Need", "The Science of Curves", "Fan Mail", "The First Time" and "Christmas Eve Picnic, Pretoria".

One way of defining the form of pp/ff is to look to the writers' submissions guidelines from print and electronic journals. This unscientific method reveals tremendous diversity in the required word counts for pp/ff. *The Phonebook Dot Com*'s stories were sent to British mobile telephone subscribers via single text messages, within the 150-character limit imposed by the digital technology. *Writers' Digest*'s Short Short Story competition has an upper limit of 1500 words, while Canada's *Maisonneuve* calls for theme-related fiction between 8 and 800 words. The annual University of Maine's *Binnacle* Ultra-Short Competition calls stories less than 150 words, the now defunct *Green Tricycle* insisted on submissions less than 200 words, and *Vestal Review* and *Staccato* -- both branded as microfiction magazines -- cut off submissions at 500 words. *Flashquake*, another magazine specialising in flash fiction, accepts work up to 1000 words.

That still doesn't answer the question of what this seemingly arbitrary number of words a given editor will accept for publication constitutes. Most readers, writers, and editors agree that within these concentrated limits a unified narrative entity is expected. Some would say pp/ff aims to achieve in one page what the novel accomplishes in one hundred.

### **100 Papers**

The name of my collection, "100 Papers" is an attempt to portray the notion of brevity and breathlessness in storytelling, as if one were clutching a sheaf of 100 loose pages, which might be ordered any which way. This collection commences and ends with a 'toilet paper story', but beyond that, the ordering is random, anarchic. The shortest story "To a Guitarist..." contains just 69 words and the longest "Ride the Tortoise" comes in at 1469 words.

The collection aims to be an interaction between the 'gift book', the 'joke book' and the literary anthology of short fiction – a toilet book with a difference, short shorts that take about as much time as a short stop on the pot.

The final and title story in the collection is a play on the word 'loo paper' (toilet paper). The narrator misreads his wife's illegible handwriting on a shopping list,

believing that the item '100 paper' is a 100-page exam pad. When he finds himself in a compromising position without toilet paper, he must make a plan.

This research report attempts to present examples from a variety of sub genres including monologue ("Sun Dried Tomatoes"), dialogue ("Trouble With the Servants"), vignette ("How the Oreo Stole Christmas"), slice of life ("Green Socks, White Lies"), magical realism ("Eating for Two", "Stones"), 'laundry list' ("Clutter"), letter ("Would You Kindly?", "Psychophant") and others.

### **Publication and projected audience**

International journals that publish this genre -- and to which I aspire -- include *The New Yorker*, *Cue*, *Diner*, *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Geist*, *Diagram*, *Flashquake*, *Paragraph*, *Cake Train*, *Noon*, *Night Train*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Malahat Review*, *Small Spiral Notebook*, *RHINO* and *The Double Room*. Some of these publications have an online presence featuring selections from their print journals.

South African journals that have published my pp/ff include *Fidelities*, *New Contrast*, *New Coin*, *Laugh It Off*, *Chimurenga*, *Carapace* and *Green Dragon*. International print and electronic journals where stories from this collection have appeared include *Mississippi Review*, *Noö Journal*, *LitPot*, *Tattoo Highway*, *Journal of Modern Post*, *Quiction*, *The Hiss Quarterly*, (*parenthetical note*), *The Beat*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Ghoti*, *Whim's Place*, *Doorknobs & BodyPaint*, *Konundrum Engine Literary Review*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Snow\*vigate*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Opium*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *Gator Springs Gazette*, *FRiGG*, *lichen*, *elimae*, *The Green Tricycle* and others.

Publishing my work online has proved advantageous in my experience. I have developed a 'web presence', and am in the process of developing an audience. The publication of "Rocker Surgery" in the online journal *Salome* enabled me to see a number of reader's responses. (Addendum B)

Several editors have invited me to submit to their journals. Apart from the resulting publications, my confidence as a writer has grown. I have also discovered a desire to

explore the limits of pp/ff. The validation of publication has enabled me to take risks, to be bolder in my experimentation and vision.

Because readers and editors can locate my online work easily, I believe this could facilitate the global marketing of this anthology in time. When appropriate, I will approach the editors who first published pp/ff from the collection, to request an announcement and/or review of the publication.

I have begun submitting “100 Papers” to local publishing houses, focusing on the smaller independent publishing houses, like Dye Hard Press, Deep South Publishing and Pine Slopes Publications, which use POD technology and seem willing to risk publishing ‘alternative’ work, and may be receptive to exploring marketing links to toilet paper manufacturer for potential sponsorship.

The unpublished works have been submitted individually to other journals, which, in the event of publication, will further extend the network of publications that might promote the collection in the event that a publisher is found.

### **Potential developments for myself as a writer of pp/ff**

Writing “100 Papers” has been a deeply gratifying experience. From the commencement of each story as set of five unrelated words on a blank page, to the finished product -- whether a paragraph, a page, or three -- I have found myself absorbed, energised, focused. It has never been difficult, in the way that academic writing, journalism or school reports have been. I felt enlivened. At an artistic, aesthetic and creative level, the constraints of pp/ff have been strangely liberating.

Richard Currey is an author of two novels and two collections using the stylistic conventions of pp/ff. He says (Electronic mailing list, 14 February 2006), “Flash fiction is [...] very widely employed--even if it is buried in the larger borders of what appears to be a conventional novel. “Flash” is a fundamental writing technique--one needs good paragraphs to make a page, a story, a book.”

It is with this in mind that I hope to approach the form of the novel in my future writing, building a cohesive unit with the characters I’ve discovered in “100 Papers”.











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