

https://dspace.org/

After just now : a novella.

Schutte, Gillian

2011-05-13
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/9750

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

After just now.

A novella by Gillian Schutte

Student number: 9709668T

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts by Research (Creative Writing)

Johannesburg, 2010

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____

(Name of candidate)

_____ day of _____, 2010.

Dedication: To Sipho and Kai – for the alchemy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Michael Titlestad whose workshop commentary was a constant source of inspiration, to Gerrit Olivier whose feedback kept me going when I had lost my bearings -- and to the entire MA group for their insightful input.

Thanks to Deirdre Byrne for her sheer enjoyment of my manuscript and her support.

Love and thanks to my husband Sipho and my little boy Kai, for the space they offered in my writing process -- and for the inspiration.

Thanks also to our ancestors and the stories they left behind.

Table of contents

Novella	6
Reflexive Essay	145
Bibliography	207

After just now.

‘Like you, I am probably a mere projection of my own imagination – a composite of stories and probable truths which play themselves out in a masala of genres – and because of them I dream myself real.’

I love the Karoo with its restrained hues and endless sameness of landscape. I am looking at the Blue Mountains in the distance, which are never blue when you reach them. My little boy says for the hundredth time, 'Mom and Dad, are we nearly there?'

Lunga turns around to answer him when he hears my exasperated sigh.

'Just now my …'

… Bang

The world has slowed down and sped up simultaneously. I am in my seat but my stomach is against the windscreen. I think of my child – I want to shield him but I cannot – I am spinning – I see his terrified face whizzing past me three times. Lunga's body shoots through the windscreen. It is sliced into a hundred pieces as he goes out headfirst. I am wondering how I am going to put him back together again when my head hits the tarmac. There is a midnight blue. My heart swells and explodes with the pain of not being able to help my child. It is a pain that is not worth bearing. I would rather be dead. I hand myself over to the enveloping blueness.

'Ag nee Hendrik. Now look at our wagon. And all our supplies are all over the ground.'

She looks at a terrified group of San, mixed-race and Xhosa people who are all laden with sacks.

'Well, don't just stand there – pick it up man!'

They throw down their own sacks and grovel on the ground to pick up the mess. I can see my son with them. He looks upset. He is sucking his thumb. I want to shout at him, 'No Tau, you do not suck your thumb any more,' but my voice sticks in my parched throat. The strange-looking woman stalks over to me. She is wearing a voluminous grey-

blue dress, which is flouncing around her tall body. She has a bonnet tied around her head. She bends over me and says,

‘And you – what the hell are you? Hendrik, come and look here. It is a boy with breasts … and funny clothes.’

I look up at her. She has pale blue eyes and blonde hair. She is tall and somewhat beautiful, although weathered and brittle. Behind her stands a man who is even taller. He is handsome and has dark skin and piercing blue eyes. He stares at me intensely and rubs his long beard. He is wearing a dark jacket, brown baggy pants and has a wide-brimmed hat on his head. There is a long gun slung around his chest and a leather pouch around his waist. He looks, shakes his head and mutters something guttural, walking away.

‘Ag shame Hendrik, it is thirsty; let us give it some water.’

She pours some water into my open mouth. I am able to let out the scream that has been clawing the side of my throat.

‘Tau!’

The woman falls back in shock.

‘Hendrik, it is a woman. She is crying for something.’

I point at the little brown boy near the broken wagon. I shout, ‘Give me back my son!’

The woman walks over to the little boy sucking his thumb.

‘This little bastar? He’s more like my son than yours. He is her child.’

She points to a pretty Xhosa girl. She looks too young to have a seven-year-old.

‘What is going on here, Hendrik?’

Hendrik looks sheepishly at both women and then at me. He clicks his tongue and tells them they need to get on their way. He puts the wheel back on the ox-wagon and makes sure all the supplies are secured. Then he motions to an elderly Xhosa man to pick me up and put me on the wagon. When the old fellow gets near I can see that he is my father-in-law.

‘Wiseman!’ I cry out.

He looks at me blankly.

‘Tata, why are you in skins?’

He looks away.

‘Bring me my son, Tau. Your grandson!’

My child is walking next to the wagon. His little feet are dusty and calloused. He looks weary. I reach out to him and shout, ‘Tau!’ He hides behind the young Xhosa woman’s legs and looks like he wants to cry. I have no idea why my own child does not know me or why I am on an ox-wagon in the middle of a bleak landscape with a woebegone group of people. I do not know why my father-in-law is ignoring me and dressed in animal skins. I let the midnight blue of unknowingness take me over.

*

I am lying next to our overturned car. There is glass and metal everywhere. My child is still in his car seat turned on its side on the road. I can see the numerous ribbons that used to be Lunga, scattered everywhere. I cry out to Tau. He moves his little hand, then I am gone again.

*

‘Wake up! Wake up!’ The tall woman is slapping my face.

‘You must tell me whose daughter you are. Are you the Venter girl who disappeared with Coenraad de Buys?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘I am Lila Schmidt – the daughter of Isaak Andries Schmidt and Jeanne de Waal from Pietermaritzburg.’

She looks at me as if I am insane.

‘De Waal – that is my husband’s surname. Pietermaritzburg – there is no such place.’

I croak out, ‘What is your name?’

She tells me sadly, ‘I am Hettie Venster, the wife of Hendrik de Waal.’

*

I am walking through the knee-high grass collecting the ribbons of my husband. All around me are little creatures of different colours scurrying through the veld. I recognise them as my ideas. I feel the top of my head and realise that it has been sliced off. How am I going to put all my ideas back in my head? I hope there are no idea thieves in the Karoo. I hate idea thieves. They are spineless, unoriginal creatures who believe that their thinly disguised attempts at being original while borrowing other people’s thoughts slip by unnoticed. There is nothing I can do about this while I still have to pick up my husband. My ideas look happy running freely through the purple haze of grass.

Eighty-nine strips of Lunga are lying near our car. I am too exhausted to continue. I do not feel good with half my head missing. I lie down on the ground.

*

Hettie has brought me one of her dresses to wear. She has had to take the scissors and cut off half a meter from the bottom. She cannot believe I am a de Waal because I am so short. I tell her about my tiny grandmother who married the son of one of their descendants in the future.

She stares into my eyes and says, ‘I don’t know where you came from, but you crashed into our ox-wagon when we had just arrived back from the Cape of Good Hope. Now I do not think you are really very well. Let me give you some remedies.’

She throws some odd-looking brown acrid slime down my throat. I feel light-headed. I need to get to my son.

Hettie tells me I must wear a bonnet when we go for supper. We walk through some weighty hessian curtains into the centre of the house. There is a table made out of heavy wood, some equally heavy chairs and two candles that smell like sheep fat burning in the centre.

The young Xhosa woman waits to dish up the food for Hettie and Hendrik as well as the nine children who have suddenly filled the room. The noise is unbearable. I see my son with his golden dreadlocks holding onto his mother’s legs as she begins to dish up. Hettie turns to him and hisses spitefully. He recoils backwards in terror.

I get up and shout, ‘How dare you treat my child like that! What is your problem, woman?’

She stares at me aghast. ‘But he is just a little bastar …what is the matter with you?’

Hendrik ignores it all and reads solemnly from a huge dusty bible.

I say to Hettie, ‘What year is this?’

She tells me it is 1790.

I say to her, ‘Hettie Venster! I know who you are.’

She says, ‘Thank God, because no one else seems to care.’

I can see she is weary, drawn and unhappy. She looks like a woman who harbours a secret. She shows no interest in her children or her husband, who sits at the table and looks at the Xhosa girl. He smells terrible. I can smell him from where I am sitting. I get up and move to the other side of the table. My son is staring at me with large almond-shaped brown-black eyes. I try to say something to him. He takes his thumb out of his mouth and puts his index finger to his lips, cautioning me to stay silent. I want to hug and kiss him. My heart starts to bleed until there is a crimson red stain on the tablecloth. Hettie clicks her tongue and wipes it up.

Later I creep outside to pee in the dust. I see Hendrik disappear into an outhouse. I see Hettie huddled at the dining room table with a candle glowing. She is reading a heavy leatherbound book. Her fingers trace the words slowly and she mouths every word in Dutch. I realise we have all been speaking Dutch since we met. I feel for this woman. She seems so intense, so detached. If she were from my time she may have been a literary professor or a writer. She has the writer’s brow with the single hard line slightly to the side of the centre of her forehead. While I am watching her she begins to wail softly under her breath. She cries out, ‘Jesus.’

I call out to her, ‘Hettie, are you all right?’

She turns to me, wild-eyed, and says, ‘Jesus is my lover. He is a beautiful man on a white horse. He comes to me nightly and one day he will take me away with him. I am the whore of Jesus.’

She is flushed. She rubs herself between her thighs as she speaks. I decide to leave her on her own and walk back to the other side of the house where there are big beds piled up with the bodies of Hettie and Hendrik's children.

A child of five years old sits up and says, 'Did you know that Adam was a de Waal and Eve a Venster?'

I did not.

She says 'We are the Doppers,' and goes back to sleep.

I lie down on the corner of her bed.

*

A little dark-haired girl with a grubby face is staring at me.

She says, 'You must wake up now. It is time for the service.'

She points to some soapy used water in a tin bowl. I reluctantly wash my face with it. My mouth is dry and furry. I walk through to the kitchen area and Hettie is busy cooking porridge with the young Xhosa girl. Her face is pinched and her mouth is drawn into a straight tragic line. I recognise that expression. It is the look my mother gets on her face when she is in repose. My heart lurches as I think of my mother. I have not been to visit her in ages and I know she is lonely living in Pietermaritzburg with her children spread all over the world. But I seem to recollect being there recently. Hadn't we passed through on the way to shooting our documentary in the Karoo?

There is a woman tapping my arm. I see pale blue eyes staring intently into mine.

Hettie says, 'Help me here. We must feed the natives at the sermon.'

I grab a bowl of porridge and follow Hettie out the makeshift door. Outside I see about sixty Bushmen congregated around Hendrik, who sits on a wooden chair. The huge dusty bible is on his lap. There are lots of tiny yellow children running around naked and women chatting to each other in an otherworldly language of clicks and sharp gestures. The men are not as chatty as the women. They stare off into the distance. Two yellow women help Hettie with the food. They give each family a bowl of porridge with a sloppy mixture that looks like maas.

I say, 'What are they doing here? I thought you hated the Bushmen.'

'I do,' says Hettie, 'but Hendrik has changed his mind. He's killed over two thousand in the last five years, you know. Now he thinks he's F W De Klerk,' she whispers as Hendrik glances up at her.

Hendrik begins his sermon. He reads in a strong baritone voice laden with drama. He begins low and slow and then reaches peaks and pitches, his nose quivering at the effort. The people look at him with a mixture of awe and amusement. Then Hendrik's voice climaxes into an almighty Voice of God rhetoric that seems to instantaneously fill the Bushmen with terror. He speaks about the fire and brimstone of hell, where all shall end up unless they believe in the almighty God of his people. He speaks with the assurance of one who knows without a doubt that he is right – that he is one of the chosen people here in Africa, sent to save the savages. The Bushmen tremble at his words of damnation. They draw their children in close to them. I want to shout out, 'No! Do not listen. Close your ears to this evil. This God is going to cause untold harm to your people!' – but I don't.

I feel a gaze on my face and see my little boy sitting on a rock looking at me. He puts his index finger to his lips. He is bathed in golden light and wears a bindi on his forehead. I want to gather him up in my arms, nuzzle his neck and call him my golden boy. He looks away quickly as if he has read my thoughts and is discouraging my wish. He has a card in his hands. He gets up to go and leaves the card where he was sitting. I walk over and pick it up. It is a Tarot card – the Empress. I look over to where he has

moved. He gazes into the distance. I try to gesture to him but a sudden wind whips around me and I find myself being drawn into the great behind. My eyes fill with dust. My legs strain to keep up the pace of my backward running. I run for a long and painful while with my eyes tightly closed.

*

There is a door in front of me. I push it and it swings open easily. I walk into a smoke-filled room. In the far left corner a jazz band plays a frenetic and mosaic medley. People crowd the dance floor and jive, jive, jive. A piano falls over and the keys transform into black men with white women, black women with white men, black men with white men, black women with white women, – and they all laugh uproariously while throwing each other joyfully around the dance floor. They wear suits, jaunty hats, stovepipes and dazzling satin dresses cut close to the body. Against the wall a line of men with white painted faces and fixed smiles survey the dancers. A procession of frolicking couples in feathered masks with beaded beaks runs through the crowd, giggling and screeching and pinching each other's waists and arms. A few broken-down bodies slouch against the bar with ravaged expressions hung upon their faces. Amongst them sits a faded middle-aged woman. She has too much blue make up on her hooded eyelids. She throws back glass after glass of epiphanies and grows none the wiser.

I walk to the bar. An elderly fellow who looks like a butler asks me for my order in a clipped British accent.

'I'll have whatever she's having,' I say, pointing to the faded woman.

'Don't bother,' he says, 'you cannot buy illumination in a glass.'

'Well, then, how about my one true voice?'

'I've got none of those but I can offer you a cup full of words and a Remington.'

‘No problem,’ I reply and notice a handsome black man sitting across the room. His eyes bore into me. His thighs bulge beneath his designer suit pants and his body ripples beneath his perfectly ironed shirt. I feel words stirring in my mind and sentences sliding down my throat – but they do not begin with I.

‘Here you go,’ says the old fellow – shoving an antique typewriter and a cup of words in front of me. ‘She can pay when she is done.’

‘But I’m drinking in the first person.’

He looks at me knowingly.

‘You’ve seen that man over there?’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘When did he arrive?’

‘Way before you did and let me tell you he’s worth the effort. You know what I mean, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I say, downing my cup full of words and reaching for the keyboard. I begin to write.

A blonde walked into the room. Tokyo’s loins stirred like a shifting crocodile on the banks of the Limpopo… or perhaps a mole on the first day of spring … or possibly an idea about to be birthed. The point is they stirred and this took him by surprise. He had not felt stirred for some time now, which had not really bothered him much. What bothered him more was the fact that they were now stirring quite a bit and he was inclined to visualise all sorts of wanton erotic scenarios in his head. The irksome thing about this was that he knew he was in a novella for specific consumption and thought that the descriptions that played out in his mind may well be rather too graphic for this particular pallet – although he did think that it might be more acceptable coming from a him in third person – as opposed to a her in first person – especially if everyone knew

that it was autobiographical for instance. And this got him thinking in sentences that started with I which did not feel right at all. For God's sake what tense is this he asked himself looking inside his mind? Ah third person past tense. He was relieved. He still had time for a few more. He turned to the anachronism behind the ingot and asked for another. Another what? Another glass of inverted commas, of course.

.

Tokyo felt irritated beyond measure at the question. Wasn't it obvious? 'Single or double?" His irritation rose to breaking point as he stared at the anachronism with a look that said it all.

Does anyone ask for doubles anymore?

He would have shouted if there were any of those darned exclamation marks around.

"Actually hardly anyone orders them at all anymore," the anachronism replied in a supercilious tone.

Tokyo felt a hot flush of humiliation.

If I wanted a double I would have said so don't you think? Are you people trained to ask if we want doubles as a matter of course?

"Actually we could not care less but I am obliged to ask you if you want a new paragraph on the side?"

My fingers play a staccato beat that becomes part of the cacophony and every now and then the band pauses and the crowd slows down and listens to my solo – and then they clap and whistle and ululate as I continue with the story…

Tokyo scanned the page for the blonde who seemed to have . This got him thinking about his last encounter that was with an alliteration picked up in this very location. She was a red head and he remembered how the thought of her red bush had gotten him

worked up into a lusty froth and loosened up his generally ltd vocabulary. He wondered if she understood the effect the idea of her flaming pubis had on the imaginings of men from all vocabularies and if women like his wife would comprehend what a relief it was to say words like bush and pussy out loud in his mind. Probably not he thought. They would write it off as cheap and crass – not in the least bit considerate of the diffusion that lay beneath the playful reprieve of the profane. He concluded that – like his sanctimonious wife – they were probably no fun between the pages and he began to regret his upbringing, which created a pathological politeness in him – a condition that led him to a tedious marital conclusion. If he had just been brave enough to say pussy out loud, his wife may have defaulted someone else into joining her in boring matrimony.

His cerebral meanderings led him back to the red head. He had seduced her with a mixture of previously repressed *words and she had slipped him a poem of sorts after they had completed their salacious soliloquies. He was quite impressed and could still recite it off pat because it had flattered him somewhat. So he did…*

After your ludicrous and rather loquacious licking of my libido and luscious lambency of my labia I could not help but lucubrate – although the luminous Lucretia within was laconically lulled by the lasciviousness of your lavish lip service the lupine lady lurking loose limbed and leering through the loophole rather loved the licentiousness of your lusty lunacy.

He chuckled to himself and caught the anachronism *looking at him askance. OK he said. I'll have that new paragraph on the side after all – and another of these – and please can you refill this bowl of punctuations.*

Tokyo's loins resumed their stirring when he turned away from the anachronism *and saw the blonde seated on an unsound juxtaposition only three sentences away. Damn, he thought. What is it about blondes that made him so incredibly horny? Was it the fact that there were hardly – if any at all – natural blondes left in the world? He presumed that she was a bottle blonde and that presumption made him feel both sexually excited*

*and superior to her. Not to mention that her particular shade of blonde also reminded him of someone much younger than was allowed – an uncomfortable thought which virtually put an end to the pleasant rousing between his thighs but was soon replaced with imaginings which could best be described as pornographic and therefore had to remain firmly within the domain of his head. He contemplated the minimalist use of language that accompanied the plentiful pornography he consumed when his wife was sleeping and thought that perhaps it was a truly modernist expression of emotion based on the notion that it was good very good. He thought about his taste for wrestling and realised that there was very little difference in the dialogue or mentality between wrestling and porn and wondered why he – a person with such refined tastes in most things – felt it necessary to watch both – weekly. Ah well. It helped him escape – and cope with – and ignore – the potential uprising of ex-exclamation marks that were accusing him of usurping their rightful place in history. Not to forget the stress involved in his recent campaign to become the capital C of words such as capitalist, consumerist, commercial – although some would say conniving, capricious, cunt. It was hard work maintaining the tyranny of his personal democracy (**!!!**)*

He gulped down the last of his inverted commas and throwing an ellipsis into his mouth he turned his mind to the blonde. He wondered if he should offer to buy her a ~~***double adjective***~~ *and tell her about his latest delusion. That should loosen her up and who knew what the possibilities were then. He briefly remembered his anodyne wife and her insipid interpretation of eroticism – and their social standing – but pushed this recall aside when the blonde turned towards him and smiled – somewhat seductively he thought. Moving towards her he unexpectedly felt self-conscious trying to pick up a blonde in the middle of the afternoon in a novella. It may have been the manner in which an abbreviation had looked at him on his way to the next sentence – although that could have been a subversive (**mssg**) in reaction to a recent article which had exposed his inability to employ letter challenged staff.*

*He was relieved when he reached the blonde's unstable dichotomy (**w**) and looked into her face, which he expected would be rather vacuous. Instead his gaze was met with a glint of urbane wit – which flustered him – he blurted out – can I buy you a dictionary?*

She narrowed her green eyes squashing his (ᗰ ᘉ□) into parenthesis and said – why is it that all you upper casings assume that blondes are lacking in brain matter? And by the way – yes I am a natural blonde. She took his face between her pale hands and pulled him willingly towards her naked cliché, which was indeed covered with natural blonde (,,,,,,,,,). And that is where he momentarily lost himself in a kind of ecstatic suspension, which was probably best not recorded in lexis. The blonde soon tired of his antics and asked the anachronism if she could order a tall story.

"Not on this page" replied the anachronism – "but you will most certainly get one in the allegory just around the corner."

Tokyo ordered another as he watched the blonde walk out of the room.

*

I type my last full stop to the beat of the jazz band, order another cup of words and find myself drawn to the dance floor. The handsome man is still staring at me, but with a look of displeasure and malice on his unmasked face. I am compelled past his table. .uhu.

"Jwayela," he says, the inverted commas hanging ominously from the edge of his voice.

I feel panicked and rush into the arms of a dancing woman.

'I prefer to dance alone,' she says gently, pushing me away.

'Me too,' I say and find an empty spot to boogie on.

'Who are you?' I shout at the passing faces.

'We are the Jive, Jive, Revolutionaries,' they sing back in acapella. 'We dance our way through it all.'

‘What all?’ I shout.

‘All of it – the whole damned shebang.’

‘What is happening now?’

‘Nothing. There is no crisis – that is why we need to dance as fast as we can.’

‘Have a fact,’ sings a glamorous woman, offering me a long cigarette.

‘Let me enlighten you,’ says a man in a black suit, flicking his Zippo.

Next to me a little wizened brown woman dances. She wheezes and coughs and rattles.

‘You need to go home,’ I say. ‘You are sick.’

‘I’m not sure why I am here – perhaps I am near to death,’ she says.

‘Are you not a Jive, Jive, Revolutionary?’ I ask.

‘No – but I did find solace in a jug once.’

‘Go home,’ I shout as I am whisked off by the feathery couples, giggling and pinching each other’s waists.

‘I have no home to go to,’ she calls back sadly. ‘They never delivered on their promise.’

‘Do you have a name?’ I shout back.

‘Yes – The Peace of the Big Tree,’ and then she is gone.

My heart breaks into crushed ice. My brain freezes. I cannot breathe anymore. I need to get out of the smoke and the laughter. The insane music scrapes at my psyche and jumbles my words. I see a procession of revelling mourners. They carry a black rubbish bag. Inside it I can make out the shape of a small body.

'Who has died?' I cry out.

'The Big Tree,' shouts a man with a fixed smile.

'Lies, lies – it is the dead pot-plant from the corner of our collective consciousness,' shouts another.

'Where are you taking it?'

'Outside,' they shout.

I see my escape. I join the procession and make my way exterior. Then I remember that I have left my story interior … stuck in the carriage of the Remington. If the big handsome black man gets hold of it he may try and annihilate me … or worse … bore me with a wooden conversation. But I cannot make my way back into the frenzied dissonance. I push on with the procession.

We are walking down a yellow brick road. In the distance a sea of people urge themselves towards us, a cloud of dust in their wake. As we get nearer I see a wave of pink flesh studded with panicked blue eyes and open mouths.

'Where are you going?' I call out as they tidal past.

'To throw ourselves back in the sea.'

'What is happening behind you?' I ask.

‘There is no crisis,’ they shout back. ‘That is what we are most afraid of.’

They disappear.

*

I take my son out of his car chair. I was too afraid to move him before but now I have to do it. I hold him in my arms. His body is relaxed. He is fast asleep. I put my ear near his nostrils and feel the warmth of his breath. I hold him tight against my chest and pour untold love into his body. Then I lay him down on a blanket I have retrieved from the boot. He looks beatific lying on the blanket. His eyes flicker open and he smiles briefly at me. He puckers his lips into a little kiss and blows it at me. Hot tears stream down my face as I explore the contents of our car strewn all over the road. I see my video camera under the car and retrieve it. It is unscathed. There is a half-used tape inside. I hang it around my arm. Then I see my diary lying open and face down on the road. I run to pick it up. I sit on the blanket and look at Lunga’s incomplete body lying next to me. A mammoth surge of grief overwhelms me. I pick up a strip and hold it close to my heart. Truth is, he was in one of his moods when the accident happened. A brooding silence which puts the fear of death into me. I had no idea what I had done or said that brought on this mood – but it is in those silences that I feel such a violence I sometimes wished he would just do whatever aggressive acts may be playing out in his mind and get it over and done with … but maybe this is a figment of my imagination for I am certain about nothing. I cry a river of tears and wipe my nose on the strip of him I have in my hands. Bits of him float off down the road. I jump up to retrieve him and use the ribbons of his body to soak up the water. I am exhausted. I curl my body around my son’s.

*

There is a rough texture scraping against my bare legs. I look down and see a lion looking up at me.

‘You were meant to do a Tarot reading,’ he purrs.

‘Why?’ I ask.

‘So that you can find your one true voice.’

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘Is that what I am looking for?’

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘and I am the first card on your journey.’

‘What about this Empress card?’ I ask, removing it from my pocket. ‘Someone gave it to me. Is this not the first card?’

‘No, silly, that is your essence.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘You are the nurturer, the lover, the mother of earth.’

‘No!’ I cry out. ‘That cannot be. I want to be Charles Bukowski. I want to wallow in broken-down buildings with fat whores and write about the grime of my madness.’

‘Well, you cannot be who you are not. Can we move on to me now, please?’

I feel I have no choice.

In the future I see a man hanging upside down from a tree.

The lion lifts his head lazily towards me and says, ‘You ought to be afraid of me. I am the untamed lust that resides within you. I am the beast of desire.’

I say, ‘Join me, for I am no longer afraid of you. You are I.’

‘Christ,’ I shout in my mind ‘these are not my words. I would rather say …

I am no longer afraid of the me that resides in you Or the you that resides in me You are a fat whore and I am a bum with a way with words We can throw our discontent Together Against the fetid walls of Our existence And then get lost in messy sex Finding ourselves Old and still fighting in grimy sheets We’ll Fight and fuck into the early hours – for however long it lasts Coz nobody really cares Except our cat perhaps And that is only because she needs to be sure Where her next meal comes from But we are… Afraid … that is …’

The lion persists, ‘How will you control me?’

I hand over to my fate and say, ‘I will not, for I need you when the Hanged Man finds me. He is with his legion of the Knights of the Holy Grail and they are searching for the one with the puzzle of life etched around her belly button.’

‘Look,’ I shout at the lion, ‘I need to know why I am compelled to speak this arcane dribble and why I cannot stop.’

The lion shouts back, ‘Oh, for God’s sake, perhaps you are just embracing the myriad aspects of you! Are we going to do this thing or not?’

‘Well, does it get any more exciting or gritty?’ I ask.

‘OK, let’s just fast forward a bit,’ he snarls.

I see men balancing on tightropes, blue river witches and baby seals with chocolate brimming eyes. I see happy baby girls running through fields of yellow wheat and ancient Chinese scholars reading from scrolls. I see skeleton women with yellow teeth bared and cantankerous bones and they all whiz past me quickly. Then it slows down and the landscape warps into kaleidoscope.

The new vista is astonishing. I perk up considerably. In the distance I see a beauteous man with a knot of hair on top of his head performing the primal dance of life. When we reach him I am drawn into the rhythmic boogie accompanied by music of great force – a recurring multidimensional hum, which translates into honey nectar sliding down my throat. I am in congress with an indigo man whose attractiveness is ubiquitous. I become him. He becomes me. A sweet smell fills the air. I see Mary smiling benignly at me and the smell of roses pervades my senses. I am no longer able to sustain this exquisite state of ecstasy. The indigo man smiles a striking beam and I am released.

I move into myself. Inside of me a young man filled with fervour runs through my heart.

I say, 'Who are you?'

He says, 'I am the Knight of Wands.'

My chest fills with sudden zest and expectation for something unknown. My intuition beams from my brow and I have a sudden urge to write a poem to a nameless entity about to cross the threshold of my life. I etch the poem into my heart and carry it there, for our journey must continue. A bejewelled serpent says, 'Climb upon my back and I will take you there.' I am not sure where 'there' is but I cannot wait. I climb upon the serpent's back.

The lion follows. His demeanour has changed. His body has filled out and his muscles are distinct as he walks with intent. He holds his head high and the slothful randy glint in his eyes has transformed into a direct golden beam filled with lustre.

I hear a canter in the distance. I see a man upon a black steed. He carries in his hand a chalice and wears upon his head a crown of seaweed. His eyes harbour the hue of the subterranean and his hair is the colour of evening light playing upon water. I am filled with longing. He stops as he reaches us and holds out his hand in greeting. I feel a current rasping through my body and settling in my groin.

He says, ‘I am the man who expresses my emotions, who has a passion burning in my bosom, who loves a good roll in the hay.’

He sips red gluwein from his chalice in a suggestive manner, his eyes searing into the poem I carry in my heart. He laughs and begins to tell me amusing stories about his journeys and conquests. I am inevitably drawn in. I feel a deep tickle in my abdomen, a sweetness in my throat and a longing between my thighs.

I say to him, ‘I throb to the beat of my longing for you and the magician between your thighs, which has cast a spell on the ephemeral mist of a thousand maiden’s sighs.’

He looks surprised.

I continue, ‘A drum beats in my belly and a dream unfurls in my eyes.’

I cannot understand why I am talking in rhyme but it seems I cannot stop.

‘Come suckle with me from the sacred tit for even the warrior cries – perhaps we’ll traverse the underworld and discover ethereal skies.’

He is amused and flattered. I can tell by the size of the wand in his pants.

He says, ‘Listen, honey, I am only one aspect of the man who seeks you out. I am the foreplay, as it were, and because you have with you the serpent of desire and the lion of lust, they will devour me if I touch you. I cannot die, for then part of the Hanged Man will be missing and he will not lie with you.’

He bids me farewell.

I am wholly unsatisfied at this turn of events and as horny as hell. An un-quenched Empress is not the ideal situation. I shout at the lion, telling him he is a no-good lusty

old fool. I scream at the serpent that her ridiculously garish jewels are chafing me between my legs with her endless squirming. I shout at anything or anyone we happen to pass on our way. The lion looks at the serpent and they suppress their mirth. I try to change my shallow breathing into deep conscious breath – but to no avail. My heartbeat is rapid and I have a ravenous pit of childish longing in me, which nothing will satiate. I am miserable in my aching. Perhaps now would have been the time to stumble upon the Death card. I fall into a shallow and unsatisfactory sleep in which I am beset by unappealing sex demons who torment me in my unslaked wretched thirst.

*

My husband says to me, 'You did not suffer. You were white.'

'I still am, hellooo – but that's such crap. White people suffered too. Maybe not politically, but I suffered.'

'Ja, but your school fees were paid by government. You had hospitals. We were denied it all.'

'But my childhood was crap. I am irrevocably damaged as a result of my early years. At least you had a chance.'

'We were the ones who went to prison … not you.'

I want to punch his sanctimonious black nose.

*

I wake up hours later with a new resolve. I apologise to the lion and the serpent.

The lion winks at me and says, 'You can't help the *me* that resides within you, but you have tamed the beastly side of me and that is a good thing.'

I say, ‘It does not mean that I will forget about my need for the magician between his thighs.’

The serpent says, ‘How about the magician that has been hanging upside down for eons? Imagine the possibilities there. He cannot be anything other than well hung.’

She winks at me with such salaciousness that I feel a touch of heat in my nipples and laughter rising in my chest.

*

I see him crouched in the cell. He hears his mother’s voice calling for him. He jumps up and runs to the window, pulling himself up towards it with strong arms. He sees his mother running away as two policemen point their guns at her.

I say to him from the shadows, ‘I have a message from a black angel. It is this – “Consciousness is essentially an inward-looking process”’.

He looks at me with stony eyes. ‘Who are you?’ he asks.

‘Your above and your below,’ I say.

*

We walk for days. There is nothing but a bleak landscape ahead of us. I am parched. I have forgotten why we are on this journey. I seem to think we are nearing completion but I am sure of nothing.

My eyes are cast downward when I feel the unfamiliar coolness of a moss-filled forest on my skin. I look up and grandiose trees and fecund damp foliage surround us. It seems that we have entered a live emerald, which throws a myriad of different images

of greenness outwards and inwards. Golden sun swords shoot through the gaps in the trees and I am truly bedazzled. The lion says, ‘At last.’ At last what? I wonder.

I see the army of Grail Knights making their determined way towards me. I think I am afraid. I turn on my heels and run. The lion lies under a tree and licks his paws. The serpent curls up in a diamond of sun and waits. I flee into the greenness and my dress falls away from my body. My nakedness feels extraordinary. The army of Grail Knights approaches me from all angles. They surround me. Honey pours in a warm cascading of sweetness between my thighs. My breath quickens. Serpent spasms undulate in my abdomen. The men approach me. I lie down. When they reach my prostrate body one of them removes my hands from their ecstatic placing over my belly button. He reads the tattoo, which was engraved around my hara by the scribe witches one night when I lay in a dream about a hanged man.

‘It is She!’ cries the Knight of Pentacles of the army of the Holy Grail.

They whip out their horns from their pants and blow long mournful, hollow notes through the forest. My loins throb with an intensity never before experienced. My breasts explode with expectation. I squirm like a jewelled serpent on the damp leaf bed I have made my own. I wait. And then he comes – a tall and magnificent creature with hair the colour of morning light playing upon water. His stature is that of the trees. He is naked and the magician between his thighs casts an immediate spell upon me. My breath quickens to an animal rapidity and I strain upwards to meet him. He takes me in long deepness as he fills and empties me with rhythmic artfulness. Serpent pleasure generates endless unconscious undulations and lion lust pulls him inwards in strong muscular contractions while I burst like an overripe plum onto his hardness. He wolfs me inside out and outside in and I give in to his every move – pliant and strong — I take him in ways that only one who has been initiated in the underground forest can. We burst forth simultaneously in an explosion of nectar and a howling of wolves meets our cries and spasms.

Exhausted, we lie back on the leafy ground.

He says, ‘I have been seeking you out for eons and when I find you, you are naked and bursting like a hot overripe plum. Where is the chase?’

I say, ‘There is no chase after eons. You have been teasing me for too long.’

He laughs and licks my drenched neck with his elongated tongue.

He says, ‘It is now time for you to tell me who I am for that is why I have sent my army to hunt you down.’

I stroke his magician until it is hard again and then I mount him.

I say, ‘Follow the patterns of my tattoo as I move into you and away from you, for it is in this meditation that you will see yourself.’

I ride him as Isis rode the Dog Star Sirius and he falls into a hypnotic state and in the movements of my hips he sees the key to his soul through the lexis of his essence – and as he exhales the immense silver vapour that has been gathering in his chest for eons, I breathe it in and die a little death … but I do not find my one true voice.

*

There is pandemonium. I am being dragged and pulled and stomped on. The procession has burst and people shriek and zigzag and wail and beat their chests. Feathers and beads and jewels and cash fly around in vivid disharmony.

‘What is it?’ I shout.

‘The Money Man has resigned,’ they wail.

*

Hendrik closes the bible with a thud. He surveys the Bushmen sitting on the ground in front of him with a severe stare and then dramatically lifts himself off the chair. He walks stoically to the kitchen.

'Bring me my breakfast,' he grunts at Hettie as he passes into the eating area.

She follows him with a plate overflowing with porridge and some leftover meat. She places the plate in front of him. He ignores her. I am standing amongst the Bushmen outside with my camera over my shoulder and my diary in my hand. I put my diary in my pocket and take off my camera to begin to film them. I focus in on them and they tremble, but do not move. Some of the women start wailing. Only the children scream and run off into the distance.

Hettie walks out the kitchen and tells the Bushmen to go. They start shouting and clicking wildly and run fast into the veld. Hettie looks perplexed. She turns to me and falls to the ground screaming.

I say, 'For God's sake, Hettie Venster, what is it with you?'

She lifts her face from the dust and shouts, 'But where did you get that gun?'

'No, Hettie, man – this is not a gun, it is a camera. It cannot kill you – it takes your pictures. Come and see.'

She comes to me gingerly and I flick the LCD screen in her direction. She sees the Bushmen running and screaming in the small square box.

'No, jong,' she says and marches off to the kitchen. 'You are a very, very strange woman and I'm beginning to wonder if you are a witch.'

I follow her and try to reassure her that I am not a witch – just her relative from the future.

She fobs me off and tells the young Xhosa girl to start boiling the sheep fat so they can begin to make their candles and soap.

'And the little bastar must wash the utensils,' she shouts.

The Xhosa woman goes outside to call Tau. She says something sharply to him and he starts to collect the plates that are strewn around the yard.

I am outraged. I say, 'But Hettie, he is just a child.'

She clicks her tongue and brushes past me. She re-emerges from behind a heavy hessian curtain with a book in her hand and walks outside towards the koppie. I am left standing in the kitchen. I go outside to help Tau. His mother rushes towards me and grabs the utensils out of my hand. She says something angrily in Xhosa. I'm not sure what to do. I begin walking in the opposite direction to Hettie. I still have my diary in my pocket and my camera around my shoulder.

In the distance I see a forest. I continue walking towards it. Eventually I reach it and enter its coolness. I am relieved to have found shade. There is a little stream running through it. I sit near the stream under a large tree. My eyelids are heavy and soon I fall into a deep slumber with my back against the rough bark.

*

I wake up and stretch. When I look back I see my body still in the bed. I go to the looking glass. I am a little girl with two long ponytails. I am wearing a blue sailor dress and striped knee-high socks. On the bedside table I see two cerise pink tablets. Written on them in gold lettering are the words 'Swallow me'. I do. Suddenly I grow very tall. My head shoots through the roof. I step out of the house and begin walking. I find

myself in a forest. I am nearly as tall as the trees. One of them bends over and whispers in my ear, ‘Drink that lake.’ I bend down and lap up the water. I start to shrink. The trees whisper. They sound menacing. I run away for a long time but I stay in one place. Then I hear an array of different voices coming from a spot between the foliage. They are self-important and shrill. I see a group of strange-looking people sitting around a long table. They are drinking tea and seem to be talking to themselves – or shouting at each other. No one is listening.

I hide behind a tree and survey the group. Some of them appear to be disembodied voice-boxes. Others are dressed in pantomime clothing. One is dressed like a Pope. A little white rabbit in a bow tie sees me. He runs towards me and says, ‘We’ve been waiting for you.’

He takes me by the hand and leads me to the table.

A taut woman with a crown on her head looks at me with a severe expression and shouts, ‘You’re late!’

Then she claps her hands and says, ‘Right, everyone. She has arrived. It is now time to begin the charades.’

No one listens.

The Queen shouts out in a shrill voice, ‘Silence!’

Everyone shuts up.

‘Silence!’ she shouts again. No one moves.

‘Silence!’ she shouts for the third time.

The white rabbit runs over to her and whispers something in her ear. The Queen rips off her crown, reaches inside her head, rips out her thoughts and shouts at them, 'Silence!'

She puts her dumbstruck thoughts back in her head and says, 'Right, let us begin.'

I am led to the head of the table. A cup of tea is thrust in front of me.

'What do you do?' the Queen shouts at me. 'What are you good at?'

Everyone around the table strain their bodies or bits and pieces in my direction. I cannot think. I do not know my right from my left. Then a kindly woman dressed in an academic gown mouths something at me from across the table. A light bulb goes on in my mind.

'Well, I think I'm a bit of a ...'

The white rabbit runs across the grass, grabs the rest of my sentence and pours it down the Queen's left ear.

'A bricklayer? Preposterous!' she screams at me.

'No, no,' I call out. 'I think what I do is ...'

Again the rabbit runs across the grass, grabs the rest of my sentence and pours it down the Queen's left ear.

'Bricks are large?' shouts the Queen.

I am desperate. I look across at the kindly woman in the academic gown but she is nowhere to be seen. I hear a commotion in the corner and see her in a boxing ring with a man who towers over her. She appears to be pregnant. He is beating his fists mercilessly against her body.

‘Stop it; stop it!’ I cry out.

‘No,’ shouts the man. ‘Not until she admits to dot, dot, dot, period.’

‘But she is pregnant,’ I call out as he smashes his fists into her body.

‘Right, let us begin,’ bellows the Queen in a strident voice. She points her long bony finger and shrills out, ‘You first.’

An odd-looking man gets up and says to me, ‘What am I?’

‘A man,’ I reply.

‘No!’ booms the man and begins to dismantle his body. He takes his head off and attaches it to his elbow. He takes his arm off and attaches it to his head. He removes his penis and attaches it to the side of his head.

‘Now what am I?’ he shouts.

‘Slightly mad,’ I say.

‘No!’ shouts the man as he removes his upper body from his lower body and turns them in the opposite direction.

‘Now?’

I am blank.

‘I am a man – but what school of thought do I represent?’

‘Horror,’ I cry out.

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ shouts the man and sits down.

‘Right, you!’ shrills the Queen, pointing at a handsome man on the corner of the table.

He immediately jumps upon a spinning ball, whips out his clarinet and plays it while laughing uproariously and juggling words. A monkey in lipstick cycles by on a unicycle, pulls the man’s pants down and gives him a blowjob. A woman in tight black leather underwear whips his rear with a cat-o’-nine-tails. The man laughs uproariously and drinks brandy while playing the clarinet, juggling words, receiving a blowjob and getting spanked. Somebody walks up to him and throws paint on his body. Suddenly his James Dean hairstyle turns a golden orange. I recognise him.

‘Dada!’ I shout, reaching out to him.

The man laughs and then disappears.

‘Correct!’ shouts the Queen excitedly. ‘Now it’s my turn. If you get this wrong you shall be severely punished.’

Before she can continue a dishevelled woman in a tight skirt calls out in French, ‘Oh Julia, Julia wherefore art thou?’

The Queen blanches and shouts out, ‘Oh shut up, Simone, you childless cunt!’

She turns towards me ferociously and screams, ‘What am I?’

She performs a whole lot of angular, disconnected movements. I am worried. I bite my lips. I screw up my face. I raise my eyebrows the same way a very stern-looking man is doing just across the table from me – but none of it helps. She breast-feeds from a woman who is nursing a piglet – I can see the watery whitish liquid sliding down her throat. She projectile vomits on the table. She defecates with abandon.

‘What am I?’ she sobs, straining her sphincter.

‘I don’t know!’ I shout.

She turns green as the sun turns black. She takes a knife and stabs the woman from whom she has breastfed only moments before. She grows a pregnant belly.

‘Jesus Christ!’ I cry out.

‘Yes, dear?’

I look up and nailed to a tree is a handsome black man with a crown of thorns. He winks at me and shouts out loudly, ‘Forgive her, for she really does not know.’

Then he looks at me and says, ‘The McDonald’s tomato sauce wrapper – unbridled creativity.’

Just above him a black woman with a head of live dreadlocks smiles down at me. She is imprinted in the sky.

I shout to her, ‘Are you the Madonna or Medusa?’

She laughs and says, ‘It doesn’t matter. I’ve killed the bitch Athena.’

The Queen screams, ‘I’ll give you a clue. I am post everything but mostly P. M.’

‘Post-mortem,’ I say.

‘No!’ shouts the Queen. ‘You have two more chances and if you get it wrong I shall cut off your clitoris.’

‘Oh no!’ I scream. ‘You cannot do that. My clitoris is my compass. I cannot find my way around the world without it.’

‘Well, then,’shouts the Queen. ‘What am I?’

‘Pre-menstrual,’ I shout.

‘No,’ spits the Queen, whipping out a small razor blade, ‘one chance left.’

I do not want to lose my compass. I turn and run away through the forest. The trees laugh at me.

I run for a long time but I am in one spot. I am convinced I am being pursued.

‘Ksst, ksst!’ I look around and see a yogi in a white robe motioning to me from between the trees.

He says, ‘Follow me.’ I do.

He says, ‘You are trapped in your mind. You desire to find your one true voice.’

‘Well, it may be so,’ I say. ‘Yes, yes, I think that is it.’

‘Whatever,’ he sighs. ‘Just remember – misery starts with desire. Desire creates action and is the barrier to consciousness. When there is desire, one has the illusion of free will – but there is no free will.’

I am suddenly running in a different direction from him.

‘What should I do?’ I shout after his disappearing figure.

‘Absolutely nothing,’ he cries out.

‘OK,’ I shout as he vanishes amongst the trees.

I hear a chorus of voices moving through the trees.

A man bellows out, ‘I’ve yet to see it. Postmodernism, Dadaism, Deconstruction, Cinema Verite and Magical Realism! I have my doubts.’

The Queen shrieks in a self-important voice, ‘The theory of the unconscious, as is well known, presupposes a repression of contents that, thereby, do not have access to consciousness but effect within the subject modifications, either of speech, or of the body, or both. As correlative to the notion of repression, Freud put forward that of denial as a means of figuring out neurosis, that of rejection as a means of situating psychosis. The asymmetry of the two repressions becomes more marked owing to denial's bearing on the object whereas repudiation affects desire itself.’ (1)

‘For Christ’s sakes, Julia!’ I cry out. ‘What if it is so much simpler than that? What if the answers reside in the space between your words?’

‘That cannot be,’ she spits. ‘In the beginning was the word.’

‘Well, then, let me put it this way,’ I shout. ‘Perhaps prax-e-o-l-o-g-y presupposes possible pre-adaptation to a pre-atomic place where plentiful peace pervades in plexus and peripheral pleochroism pleases the prospect, pledging pliant plica in pleomorphism.’

‘Bitch!’ she cries, running towards me.

Then the voices stop. She disappears. I am alone. I am relieved. I see a man with huge expressive eyes motioning me through the trees.

---

(1) Kristeva’s essay *Powers of horror* (1980: 7).

‘Come, come,’ he says. ‘Join us for tea.’

I am afraid that I will fall into the same trap but this man has a certain gentleness about him. His eyes overflow with self-mirth.

‘Don’t be afraid. We’re going to help you.’

I follow him. He is slim and dark. His movements are lithe and playful. He mutters long meandering and lyrical sentences while he skips through the forest. Finally we reach a little concrete courtyard. A big flaccid man sits at the table sipping thick black coffee from a ridiculously small white cup.

‘I said no tea,’ he says to the little dark man.

‘OK, but the caffeine – she is already strung out as it is.’

‘Sit, sit,’ says the flaccid man.

In the distance an accordion plays a happy yet melancholic tune.

He extends a clammy hand to me.

‘I’m “This and That” and this here is Italics – I like to call him Italics coz he may as well be – ha ha. Right, so we have been following your progress. It is just so refreshing that you cannot find your one true voice. I’m not sure, and we’ve been discussing it, whether you should ever believe yourself to have found it because, well, it may just ruin the fun.’

‘Blah blah,’ shouts Italics. ‘Blah blah blah yadda yadda yadda.’

I tell them about the babble of voices I hear when I fall asleep – voices in an array of unrecognisable languages that I understand when in the liminal zone but cannot remember when I wake up.

‘This and That’ laughs like hell.

He says, ‘You see, Italics – I told you she could hear us.’

‘And all those other damned dead people who believe themselves to be angels,’ laughs Italics.

‘But tell me – what are you hoping to achieve?’

‘Absolutely nothing,’ I reply.

‘Well then, even I’m confused,’ he says.

‘OK – I’ll be honest – a book … or perhaps a movie – but one that transcends the status quo … although I think there is a lot more going on here than meets the eye. There is something of an epic nature about to transpire – or maybe it has already, I cannot be sure – but first I have to get this Queen off my back. I just do not know why I have intersected with her. I mean she is so laden. In trying to transcend the material she gets caught up in its power. It holds her in a web of delusion.’

‘Aha!’ says ‘This and That’. ‘That is because she is not transcending it – she is trying to control it, master it – and then supersede it like an unwanted lover.’

‘She does not want to meet god – she wants to be god,’ I say.

He laughs hard and loud. ‘Why do you think she is after you?’

‘I think it’s got something to do with vomit.’

‘Fascinating!’

‘Fascinating indeed!’ I cry, ‘For now she means to rob me of my compass.’

I remember that I am running from the Queen. I have drunk two cups of espresso and my nerves are jangled. I bid a hasty farewell to ‘This and That’ and Italics, thank them for their advice and run off into the forest again.

Italics shouts after me, ‘Switch tenses!’

‘This and That’ shouts, ‘Continue dialoguing in a phenomenal cosmos … just stay out of the damned labyrinth.’

I chuckle, thinking of the matrix. Labyrinth indeed.

‘Stop tinkering! Find a format,’ shouts Italics. ‘This old geezer simply used detective novel plots to hang his words on. Believe me, they all do it in the end. Just find the framework and then fill it in. It works! What about Alice in Wonderland as a start?’

‘More like Chalice in Ponder-land,’ I cry out as I make off into the forest. ‘Or Phallus in Yonder-land.’

They laugh. I run for a long time. I realise the trees are nothing more than unprocessed pages – their leaves unwritten text.

I shout out, ‘A story is nothing until it is written down.’

Suddenly the forest vanishes.

It is quiet, except for a dull rhythmic patter in the distance. Somehow I feel intrinsically connected to the beat, as if it has something to do with the very core of me. In fact, I

feel it to be my lifeline – almost as if I cease to be in the moments in between – as if the pauses are a series of mini-deaths. I am paralysed, suspended in motion, nothing unless I hear the tapping.

I wonder about my free will. I wonder about the fact that my name is I. What does it mean exactly? Whose I am I?

I am no longer a child. I am now dressed in blue jeans, sturdy boots with a decent heel, a black coat and a chunky topaz ring on my right hand middle finger. I do not feel as if I have dressed myself. I feel my outfit belongs to someone else who is making decisions for me. I know this someone has something to do with the staccato drumbeat infiltrating my very being. I decide I want another piece of jewellery – an ancient silver and topaz talisman on a black leather thong. I feel my throat. There it is.

It is freezing. I am in a glass box. It is a station, but there is nobody else around. I look down and see my feet in motion. I am tap dancing. I have been tap dancing for a long time. It is the only way I can keep warm. I think the distant tapping may be my own rhythmic dance. The glass box is steamed up from my breath. I hear another person breathing behind me and turn around. I see a hazel-brown man pointing a video camera at me. He is wearing a long green coat and his dreadlocks cascade down his back. His face is achingly beautiful and intelligent.

I say to him, ‘What are you doing?’

He says, ‘We are making a film about your ancestors.’

I say to him, ‘But who are you?’

He says, ‘I am your husband – the father of your son – but don’t worry – this only happens later in the story.’ He disappears and my gaze rolls backwards.

*

I hear whispering. I open my eyes and see a group of faces looking down at me. There is a terrible smell of burning flesh in my nose. I want to scratch it out but my hands have been strapped down to the bed.

'It is for your own good,' says a young blonde woman. Her eyes are tragic and unfulfilled.

'I agree,' says a man with sideburns and a Victorian outfit.

There is an old woman in a long brown dress standing with them. She is tall with pale blue eyes. She smiles at me.

'Listen, dear – we're inside your head, as it were, and we just want to let you know that you have the milder form of temporal lobe epilepsy. Not the one that causes seizures – the other one. The one we all suffered from too.'

I reach back into the recesses of my mind. I know I have done research on this before. I access a chunk of information I had previously downloaded from the Internet. This was to explain the smells I used to get in my nose as a child. Smells that nearly drove me to the brink of madness.

Temporal Lobe Epilepsy

Simple Partial Seizures (SPS) involve small areas of the temporal lobe and do not affect consciousness. These are seizures that primarily cause sensations. These sensations may be mnestic such as déjà vu (a feeling of familiarity), jamais vu (a feeling of unfamiliarity), a specific single or set of memories, or amnesia. The sensations may be auditory, such as a sound or tune, or gustatory, such as a taste, or olfactory, such as a smell that is not truly present. Sensations can also be visual or involve feelings on the skin or in the internal organs. The latter feelings may seem to move over the body.

Dysphoric or euphoric feelings, fear, anger, and other sensations can also occur during SPS. Often, it is hard for persons with SPS of TLE to describe the feeling. SPS are often called "auras," and are sometimes thought to be preludes to more severe seizures.

As Eve LaPlante discusses in her book, "Seized," the intense emotions, sensory experience including vibrancy of colors, and particular mental state provoked by temporal lobe abnormalities, may have contributed to the creation of significant works of art. A number of well-known writers and artists are known, or in many cases suspected to have had temporal lobe epilepsy, aggravated, in some cases, by alcoholism. They include Charles Dodgson (a.k.a. Lewis Carroll), Edgar Allan Poe, Fyodor Dostoevsky (whose novel "The Idiot" features an epileptic protagonist, Prince Myshkin), Gustave Flaubert, Philip K. Dick, Sylvia Plath and the contemporary author Thom Jones. Peter O'Leary also discusses this in his book "Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness." *(2)*

A nurse walks in. She has a huge syringe in her hand. She has a white mask covering her nose and mouth but I recognise those slightly slanted eyes. They project a fine intelligence, alive with self-absorption and self-fascination. I know it to be the Queen. She means to pursue me relentlessly. It occurs to me that I may be caught in an adventure of some sort – perhaps an allegory or a postmodern fable.

The doctor in the corner clears his throat and says, 'Be careful, I would replace that description with unusual. You need to back it up and you simply do not have the time.'

I say to him, 'But the story cannot be anything other than what it is.'

---

(2) Wikipedia.

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘but these are the rules – fit in or prepare to die.’

The blonde woman releases my arms.

‘Run,’ she says. ‘Run like the wind.’

‘Thanks, Sylvia!’ I shout as I dart out the hospital room.

My theatre gown is flapping open at the back, revealing my naked body.

For fuck’s sake, I think – she nearly amputated my compass.

I am aware of the incessant tapping somewhere in the back of my head. I will it to clothe me, for I have realised that the tapping is some sort of genie – that if I make requests they are somehow fulfilled. I want my jeans – I want my coat and my topaz jewellery. I get them. I am in the streets of a city. They are filled with people hurrying to places – smiling, talking or simply walking. I feel safe.

I sit down at a table on the pavement. A little man plays a violin in the corner. He is wearing a black-and-white striped T-shirt and black dungarees. His black moustache is twirled upwards at the end. I lose myself in the anguished chords. A man in a dark cloak appears at my table. He wears a broad black hat. His long black hair falls in a curtain down his back and his fine face sports a goatee. I am instantly drawn to him. His energy is dark, yet I feel safe with him.

He says, ‘So we meet again.’

I say, ‘Do I know you?’

He says, ‘I killed you in the 13th century. I made you sing a song and then I killed you. You were a child.’

I say, ‘How do you do? I am I.’

He walks off down the pavement. I am suddenly very tired. The incessant tapping that has become part of my existence has ceased. I cannot move. I feel as if I am wrapped in plasma. I have to strain to remember my name. I am swathed in a half-cocoon hanging from a thread off an unprocessed page. I fall into a deep, deep sleep.

I wake up in the hospital bed. The woman in the long dark brown dress stands next to my bed.

I say, ‘Who are you?’

She says, ‘I am Hettie Venster.’ Then she disappears.

I sit up slowly and pull myself out of the bed. My head is thumping. I put my hand up and feel that it is covered in a bandage. Only my eyes are uncovered. The room is white with a pale green floor. It is slippery and my feet slide from under me. I land on my bum. Underneath the bed I see a suitcase. I open it. Inside are some jeans and topaz jewellery. There is a bound typed manuscript and a photograph of an entire family in Voortrekker clothes on the cover. I pick it up. There is no title and no author’s name on it. I look in a mirror and see short blonde hair sticking out of the bandage. My entire face is covered. My eyes are greenish blue. I am not thin but nor am I fat. Borderline plump, I think.

A nurse walks into the room. She clucks her tongue as she sees me out of my bed.

‘You must not get up,’ she says, leading me back to the bed.

‘Why?’ I ask.

‘Because we do not know who you are.’

‘Neither do I.’

‘Yes – but you must remember.’

‘Maybe I am not real.’

‘That is what we are afraid of.’

I clutch the manuscript. ‘Whose is this?’

‘We do not know. It was in the suitcase.’

‘Is the suitcase real?’

‘As real as it can be.’

‘That helps,’ I say, lifting my feet into the bed.

‘The best way to remember is to forget,’ she says, and walks out the door.

My head is too low. I get up and look for some more pillows to prop myself up. There are none. I reach under the bed and retrieve the suitcase. It is hard and brown but it fits under my pillow. I place it at an angle and put my pillow against it. Then I climb into the bed and prop myself up, opening the manuscript. I begin to read.

When I was born the stars were in a certain position and my mother gave me my name. She really had no choice in this matter. I had already transmitted this message to her through a process of mystical osmosis.

I had to have this name. It contained every necessary vibration I needed in order to survive and experience this particular sojourn of body, mind and soul. I begged and pleaded with X not to send me back, but it seemed I still had a lot of karma to work

through before I could fully reunite with the realm of bliss I so longed for. I warned X. I said, 'You may have to wait a lot longer now for me to join you because if you send me back I am going to experience everything and that means everything and who knows how much karma I'll have to work off then?' I heard a warm cosmic chuckle and the next thing I knew I was shooting out of a bloody tunnel and nearly fell off the end of a white hospital bed. Thank God it was not in my destiny to end up brain-damaged because a nurse walked in and caught me just in time.

I took one look at my mother's tragic expression, noted that my father was absent and probably up to no good with a fifteen-year-old at the railway barracks, and knew that I was in for a hard time. And then my mind went blank and it took me thirty-two years to wake up to the reality of what had happened and was happening to me – and another eleven to make sense of it.

Once I had realised the rigours of working through past transgressions I was free to visit X on occasion, which I did. I was actually quite pissed off to begin with. I mean why make me forget why I was here?

'Because you need a clean slate from which to begin your new experience,' was the answer.

'But that is not true. I carry the record of all my past lifetimes in the deep grooves of my soul.'

'That may be so,' was the reply, 'but this is the backdrop for the experiential playtime you are provided on the earthly plane and it would go against the experiential if you knew.'

Sometimes I got so annoyed with the answers out there that I rushed back to the less-than-perfect body provided to me for this lifetime and just got on with being human.

I cannot say that this is not a dreary task sometimes – but it has its moments.

Once, after a particularly long sulking session in which I did not visit X for weeks, I decided to grace X with my presence.

'You have been gone quite a while, my child. And I see you dabbled in some cocaine.'

I sniffed rebelliously.

'Not to worry, that kind of thing will not hold your attention for more than a few weeks.'

I was relieved. The strain on my already over-sensitive nervous system was a bit much for me. I told X I wanted answers and I wanted them now. So I got them. In a flash all my past lives came flooding into me and there were many. In some I was holy and living the enlightened life and in others I was truly evil. I felt the elation of being a yogic master and the horror of being a mass murderer all at once and I suffered intense pain and joy. I wanted it to stop, this relentless sensory experience. Then it did and I understood why we begin each new life with a clean slate. X spat out three red stars and said to me, 'You know the answer. The answer is in your name.'

I humbly bid farewell to X and joined my earthly body to experience what was left of my life with as much dignity as I could muster. I have not gone for tea for a while now and I only mean to go back when I have worked out the answers, which are contained within my name.

When I look back over my life I realise that the clues are manifold. I begin to work on the blueprint which I intend to weave into a fantastical tapestry, intertwining the real and the unreal into the quantum threads of an intricate tale which I will deliver to X's feet and listen to the chuckles of delight as my destiny is considered thereafter. Surely then I will be relieved of my earthly duties.

*

We are in a car driving through the Baviaanskloof. Lunga has the camera and is filming the beauteous landscape.

‘They were bladdy lazy,’ he says.

‘That they were not,’ I reply.

‘Of course they were. That is why they captured little children and made them into slaves.’

‘Yes, but that was the way of the time. I doubt they would have made their way across the ocean and then into the frontiers if they were lazy.’

‘Well, maybe they knew they would have it easy when they got here.’

‘Mommy, your people were baddies, hey?’ says Tau from the back seat.

‘I’m not sure, Tau – that’s what we are going to find out in our film.’

‘Oh,’ he says.

*

The man with the Victorian outfit stands at my bed.

‘What is the difference between exterminate and extirpate?’ he asks.

‘The same as between eradicate and annihilate,’ I answer.

‘Very good,’ he says. ‘Very, very good.’

‘You’re not leaving, are you?’ I ask as he turns his back. ‘Stay and talk for a while.’

‘No,’ he says. ‘I have so much thinking to do.’

I lie back on the pillows with a mouth full of words.

A man comes crashing through the door. He has blood dripping from his hands. He wears an anguished expression upon his face.

‘Have you got a quill?’ he asks.

‘No,’ I say.

‘I need to find one with the greatest of urgency. I need to write to the Dutch East India Company today.’

‘What are you going to write?’ I ask.

‘I am going to implore them to stop the killing of the yellow people. What if they killed or captured our children? What would we do? We would fight blood and guts.’

‘What year is it?’ I ask.

‘1798,’ he shouts as he turns and runs from the room.

He leaves red smears on the door. I get out of bed and try to clean them, but the more I scrub the more the blood spreads itself over the walls. I return to my bed and pick up the manuscript.

My mother was a beautiful creature. Audrey Hepburn with a twist of Vivienne Leigh. Since she was little she felt that she was the centre-stage actress in an epic black and white tragedy. Misunderstood, unloved but desired by all. This is how she lived her life. She came from a lower middle-class family with upper middle-class sensibilities. Her

father was partly educated, having finished half a law degree. He was forced to abandon his studies with the war. After the war he married my grandmother, a diminutive British girl whom he had met when she served him at a tea garden with a dubious reputation. It was called the Cremorne and could be found just outside Howick. This was run by her once-dynamic sister, who had managed to squander the fortunes of her recently-deceased American millionaire husband in a few months of desperate partying and diamond-buying madness. A troupe of hangers-on and poor relatives, with a penchant for drinking, soon found her depleted and pawning her huge stone rings for next to nothing.

My grandfather got a job as a clerk in the employ of the railways, and between his bitterness about not having become a lawyer and his suspicion that he had met his wife at a brothel, he orchestrated a vitriolic attack on her psyche for the rest of their married life. This is what my mother and her two older sisters were born into, and it took them all their adult lives to get over it.

My mother found her escape in an Afrikaans boy from the wrong side of the tracks. He was chatting her up in the sun one day when his James Dean coif turned a golden orange right before her eyes. She fell in love instantly. What she did not know was that one of his numerous girlfriends had just applied half a bottle of peroxide to his fringe after giving him a blowjob in his father's garden shed. He had dumped this girl around the corner when he saw my mother, an Audrey Hepburn dream, floating down the road in her stovepipes, heavy dark eyebrows and brooding expression. He took her to the shed where he had just had this ungodly act performed on him, whipped out his clarinet and started to play her a series of jazz riffs. My mother thought he was brilliant. Her haughty demeanour soon melted and she became his partner in every sense. She donned a leather jacket and took to the 'Teddy Boy' girlfriend role with aplomb. She rode on the back of his motorbike and attended jive dance sessions with him every Friday night on the wrong side of town. Soon they held the title of Jive King and Queen of Pietermaritzburg, both having an unnatural innate sense of rhythm. She dutifully attended his army concerts where he played the trumpet, and jived at his swing band jazz gigs, which he and his five brothers performed regularly. He was one of the few

jazz musicians who had a double lip – meaning he could contort his muscles into both wind instruments at will. He could also play any type of music by ear.

My grandmother disapproved. Afrikaans boys were considered low-class in Natal. She seemed oblivious of the fact that her own husband was born in a concentration camp and was a descendant of a long line of Boer commandants.

When the pressure got too much for my mother, she eloped with my father. Together they made a quick succession of children – having four of us before they were 25 years old. My sister Rose was born first. She was a blue baby and spent most of her life with a sunny but somewhat detached disposition. She was extremely pretty, but my mother always maintained that part of her brain had gone into shock at birth. My parents argued over her name. My father only agreed to names that his family would not Afrikanerise. He was ashamed of being Afrikaans and my mother's queenly manners and middle-class aspirations only made this self-loathing worse.

He named his first son Chet (after Chet Baker), and owned a huge collection of jazz albums which he looked after fastidiously. One of my few vivid recollections of him is of him shouting and swearing and breaking a Herb Alpert record over his knee. Someone had left it in the sun, where it had warped.

My brother's name suited him to the t. He was a born improviser. He taught me to shoplift and make bombs out of cooking oil and wax crayons. We once set a building alight in an open lot near our block of flats and watched in fascinated terror from beneath the stairwell as the fire brigade battled to put it out for hours. No one ever found out that we had started the fire. He improvised his way through women and making money in his adult years and fled the horror of Africa, after his blonde children were nearly abducted by a coloured man in Greenmarket Square. He is now a very rich man living in the east of Germany.

Then there was me. My mother drank a bottle of gin in a hot bath and rode a horse to get rid of me. By now she was wondering what had become of her career as a ballerina.

My father's sexual demands were frequent and sometimes bizarre. He often came home from work with the sweet funky smell of another woman on his fingers, which did not stop him from wanting more. But I was determined to be here, whether or not she had damaged my DNA in her attempts to get me to agree not to come into her world. I was born with a few oddities, which my mother spent years trying to find ways to hide or perfect. But I was also born with my parents' uncanny sense of rhythm, a natural flair for poetry, as well as my father's extraordinarily high IQ, which, like him, I never had enough stability to use to its full capacity. Instead, I channelled this untamed intelligence into naughtiness and a series of neurotic and fearful obsessive-compulsive thoughts, which I spent most of my childhood trying to conquer. It is safe to say that my head was a war zone for most of my childhood and early adulthood.

After me came my little sister Tina – a skinny child who clung onto the outskirts of our family in a constant state of shock. She found herself, eventually, in the controlled world of academia and after her first cum laude she decided that she would create the perfect stable world for her own family. Five degrees, two children and an equally educated husband later, she now lives in the safety of Canada, does not let her children play any PlayStation games or taste McDonald's and cannot believe that my son was saying 'bullshit' when he was only two.

My father used to sing 'I was born under a wandering star' a lot. Whenever we heard that song we knew we were moments away from packing up our car and heading for a new town, a new home and a new and improved life somewhere better. By the time I was three we had lived in a series of flats, caravan parks and low-cost housing schemes all over South Africa. It was at about this time that my father 'lost his lip' in an accident on the building site where he was doing temporary work. This meant he could never play a wind instrument again. Instead of jazz he found a new creative outlet, which included his family and his fists. I suppose this is where my story begins.

The nurse bustles in. 'What – are you still reading? It's getting late. Almost time for your supper.'

I slam the manuscript down and ask, ‘Why am I here?’

‘Why are we all here?’ she says.

‘True – but specifically why am I here in this hospital bed in this room?’

‘Are you sure you are here?’

‘As sure as I can be.’

‘Yes, but just how sure is that?’

‘Well, I can feel this metal bed – I can touch you. Surely this is enough proof that I am here.’

‘The imagination can do incredible things – you only feel these things because the imagination allows you to imagine them to be there.’

‘OK – but please just tell me, within the realm of my imagination, why I am here?’

‘But I do not know if you are here. Without you thinking you are here you would not be, so I cannot give you a clear answer.’

I feel anger rising in my chest. I grab her arm.

‘Look here. I need to know. I am here – but am I her – the woman in the book?’

‘It depends which one – in effect you are all of them because you wrote them.’

‘So I am the writer?’

‘Not necessarily – but you are reading it, which means in some way that you wrote it.’

‘How?’

‘Well, those words resound in your mind while you are reading it; so who’s to say that you are not complicit in its very existence?’

‘What about all the stuff that’s been written that I don’t get to read?’

‘Well, who’s to say it is written then?’

‘But I can see the books on the bookshelves in shops – rows and rows of them that I will never get to read. They’re still real.’

‘Maybe more real is the fact that you will never get to read them. Perhaps it is a state of mind more than actual books that are written.’

‘Are you never going to tell me who I am and what I am doing here?’

‘How can I? I am only me because you perceive me. If I tell you who you are you will still have no proof that you exist outside of what I have told you.’

‘Please,’ I say, ‘I don’t care if you tell me who I am within your own parameters – just give me a clue.’

‘Well, you remembered bookshops.’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘So?’

‘But Who Am I?’

‘You are you – pure and simple.’

I am just about to ask her about the door and the bandages when I hear a knock. A young black man comes in with a tray. He pulls a metal trolley towards me and places the tray on it. There is some gelatinous, bland-looking mush on a plate and some melted ice cream and custard. He smiles at me. I want to ask him if he has any information on me but he and the nurse exit quickly, giving each other a meaningful look as they do. I push the unappetising supper aside and continue reading.

I am four years old. I am in a suburb in Cape Town, sitting on the carpet in my mother’s bedroom and admiring the long-stemmed gold glass vases she has recently inherited from her mother. I am scared of something – I am not sure what. Maybe my father is home and has already started his ranting. Maybe he is slapping my brother. I wish my mother would come home. The whole room starts to shake. The mirrors on her dressing table shatter. I close my eyes tight. I think I am going to die. Just as soon as it starts it seems to end. I run to find my brother. I am terrified I am going to get into trouble for breaking my mother’s vases and start to create different scenarios in my head to explain the inexplicable. I think maybe I have devil powers.

They drop us all off that day. It is the same year as the earthquake. I think I have gotten us all into trouble. I am scared. My mom hugs and kisses us. She has tears streaming down her face. Her one eye has the shadow of a yellow bruise around it. My Aunt Freda is with her. She urges my mother to leave. ‘It’s the right thing to do. You cannot do it on your own. That bastard has taken your life from you.’ My mother turns around and leaves us there. I go numb as I see her back disappear. We are all in shock. My oldest sister’s mouth forms a hard line – she keeps that expression forever. My brother starts to punch the first child he finds. My little sister doesn’t speak for a year. I concentrate on my devil powers. If I think hard enough, my mother will come back and fetch us. When this fails I start to scream. If I scream loud enough she will hear me and come back. Eventually the matrons lock me in a yellow room where I scream at the top of my lungs until my little body collapses in exhaustion. This continues for the eighteen

months we are there – at The Marsh Memorial Homes in Rondebosch. I repeat the same devilish act every Sunday after my mom comes to visit us.

It is suppertime. My little sister is sitting on a potty on the dining room table. She is crying. She still has not spoken a word since my mum dropped us off. She is only two. All the kids are laughing at her. I am told she poo'd in her pants and is being taught a lesson. I scream and run out the room. I am locked in the yellow room again and I scream my loudest for my mother to come and rescue my sister.

I am in the kitchen. My pants are down and I am being paddled with a brown wooden spoon on my bare buttocks. After my hiding in front of three bovine matrons and a man who talks and laughs like a woman, I am given a block of butter with syrup on it. I cannot wait for my next hiding.

My brother is kicking the head of his new teddy bear around the playing field. I cannot understand why he has ruined his Christmas present like this. He has decapitated it and kicks it angrily at me.

It is suppertime but I cannot move. My legs have been buried up to the thighs in a sand-pit. I am lame and I know I will get into trouble. I see a group of boys running away laughing.

My brother and I are walking in the field. We see a little mouse. He goes to pick it up and gets bitten.

I am on a swing. My little sister comes running up to me with her curly blond hair bouncing on her head. My swing hits her on the head and she is concussed. I think I have killed her and beg her to wake up. She does but is rushed to the hospital.

My older sister stares over the balcony, her mouth in a tight hard line. She is waiting for my mother. My mother doesn't come that day.

I am in a yellow room screaming and screaming.

Then one Sunday my mother comes to fetch us and we all move to Joburg. By this time my brother and I are delinquents. Six months later my mother packs the two of us up and sends us on a train to a boarding school in Pietersburg. The rage I contain in my seven-year-old chest fumes and smoulders and explodes right into my adult years.

I am eight. My mother comes to our boarding school to take us out for the weekend. She has a glamorous new hairstyle and is wearing pink. She tells us she is getting remarried and that we are going to move to Rhodesia and live on a farm. She tells us she has someone with her she would like us to meet. We are in the dining room of the Holiday Inn in Pietersburg. A tall papery man walks in with a false smile on his face. When he shakes my hand I recoil at the smell of his skin. I think my mother must have found his advert in the Farmer's Weekly but I am glad to be getting out of boarding school.

*

A doctor walks in. 'How are you feeling?' he asks.

'Pretty confused,' I say.

'Is it that?' he asks, pointing at the manuscript.

'Yes,' I say. 'Whose story is this?'

'Is it a story?'

'I'm not sure – what do you think?'

'That I cannot tell you.'

'Oh, so you've read it?'

‘Sort of.’

‘What does that mean? How can you sort of read something?’

‘You can skim over it and get the gist.’

‘No – that’s not possible. You can never do a script justice by simply skimming over it. There are too many nuances – hidden agendas.’

‘All I will say is that it remains to be seen.’

‘What does?’

‘Whether it all pulls together in the end – we’ll have to ask the council.’

‘What council?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘For goodness’ sake, you are so evasive. What’s with you?’

‘No, what’s with you?’

‘OK – that’s it. I’ve had enough of this madness. I would seriously like a sleeping pill or something that will knock me out completely for a long time.’

‘I would suggest something that makes you sleep for at least six months.’

‘Good idea – I could not agree more.’

‘ I’ll be back with those sleeping pills,’ he says and walks out the door.

Damn, I think – I could have asked him why I was here. I throw the manuscript to the floor. Shit, goddamn it – now I am bored. I want to get out of the room – walk down the corridor to the toilet – peek into other people's rooms. I lift myself off the bed and walk towards the door. On the way I see my reflection in the mirror again. I should take the bandage off so I can see who I am. But I need to open the door. I turn to it but it is no longer there. Maybe I am facing the wrong direction. I turn towards the window and see the door. I walk towards it but again I am faced with a blank white wall. I realise that the door is reflected in the mirror. I stand before the reflection and try to work out where the actual door is. If it is in the mirror on the left then it must be on the wall on the right. I turn towards my right. No door. I think that if it is on my left in the mirror then I should in fact turn left – so I turn left. No door. Perhaps it is behind me. I turn around and look for the door directly behind me. It is not there. The bed is there. I look for the reflection of the bed in the mirror and see that it is not reflected in the mirror. I wave my arms around me to see if there is some invisible force blocking the view. I see myself doing this in the mirror. I touch my face just to make sure I am there. There is no bandage on my skin but I can see myself touching my bandaged face in the mirror and I am convinced I felt the bandage earlier on.

I am somewhat disturbed and wholly tired out by this mirage. I pick up the manuscript and hold it in front of the mirror to make sure it is actually in my hands. It is. I return to bed with the manuscript, thinking to myself that the only thing I can be sure about is the existence of this manuscript. I throw it against the wall – angry that it exists with a certainty I do not possess. The pages fly off in different directions and land gently on the floor. Shit, fuck, motherfucker, bladdy hell. I heave myself off the bed again and pick up the pages. There are no page numbers. Fuck it. I go back to the bed and spread the pages out in front of me. I remove the ones I have already read and put them in a pile on the metal tray. Then I pick up the first page knowing that I'll have to make sense of it as I go along. I have nothing but time on my hands. I lie down and look around me. The door is where it should be.

I am nine. There is an army helicopter up above. It hovers over the hockey field and drops pamphlets. The kids hold onto their hats and rush to pick them up. It is an array of paper flyers, some with pictures of a woman with her lips ripped off, some of decapitated children, one of a white baby – murdered by the terrorists. I cannot believe what I am seeing. What if this happens to my mum? I think of her on the farm, alone while my stepfather is tending to the tobacco fields or out on police reserve duty. I wonder why she married this man who looks like a crocodile and smells like the old elephant-foot ashtrays and lion skins that adorn his house. I wonder why I am living in Rhodesia in the middle of a war and if that shrivelled-up thing pinned to the bar wall at the tennis club really is a terrorist's ear.

I use my powers again, which by now have grown increasingly religious. Every night I pray from my boarding-school bed, obsessively, that my mother will be kept safe from the terrorists. I visualise large angels covering our farmhouse with their wings – three of them standing taller than the house, facing inward, shielding my mother from outside harm. Both of our neighbours are attacked with mortars. One of our neighbours is shot at point-blank range by a revenging farm worker. He used to string his labourers up by their fingers and set his pack of dogs on them. He was the man who castrated our foxie after it wandered onto his farm. Our other neighbour is killed at night while going to switch the generator off. My stepfather is a weak man. He never harmed anyone physically. He is indifferent but somehow this has kept him safe. Our 'houseboy', Waiter, disappears and rumour has it he has joined the terrorists. We children loved him and we presumed he loved us. Maybe he did because our address never ended up in anyone's little black book.

I am ten years old, running happily down the corridor to my classroom. When I get there a group of children are huddled in a bunch whispering. They go silent when I walk in the door. 'What?' I wish I had never asked. They burst into excited explanations and accusations. 'Your brother tried to murder a boy last night.' My stomach implodes. I run out of the classroom and find my brother sitting in the courtyard with tears streaming down his beautiful face. His body is hunched over his knees. I sit next to him.

My head is throbbing. The world has turned into a loud screeching invasion. 'What did you do?' He cannot answer me.

The headmaster stands on the stage and tells the whole school that my eleven-year-old brother pulled his pen-knife on a fellow student, held it to his neck and threatened to slit his throat. They tell the children not to worry. My mother is called to remove him from our presence. She sits in the headmaster's office for a long time. When she comes out she is crying. She leaves and my brother remains at the school. He is sent to a psychologist once a week. The other children are never told why this potential murderer is still lurking in their corridors. I never know why either. I pray to God on a nightly basis to stop my brother from becoming a real murderer. I say the Lord's Prayer over and over again and ask God to protect my brother.

I don't know how, but soon I am the one who is guilty of attempted murder in my head. I begin to sleep on my hands and pray that I will not lose control and murder the whole dormitory. I am a thin and weary child. The strength of mind it takes for me not to lose control and murder everyone takes its toll on me. I cannot see any violent movies without becoming fretful. If I see a Scope magazine with the word murder in it I go into a state of anxiety, get dizzy, run to my room to lie on my hands so that they cannot perform any ungodly acts. I read a comic about a hand that floats around killing people. I begin to imagine this is what will happen to my hand. I once go to sleep with my arm under my neck and my hand protruding out the side next to my head. It goes numb. When I wake up I see a disembodied hand next to my head on the pillow. In a flash I know it is my murderous hand that has returned from an unsavoury expedition and has forgotten to reattach itself to my arm. My heart lurches and I stifle a scream. I creep around the dormitory looking for decapitated children. They all look intact. I go back to bed and sob for a long time into my pillow. Between praying to God to protect me from myself and my mother from the terrorists, I am a wreck. The next two years go by shrouded in this miasma.

A phone rings. I jump up, startled. I had not noticed a phone before. It must be my imagination. I lie down and try to imagine it away. It continues. I put the pillow over

my head. It drowns it out. I fall into a slumber. When I wake up the phone is still ringing. The nurse rushes in.

‘For pity’s sake, will you please answer the damned thing?’

‘No!’ I shout back.

‘Then I will,’ she says. ‘Helloo. Yes, she is … it’s your mother.’

‘What!’

‘Your mother – she needs to speak to you.’

‘Shit. Fine.’

I get up and slide towards the phone.

‘Mom?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is it?’

‘You cannot just go writing my story like that.’

‘I don’t think I have.’

‘Well, Tina told me you are.’

‘Who’s Tina?’

‘Your little sister.’

‘But I don’t even know who I am right now. I don’t even know where I am.’

‘Don’t start that story again. You tried that when you were fourteen.’

‘I did?’

‘Yes – and then you refused the medication. You always were slightly mad, if you ask me.’

‘But what number did you use to phone me?’

‘Your number.’

‘What – my home number?’

‘Yes.’

‘But I am stuck in a hospital somewhere – in a white room with no way out. You need to help me. I’m being held against my will.’

‘What nonsense is this? That is the nonsense you are writing and I bet you’re putting all the blame on me.’

‘I am not writing.’

‘Look here – you need help. Call an ambulance. Declare yourself certifiable.’

‘You know I don’t buy into that rubbish. Madness is a choice. I chose not to go that route.’

‘For God’s sake, Lila, I do not want all that stuff dredged up again. I’ve changed. I’m not the person I used to be. Besides I had no choice. Maybe I should have left you all in the homes. Maybe then you would have had the stable life you all wanted – gone to three schools like the rest of the world. I’m sick of your story about how many schools you went to. Don’t forget you chose to be born – did you have to choose me as the vehicle – come rushing into my life to make it as difficult as possible …?’

‘For Christ’s sake, Mother – just get over yourself! I have every right to tell my story if it is indeed my story.’

‘No – you are telling my story and that I will not allow.’

‘Am I? Really?’

‘Yes – if you’re going to tell the story of me at least focus on the fact that I did everything I did for you lot. I held down three jobs, married a farmer, got jobs at universities so that you could get a free education – put you in a home – all because it was the best thing I could do at the time. You have no right to tell it any other way.’

‘Look here, if that was the case I appreciate it – but I am unable to tell your story because it was not my experience. All I can write about is what my life consisted of from my perspective. But don’t worry – as far as I can tell, I’ve transcended the blame game. I love every dastardly thing that ever happened to me – if it did.’

The phone clunks down in my ear.

‘Christ almighty!’ I shout out and skate towards my bed, throwing myself down.

‘Yes, dear?’

‘Oh no!’ I scream, pulling the pillow over my head. ‘No, no, no.’

Later I remove the pillow from my face. He is not there. I pick up the manuscript and try to read myself to sleep.

I am thirteen and at high school. My toiletry bag is my biggest delight. My mother has bought me deodorant for the first time ever. I have lovely-smelling creams and a new face cloth and toothbrush as well as two training bras. My soul recoils as I walk into a new dormitory populated with giggling and screeching girls. The pretty ones have already begun to form bitchy little groups. The fat and pimply ones hover around the outskirts of these groups hoping that they will be invited in. I am neither pretty nor fat. My very blonde hair is blonder from my recent perm and holiday at Scottburgh.

Most of the kids here are from the various farming regions around Rhodesia. My mother has decided to send me to an all-girls' school. She does not want a repeat of my older sister's school life. She is at a co-ed school where girls are falling pregnant and my sister is being poached by a teacher. She has already been caught kissing him and bunking out every weekend, coming back tipsy. The teacher tells everyone she kissed him. She gets punished and he keeps his job. I am in awe of my beautiful sister. She looks at people with her pretty mouth still set in the hard line she perfected at the Marsh Memorial Homes. She slants her eyes and they shrivel in her presence, finding themselves wanting to lick her shoes to gain her approval. I've seen her do this and I think this is the way to behave in high school. I walk over to my bed and look at the staring faces with what I imagine to be the same expression. Two pretty girls pack up laughing. I turn my head in a regal manner and take out my hand cream. Almost immediately I have relegated myself to the status of a weirdo and can only belong to the fat girl crowd. They are too terrified to look at me. I am on my own now. Better that way. But at night I begin to wish that I had a hand to hold onto. I remember a washed-out little boy in the bed next to me at the Marsh Memorial Homes. We used to hold hands every night, crying ourselves to sleep. I never understood why they put all of us siblings in different rooms.

We are all herded into the prep room. The older girls are excited. It is time for our initiation. Crying standard six girls are told to stand on the prep room table and

perform ridiculous tasks. 'Make love to the broomstick! Give birth to barbed wire!' shout a mass of flushed faces. All the girls, even the pretty ones, are reduced to gibbering tearful blobs. It is my turn. I stand on the table and give them my sister look. They shout loudly at me. 'Give birth to barbed wire!' I stand motionless and stare at them with the withering look. They try again and again and I stand there resolute. Eventually they give up. My mother told me I do not have to do anything I do not want to do. I do not want to give birth to barbed wire. I do not want to wait for the older girls at the door. I do not want to stand up and say 'good morning prefect,' or become anyone's skivvy. I just don't. No one knows what to do with me. They ignore me for a few weeks.

I have made a friend. Her name is Mandy Smith. Her mother lives on an army base. Her mother is a slut and so is Mandy. She spends night after night telling me about her exploits with the army guys. I have no idea about half of what she tells me. I cannot imagine that a man can stick his fingers inside a vagina. But according to her they do and it feels good. I think some of the other girls overhear us. There is a hushed silence every time we walk into a group. One weekend Mandy tells me one of her army guys has arranged to meet her. She is going to bunk out. She asks me to pile up her pillows in her bed with a stuffed stocking for her head after she has climbed out the window. I say I will not. I am already always in trouble. We fight. We do not speak to each other all day. Everyone notices and they talk about how they heard me shouting at her in the bathroom. She still bunks out.

She does not climb back into the window later that night. She does not return the next day. We hear that she has had a very bad accident. Her army guy is killed instantly and her body is almost skinless. I walk into the prep room and everyone goes silent. They begin to whisper and point at me surreptitiously. That night my sleep is broken by a shrill scream. It is Meredith Bytheway, a prefect who sleeps on the other side of my cubicle. The lights are switched on by the housemistress. Meredith Bytheway is hysterical. She is ushered out the room. Nobody will speak to me for the rest of the weekend.

On Monday I go to my French class. I have forgotten to do my homework. My teacher goes into a frenzied rage. She sends me to the headmistress. The headmistress begins to tell me I am no good, I am a slut who dyes my hair blonde, that this must be so because my eyebrows are dark. I want to pull down my pants and show her my shock of blonde pubic hair. I don't. She tells me I am a bad influence, that girls are falling pregnant and somehow I have something to do with this. I look at her in disbelief. She says, 'And then there is the accident.' I feel huge tears plopping from my eyes. She stares at me and shouts, ' Do not look at me with those huge innocent blue eyes of yours when you know you are far from innocent!' My eyes are green. She tells me to go back to the dormitory.

I hear later that Meredith Bytheway saw me floating above her bed in a black cloak with a dagger in my hand. Other girls start to see me at night floating around with a dagger. There is lots of screaming in the dorms. I am terrified. I am told I am a witch and that I put a curse on Mandy because of our fight. I am told that my mother is a witch as well. I am told that I am to be expelled.

My mother flies down from the farm on her broomstick. She spends a long time in the headmistress's office. I hear a lot of shouting from through the door. My mother leaves and I am left at school. I retreat back into my madness. I am terrified of myself. I start praying again. I go home for the Christmas holidays and wish the terrorists would come and wipe us out so that I will not have to return to that school ever again.

I am forced to go back to the same school but I take the little amulet that Mondrake, our resident 'witchdoctor' and 'horse boy', has made for me. He tells me I have the gift and smears some black charcoal on my forehead. I have loved this man since I was nine years old. I carry the small sack of herbs, and God knows what else, in my suitcase when I return. By now, the witch hysteria has calmed down. The kids look at me with a sort of mixture of reverence and wonder. If I look back they hide their faces. This is when I meet Shazza Sales.

I hear a rustle of fabric. I look up and see Hettie.

She smiles at me and says, ‘Do you remember now?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘Who is this person?’

‘It may be you,’ she says.

‘How would I know?’

She takes out a photograph from her pocket. It is in full colour. There is a blonde woman, a handsome black man with long cascading dreadlocks and a little brown boy with curly hair resting his head on the blonde woman’s shoulder. The dreadlocked man looks at the woman with an expression of bewildered amusement. It is obvious she has just said something that is typical of her – something offbeat and curvaceous – something that amused him despite himself. The little boy adores the woman. He has handed himself over completely, with love and trust. She looks independent and funny. I suspect that she takes herself seriously but pretends not to.

‘Is that me?’ I ask – construing that it may be, given the short blonde hair I noticed peeking out of the bandage earlier on.

‘Only you can tell,’ says Hettie.

‘But I don’t feel like anyone. I don’t remember a thing. Is this my life? Are these my thoughts?’ I ask, slamming my hand on the manuscript.

‘It is hard to tell,’ she says.

I am exasperated. I say, ‘Can you be of any use to me at all?’

‘I am still trying to help myself.’

She walks towards the door.

I want to ask her why I am in a hospital bed and why I have a bandage around my head. I want to ask her if I was in an accident or whether I have had brain surgery – or if perhaps I am dead. The door shuts with a decisive click. I have a feeling I am locked in. I should get up to check but my head feels too heavy. I continue to read instead.

Shazza is an exuberant and beautiful girl. She is a day-scholar. She befriends me. I start to spend every weekend at her house. She lives just across the road from the school. Her parents have a pub in their house and throw lots of parties for lots of interesting transformation entrepreneurs. Eventually I start going to her house after school during the week. No one seems to care where I am. I meet Prince Thomas Johnston at her house. He is a dusky Maori man with a mop of dark curls. He plays a guitar and looks at me when he sings. I am instantly in love. He is much older than me, but that does not matter. I think about him constantly. One day I am walking through Salisbury when I see him. He has a long model attached to his arm. He asks me to wait for him outside the Monomatapa Hotel. Then he returns five minutes later without her. I have a short twiggy hairstyle, am wearing a leotard and Gap jeans, with red high-heeled shoes, hoop earrings and a thick brocaded belt around my skinny hips. I see them in a pile on the floor as this handsome Prince reveals to me the pleasures of the flesh while still maintaining my innocence – or at least my virginity. His penis is purple. I watch fascinated as white milky stuff shoots out of it onto my pert breasts. Then we dress and he drops me back in town.

It is our last day in Rhodesia. My stepfather has made the decision to leave as he cannot live under a black government. He believes there will be a bloodbath. I am walking down to the café with him. It is at the shopping centre down the road from my sister's flat in Salisbury. My little half-brother, Stewart, is in my arms. Suddenly there are bullets whizzing overhead. We fall to the ground and leopard-crawl to safety, a difficult task with a two-year-old in arms. An army guy has gone mad in a restaurant and starts to shoot randomly. Two people are killed. We are unhurt.

'Mom, can I have my milkshake?'

Startled, I look up and see my little boy. I hug him. He shakes his fist at my laptop.

He says, ‘I hate you, computer … you mother thief.’

I laugh and squeeze him tightly. I make him his milkshake and tuck him into bed.

‘What do you want me to read?’ I ask him. ‘Alice in Wonderland?’

‘No, that’s for babies,’ he says.

‘Narnia?’

‘No, the book is boring. I like the film.’

‘What about the one about the boy werewolf who turns into a poodle instead?’

‘Yes!’ he shouts.

I read to him for half an hour and then switch off the light and return to my story.

I am fifteen when we finally return to South Africa. I realise that my jaw has been clenched for years. My mother divorces her farmer, who has been reduced to a poverty-stricken wreck and has to manage other people’s farms in South Africa. We are all suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Our family life is no fun. I start to hate my mother with a passion. I don’t feel normal around her. I fiddle neurotically with my hair a lot. I start to lose myself in an assortment of men. It takes six different encounters with various hairy-bottomed university students before my ironclad hymen finally breaks. From then on there is no stopping me.

I get a job at the local Pick ‘n Pay after school hours. I go to a cocktail party in the manager’s office after work. I drink a lot on top of my sinus medication. Later I find

myself in bed with the fresh produce manager. He is a puffed-up body builder with a very small dick. He takes me home in the morning. The next day I go to visit my mum at her work. She is working at an attorney's office. The fresh produce manager is there visiting his fiancé, who works with my mum. We do not say hello.

I am at the local discothèque. I am doing my usual sexy routine on the dance floor, wearing a shiny mini dress and high silver shoes. I see a man with a beard watching me. He asks me for my number and I give it to him. He comes to fetch me the next morning. He is with a hippy couple. We all go to a forest in a rusty VW kombi. He introduces me to pot and kisses me a lot. His tongue is exquisite. Then we go back to his friend's one-roomed outhouse. They wait outside while he performs at least an hour of something astonishing on me. I later find out it is called cunnilingus. This is some kind of wonderful. He leaves for Israel the next day. From then on, if a man does not perform the same superb tongue work on me on the first date, I ditch him.

My mother is acting weird around a boyfriend I have recently met. He is 25 years old. He has moved into a cottage in our garden. It is a school night. I am in his room and we are getting pretty steamy. When I come up for breath I see my mother watching us from the door. She looks evil. I run to my bedroom. She stays in his room all night. Then she begins to enrol me in ballroom dancing lessons and other evening activities. She and my boyfriend drop me off. I begin to suspect something. My heart starts to fall apart but soon enough I wreak my revenge on her by seducing one of her friends. Piet is in his thirties. He is the quintessential cowboy. He has long scruffy hair, a moustache and dark brown skin. He looks like a poor white and listens to Elvis Presley. I adore him. He leaves his wife and two kids for me. We fuck a lot. One day I throw a little tantrum and he hits me hard across my face. I run all the way home. He pursues me. He tries to hit me again. Between him and my mother there is no reason to stick around. I hitch down to Durban, but Piet finds me there. I catch a train to Johannesburg to live with my sister Rose, who is huge and pregnant and married to an ex-SAS guy with serious post-war psychosis – but at least Piet cannot find me. I get a job as a cashier at the Perm Building Society in Hillbrow.

One lunch hour I meet a Polish man who comes to light my cigarette at a restaurant close to my work. He is very rich but does not seem to do much. One night after a dinner he turns weird on me. I begin to suspect that he sells young blondes to the Arabs. I catch a train back to Durban, where my mother now lives. I move in with her and go back to school the next year. I have already completed half my matric through night school, but I start again.

I start to sleep with the next-door neighbour's red-haired and huge-nosed son. I jump over the wall and live with him when I have fights with my mum. I go to school in a post-coital haze on many occasions. Then my mother moves into a flat around the corner. I stay in the house, which is falling down around our ears. I finish school and enrol at the technikon to study journalism.

I meet Gary, another swarthy guy. He has just broken up with a model. He is a friend of my brother. He is a musician and has a huge collection of jazz records. I like him. He moves into our house and we become lovers. We spend hours listening to John Coltrane, Jaco Pastorius, Joni Mitchell, Average White Band, Keith Jarrett, Tia Maria, Spyro Gyro, Joe Satriani, Steely Dan, Michael Franks, Lee Ritenour, Charlie Parker, The Joe Pass Quartet and Miles Davis. He writes songs about me. We drive to the Transkei and run through fields of resinous ganja. We stuff our torch, our sleeping bag and boot full of the green herb and drive back to Durban. We sell it. I give up on my diploma and convince him to give up his boring job at the egg board. I find us a small-holding with chicken runs on it and we start a chicken farm. Later we switch to egg farming after half of our chickens peck each other to death in a bloodbath. This is caused by my not switching their water on in time on a scorching afternoon because there are monkeys outside the kitchen door. I am afraid of monkeys.

His identical twin brother pops into our lives periodically. He is marginally better-looking than Gary. When they are together they spin out of control. They talk about all sorts of spiritual and esoteric things. They are intensely mad together. Sometimes they end up wrestling each other. They are a demonic Romulus and Remus. They drop a lot of acid. I panic when his brother is around. In fact I panic a lot these days. I seem to be

hallucinating. My reality is warping rapidly. I cannot smoke pot without going on a nightmarish journey into my own heart of darkness. I cannot stay at home and be a housewife. I cannot leave Gary. He is probably my father. Instead of alcohol he smokes too much pot. He doesn't abuse me but he consumes me. I hit him and behave like a demented child. I am a trapped butterfly.

I am eighteen and I finally break up with Gary and move back into Durban. I live with my mother in her beachfront flat. This is no good, because by now I am a serious phobic. All I can do is sit and stare at the TV for hours. My obsessive, fearful thoughts re-emerge. I cannot go into any shops where the lights are too bright without feeling out of control and my throat closing up. I think I may run around stabbing people, even though I know I don't want to and I have no weapon on me. I run out of shops and movies and go back to watch the test pattern on TV. Gary spends a lot of time parked outside staring up at my window. I am scared. Eventually he stops. Years later he bumps into my mother and tells her he should have married me. My mum is grateful that he did not. So am I.

It finally occurs to my mother that there is something wrong with me. She makes an appointment with the head psychiatrist at the medical school in Durban where she is now working. I walk into his office and he surveys me from his chair. He asks me a few questions and then casually throws in, 'Have you ever had encounters with other girls?' I have not. After a few sessions in which he makes reference to my pixie looks, he suggests I sit on his lap. I am so phobic by now I begin to think he may be the big bad wolf. I tell him I want to be a writer. He laughs and tells me I need to go on three different drugs which they are running test trials on. I cannot even take a Panado without thinking it will send me over the edge. I refuse his offer of drugs and stop seeing him.

One morning I pick myself up off my mother's couch and muster up the courage to catch a bus back to the technikon. I go and speak to the HOD and tell him I regret leaving the course and I want to be a journalist. He looks sceptical. I show him my

award-winning creative writing certificates I got through the Rhodesian Institute for Allied Arts – just to make sure. He agrees to re-admit me. It is 1983.

*

A gaggle of children's voices giggling and whispering wakes me up. I open my eyes. It is dusk. Nine children look down at me.

They shout, 'We have found her! She is here sleeping at the river.'

Hettie runs up. She is furious. 'Why did you just go?' she shouts at me.

'Because you did,' I say.

'No, man,' she says, 'this is not right. You must stay near the house. There are plenty of savages out there and they will rape you if they find you alone. And then they will kill you – or force you to bear a bastar child. I am not sure which is worse.'

I see that I am back in her dress. I have my diary in my pocket and my camera slung over my arm. The children poke it and laugh. My hand involuntarily moves towards my throat. I have a topaz talisman around my neck. I could have sworn it was not there before, but I cannot be sure of anything.

I follow Hettie back to her homestead. The children run and laugh ahead of us. When we reach the homestead, I see my son still working in the garden, cleaning dishes. I am outraged. Hettie looks at me with pity.

She says, 'Listen, woman, get a grip on yourself. He only works on Sundays. The other days I have Bushmen children doing the work and he goes with Hendrik to look out for Xhosa. One day he will ride with him on the commandoes and he will have the honour of being in front.'

I gag.

Hettie tells the Xhosa girl to give me my food. They have already all eaten. She serves me a piping hot plate of lamb and vegetable soup. It is delectable. I feel satiated after eating and would love a glass of wine. I go through to ask Hettie if they have such a thing. She is sitting at a table with the big leatherbound book, rocking back and forth and wailing softly under her breath.

I decide to see if I can find my son and walk out towards the outhouses. I see him crouched in a bundle outside his mother's room. I go and crouch next to him. Our legs touch and I feel a surge of happiness. I put my hand on his knee. His eyes flicker at me and then he covers his ears. I hear a rhythmic banging and a young woman wailing loudly. She calls out, 'Thixo!' (God) and sobs big tears. I draw my child to me and shield him from this horror. He clings to me, shaking. I need to get this boy away from here. I hold him for a long time and we fall asleep in each other's arms.

*

I am with a group of women. We are walking back from a restaurant in the early evening. We are on the outskirts of a city, which I think may be Johannesburg. We walk on a flyway joined to a block of flats, which looks over an inner-city park. One of the women says, 'That is where Robert Mugabe lives.' We are all surprised.

We say, 'Shall we go and look?' Instant groupies.

We walk toward his portion of the flat and, feeling like naughty school-children, we peek into his space. There is nothing ostentatious about this building. It is quite run-down. Suddenly a man in a general's uniform appears. He has two pretty middle-aged caramel-toned women with him, both wearing traditional African dresses. One is in lilac.

'Good evening ladies.'

We want to run away. We blush and giggle. It is him.

‘Would you like to come in?’

We would. The middle-aged ladies disappear.

It is completely different inside. There is an understated elegance about the décor. There is the mark of a fastidious art collector. Robert is charming. His dark skin shines and he oozes an elegant sex appeal. He changes into a paisley silk gown and offers us all the most expensive whiskey in crystal cut tumblers. He begins to regale us with intelligent tales. We are transfixed. I go to pee. When I come back one of the women is naked and Robert is fucking her. One after the other the ladies undress and wait their turn. He smokes a cigar in between. I am also naked. When it comes my turn I know I want him. He seems to have a special eye for me. I put my satin dress back on and say, ‘I can’t, I am married.’ He seems OK with this. He takes my hand and we walk to the window. He says, ‘Look at the view of the city and this beautiful park.’

The park is ordinary. He points down to an empty lot and says, ‘All I want to do is extend my building down there, but they won’t allow me to. This is my struggle.’ I feel immense sympathy for this man.

*

‘Wake up. It is time for your injection.’

The room is blinding. A tall handsome man stands next to my bed with a syringe.

‘Aren’t you Marlon Brando?’ I ask.

He smiles, turns me over, injects my buttock, passes me the manuscript and leaves through the wall.

I am twenty-one and have finally moved into a commune. It is the second semester of my journalism diploma. It is all so boring, except for the media sociology for which I rake in the firsts. Otherwise the rest leaves me stone cold. I spend a lot of the time in the campus pub with a few of my classmates. There is Stephen, with his ill-placed wig and hairless eyes, and Phuti and Sfiso and Frank and Lynn and Karen and myself. We smoke like chimneys and drink draughts. We talk and talk and pretend to know a lot about current affairs. I love the company. We have all seen The Year of Living Dangerously and it's given us a fair idea of how journalists should behave. I often imagine myself observing myself and being impressed with my worldliness. We sometimes go to strip clubs to continue our drinking and intellectual conversation. We drink late into the night and still make it to our first lecture. By lunchtime we are back in the pub.

One Friday I go to the community arts workshop. I am sitting inside the hall on a table swinging my legs and wearing the tie-dyed sundress one of my housemates had made me – when in walks Larry. He is beautiful and brown with flowing dreadlocks. He is wearing thin grey tracksuit pants, no underpants and a vest. He holds his head like a king and makes lots of really witty comments in a British accent. We get talking. Later he is in my bed.

We hang out for a few weeks. He has a sophistication I am severely lacking – but I do get his wit. We go to obscure Indian restaurants downtown and soirées in the northern suburbs. I feel as if I have been introduced to a long-lost part of myself. Then he leaves. His parting comments are, 'Always know where interesting unknown restaurants are and try a black boyfriend.' I thought he was black.

The next time I see him I am embroiled in a relationship with Sam.

I also meet Sam at the community arts workshop. He approaches me at the same table. He is not sexy, sophisticated or beautiful, but he is tall, kind and interesting. He is a struggling reggae musician. Within half an hour he has convinced me that I should manage his band. I give up my job as a therapist, give up my boring journalism diploma

just before completion and begin to work as a fundraiser for the community arts centre. I am also a freelance journalist for the Daily News and manage Sam's eleven-piece band. I throw myself into this task with a robust passion. I hang out at Mango Groove and other concerts and convince them to take my band with them on the next leg of their tours. We end up on the same tour busses with Brenda Fassie, PJ Powers and the Mdlala Brothers. We play in university halls and stadiums and earn a pittance. My band is usually badly behaved. They take advantage of the VIP lounges and drink alcohol before they go on stage. Once, Evangelist, our keyboardist, tries to walk off a moving tour bus to piss outside. He is caught by his collar just in time by PJ, who shouts 'Where is the bladdy blonde manageress?' so loudly that I wake up from my slumber. They embarrass me but I am loyal.

We once get a gig in Swaziland. We cram ourselves into a taxi. All in all there are twenty people in the taxi – and a drum kit. We break down just outside of Hluhluwe in Zululand. A police convoy drives past and one of the policemen sticks his head out the window and shouts, 'What are you doing with all those baboons?' They drive off laughing and do not offer to help. We decide we will hitchhike to Swaziland. We split up into groups. Sam and I and Duke Ellington Malaleku stay in a group. We are the last to get a ride. We are taken to the border in the back of a rusty bakkie. Once there I have to convince a hotel to put us up for the night and call the event organiser. He says he cannot come to help us. We hitch through to Mbabane the next morning, promising the Lavumisa Hotel that we will pay them on our return. The concert is a flop. The crowd gets angry and begins to throw bottles at us. I see a woman being pulled around the gravel on her back. A fire breaks out. We are forced to run for our lives. I get some money wired through from SA and pay for a taxi for the other members to go home. They will not let all of us on the taxi, so Sam and I book into a hotel and hitch a ride back the next day. We are at the border post hoping the hotel staff will not spot us when a kindly elderly chief from Zululand offers us a lift and buys us Kentucky. We never got paid.

We are frequently not paid. I sometimes have the entire band living on the lounge floor in my commune – and their families. They are often without food and all of them have a

taste for beer. My housemates are all liberals. They put up with the strain. They have already forgiven me for the twelve street kids I arrived home with the year before when the cops threatened to arrest the lot while we were filming them for a documentary. These little chaps made mincemeat of our bleeding-heart liberal principles and we only saw the last of them when I physically chased Clemence, the pack leader, down the road with a broom. I happened to be eating a chicken leg at the time, which worked in my favour. Rumour on the street had it that I was going to curse the lot if they came back. Whenever they saw me in town they would shout, 'Hello, Lila,' and then run like hell.

I begin to put on my own concerts at the community arts workshop. I have met a rich suburban woman with an insatiable taste for young men and the arts. She begins to manage the group Twanana and we put on concerts together. We call them Afro Caribbean nights and they are a whopping success. At last my band is earning a bit of money. I often get tipsy at the door and Duke Ellington Malaleku accuses me of ripping them off. I get furious and storm home, leaving the entire group stranded.

Sam and I fight a lot. I find out too late that he has a wife in the rural area and twin sons. I only find out because one of my journalist colleagues, Frank, writes an article about a botched Busi Mhlongo concert I had put on at the Rainbow Restaurant – after I made the mistake of telling him my manager and girlfriend woes. This article is published in The New African – in Zulu. In it he asks how we are going to move jazz forward if the white band managers are sleeping with their musicians and then quotes some of my confidentialities about my relationship with Sam. His wife reads it in Empangeni and comes to Durban to sort me out. For some reason I hold onto Sam and he cheats on both of us.

After successful concerts I sometimes have to go and fetch the men from dubious hotels and dingy flats where they have spent a few days in an alcoholic daze. Two of the band members are dead from Aids-related illnesses by 1994. Luckily for me, I only pick up two venereal diseases from Sam. I fall pregnant as well. I am about to turn 22 and I do not want to have a child. Sam is not interested either. I have a backstreet abortion. Someone takes me to an Indian area, where a woman in a faded sari inserts a bunch of

stiff straw sticks into my uterus. I pay her R300 and she tells me that I must go to a gynae when I begin to bleed. I am referred to a gynae who understands the code language for backstreet abortion. He is an old man with dyed red hair and a bow tie. He takes great pleasure in forcing me to undress in front of him and making me feel like a whore. He books me in for a D&C. One of my housemates fetches me on Vespa afterwards. Sam is nowhere to be seen. I finally break up with him and try to pull my broken life and body together. I go on holiday with my mother. I begin to smell like a blocked drainpipe and have to go to hospital with terrifying cramps. They discover a wad of rotten cotton wool jammed in my uterus. I narrowly escape septicaemia and begin to despise men. I have lost my innocence but not my need for love.

*

There is a field of dead Bushmen. I climb up over the piles of dead bodies. The Xhosa stand on one side of the riverbank ululating. The Burgers stand on the other side with their gun sights set on the Xhosa. They shout and swear and spit into the dust.

I see Hettie climbing the mountain of bodies barefoot.

'What are you doing here?' I ask. 'Are you not supposed to be home?'

She looks at me with a radiant face and says, 'Your aura is indigo.'

Then her eyes roll backwards in her sockets and her body begins to gyrate.

'What is happening?' I shout.

She moans orgasmically and cries out, 'Jesus!'

'Hettie, are you OK?' I shout above the men's cries.

She says, 'Can you smell that? It smells like roses.'

‘No,’ I say. ‘I can smell burning bodies.’

The burghers begin to shoot. Xhosa men fall down one by one. I am terrified and throw myself to the ground.

*

We park our car in the churchyard where I have arranged to meet a distant relative at the gravesite of my ancestor – the Lionheart. We get out the car, greet them and walk towards the memorial site. It is a long phallic object pointing up to a gloriously blue sky. On the granite is an inscription about a legend and a hero in Afrikaans – ‘Tiaans de Waal 1802.’ This is where he died at the hands of a chief. I do not introduce Lunga or Tau to them. I am too afraid.

When we get back to the car I apologise to Lunga for not introducing him as my husband.

‘It is not my racism,’ I tell him. ‘It is theirs and it makes me scared.’

‘If they are racist,’ he says.

*

Hettie comes running from the house. She is naked. Her body is milky white and her legs are long and shapely. Her breasts are smallish and worn from feeding so many children and her stomach is a mass of loose wrinkled flesh and stretch marks. Her neck is long and her buttocks still firm. I can tell by her body that she is younger than I thought. She looks around 61, but now I think she is probably my age – 43. She stands in the moonlight and looks up at the sky, a low bestial wailing escaping her throat. Tau creeps off behind the outhouse. Hendrik emerges, buttoning his pants. He looks furious and stalks towards his wife. He slaps her face and drags her towards the house. I see

little faces peeking out of the reed wall cracks. Hettie screams and performs. She looks up at the sky and cries out beseechingly, ‘Oh Jesus – have you forsaken me, your bride?’

Hendrik slaps her again and she allows him to pull her inside. He throws her to the ground and throws her dress at her with a look of disgust on his face. He spits next to her and mumbles some obscenities under his breath. He calls her a mad woman. She lies on the ground writhing and crying. There is nothing I can do. I leave her there and make my way to the corner of the bed. I hope my little boy is OK. There is too much pain in my heart. I lie awake for a long time wondering what is happening and how I can put things right. I cannot fall asleep. I creep to the dining room, light the candle and stare into the flame.

*

A tall black woman smiles horribly as she passes around champagne glasses that are overflowing with her breast milk. A group of people gather around her and hold out their hands. They grab whatever is offered.

The milk that flows from her left breast is white and frothy. Those who drink it fall into a blissful stupor. They loll around with soporific smiles and milk moustaches.

The milk from her right breast is oily and grey. Those who drink it fall to the ground. They expire in a writhing pit of bodies. More hands reach out for the glasses.

She offers me a glass. I say, ‘No, thank you,’ and cast my eye elsewhere. In the distance a portly white man with a balding head and a confident glint in his blue eyes is fornicating with a black man who is bent down in front of him with his wide arse in the air. The black man sports a few animal-skin accessories. He is elderly and wears glasses that are misted up. He smiles like a Cheshire cat.

I look back to the black goddess. She is smoking a cigarette. I say to her, ‘You don’t look like a smoker.’

She smiles a terrible smile and says, ‘This is an exception.’ She throws the stompie to the ground and crushes it with her strong toes.

In the distance I see an angel levitating towards me. He is tall and has a shiny halo above his head. When he approaches I notice that his mouth is downcast and the halo is nothing more than a head of silver hair. He has a flashing red neon heart pinned to his elegant shirt. On his right hand is a red boxing glove. He takes a swipe at the fornicating portly white man as he passes. He misses. The Cheshire cat smiles and smiles.

A woman in Zionist church regalia pulls a heavy wooden cross through the crowd. A blue-black man is nailed to it – barbed wire pulled tight around his bleeding head. His face is angular. A mixture of peace and pain plays in his eyes. He wears a torn Che Guevara T-shirt. He is bleeding between his legs. I think he has been castrated. When I look closer I see a giant McDonald’s tomato sauce wrapper has been used to cover his nakedness and is leaking down his left leg.

A gallant knight rides through the crowd. His peppercorn beard is cut in a point and his moustache is faultless. He wears his brown suit impeccably. It is the same shade as his skin. He carries a long lance and seems to be waiting for an opponent. Then an overweight man arrives pushing something humungous in a wheelbarrow. It is brown and fleshy and overflows from the sides of its transport. I peek in as he walks past. It is growing from his lower torso. He stops before the gallant knight and begins to dance a slow menacing dance. He holds an imaginary machine gun and shoots the knight. The knight looks upon him with disdain and points his lance towards his monstrous member.

‘Do not forget to shower,’ he tells his opponent, as he turns on his horse and bids a haughty farewell.

The overweight man throws his head back and laughs.

‘Do not forget to continue to spread the light,’ he shouts after the disappearing figure.

A birthday cake glows in the centre of the room. It has fifteen candles burning on it.

*

I wake up with my head on the dining room table. I have burnt the candle out and I know that Hettie is going to be furious. I creep through to the room and see the same bowl of dirty water waiting for me. I must remember to get up before the children in future so that I can get fresh water, I tell myself, wetting a tiny corner of my dress and washing the sleep from my eyes. I am beginning to smell. It seems everyone in the household except the Xhosa woman smells. I need to find out what her secret is. I check that my camera is still safe under the bed. It is. I put my hand into my deep pocket to feel where my diary is. It is there. I walk outside.

My son is washing himself in the yard. His little body is muscular and glows a beautiful golden in the morning sun. He is standing in a tin basin. I walk over to him. I want to soap his little body the way I have always done. I take the cloth from him and put it in the water. There are two beautiful lotuses in the water. I feel around for his feet but the flowers grow from his ankles. I am filled with a sense of peace and bliss. I have no fear at all. He touches my brow. I walk into the kitchen area to find something to eat.

Hettie comes through to the kitchen. She looks radiant. She has a violet aura around her and a beatific smile plays upon her face.

‘You look beautiful,’ I say to her.

She does not see me. She levitates past me, puts some water in a pitcher and then levitates out the door. She leaves a honeysuckle aroma in her wake. I am curious. I follow her and pull open the heavy hessian curtain to her sleeping area. She is washing a man’s bloody feet. Her hair cascades down her back and her robe is half off, revealing

a lily-white slender shoulder. I watch, transfixed. Then she kneels before him and caresses his penis. She places it in her mouth. I pull back, both shocked and aroused. I make my way shakily to the bed to retrieve my camera. I need to rewind it and try and make sense of my life.

My heart lurches as I see an empty space under the bed. I run outside to see if the children are playing with it, realising that I should never have shown little Jan how to use the playback to see the pictures of themselves.

A group of men gather outside the homestead. Most of them are wearing wide-brimmed black felt hats and carry the same tobacco pouch as Hendrik. They have beards and no moustaches. Hendrik stands in the middle of them with a scowl on his face. Next to him stands a blonde man with cold blue eyes. The others call him the Lionheart. It is clear he is the leader and the men look up to him. He is Hendrik's brother. At least five of these men are the brothers de Waal. With them is a tall man with a hard face whom they call Adriaan.

When they see me they all begin whispering and glaring at me with disbelieving eyes. I see little Jan standing amongst them. He sees me and runs off laughing. I walk towards them and see that they have my camera.

Hendrik stands up and says to me, 'What is this that carries your sins?'

'It is my camera,' I say.

He turns on a switch and presses the play button.

On the screen I see myself and Lunga. He is looking at me and then he kisses me deeply. We are in our family museum in Middleburg. All the men begin to click their tongues and talk amongst themselves. They are disgusted that this white woman is kissing a black man. They cannot understand it. They cannot comprehend where the

image comes from and how it is encased within the hard black thing shaped like nothing they have ever seen before. They call me a devil's child and a witch.

Hendrik says, 'It is best to smash this thing and send her to live in the wilderness, for wildness must stay in the wild.'

The men agree as they spit their tobacco into the dust.

I notice a huge man sitting casually against a tree, surveying me with his green eyes. His hair is raven-black and his skin a golden hue. His body strains beneath his cotton shirt. He does not wear a hat and his beard is wild and unkempt. I feel naked when he looks at me. He has a devilish twinkle in his eyes.

'No,' he says. 'I have a better idea. Let her come with us on our expedition. Let us make her into a frontiersman, since she acts like no woman I have ever met before. She can cook for us too.'

I say to him, 'I am not afraid. I will come with you. I am a master marksman and I can ride a horse. I learnt all of this when I was nine years old in Rhodesia. Where are you going?'

'We are going to save the white women who survived the Grosvenor wreck and now live among the savages,' he says, surveying me with salacious eyes.

I say, 'I want to come with you.'

'Let her bind her breasts and join us,' he shouts to the men.

They agree.

That night I have a dream. I am riding on a chestnut horse looking for my son. I gallop into the distance with an anxiety in my chest. I have to find him as I know some terrible

harm is about to befall him. Then I see him standing in front of my horse. His face transforms into the face of a jackal and he holds out his hand to me. My horse takes fright and bucks and rears. I fly through the air and fall hard to the ground, my head hitting a rock. There is blackness.

*

Someone is tapping my solar plexus. I open my eyes and see a tin face staring down at me. I jump up, startled.

'Who are you?' I ask.

'More to the point, who am I looking for?' says the man in a hollow voice.

'Well, then, who are you looking for?'

'I'm looking for the lion and the scarecrow.'

'Who?'

Before he can answer, the man in the Victorian outfit opens the door.

'Let me answer that,' he says. 'She does not know who she is.'

The tin man backs against the wall in terror.

'What is it?' I ask.

'The enemy,' he says, pointing at the man.

'What makes him so?'

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, we’re not all the same,’ shouts the man. ‘Some of us used disturbed temporal lobe logic to write our stories. Besides, mine has been out of order for years. Do you want to find your mates or not?’

‘Yes,’ says the tin man.

‘Well, then,’ he says, clearing his throat. ‘The lion felt spiritually deprived and defected to a Tarot card reading but soon tired of that and became a crack addict. Now – to my relief – he has cleaned up and rejoined those insufferable children, who spent weeks playing PlayStation while Narnia went to hell, and they are now back ruling the kingdom. I’m afraid he hates Elton John’s version of the yellow brick road and, on principle, refuses to rejoin that story.’

The tin man looks bereft. ‘And the scarecrow?’ he asks.

‘Ah, the scarecrow – well, he felt he had spent too long in one field. He gave it all up – bought a brain on the black market – studied medicine and is now a doctor for loss of voice patients. He plans to graduate to the writer’s block therapy this year. He’s still somewhat vague, but he gets by … although he has a reputation for accusing other people of exploiting straw men.’

‘Fuck!’ screams the tin man. ‘My heart would break if I had one. Straw men are the least of our problems. He should have specialised in All-Intensive Decimation of Semantics (AIDS). You obviously have no idea what is happening out there.’

‘What is going on?’ I cry out. My anxiety levels are reaching breaking point.

‘There’s been a coup. The Gyre Octagon has been taken out. Words have escaped from archives and libraries. Genres are intermarrying, although death is the penalty – no one cares any more. History books are leaking into fiction – fiction has gotten hold of handheld cameras and well-known literary characters have started their own reality TV series, trying to pass this off as *cinema verité*. Breaking news stories have turned to

simple rhyme, some even to paedophilia, and adopted fantastic or fairytale language for ominous purposes. Oral recordings are finding themselves onto pages – and self-help books have usurped the place of highbrow literature. Vaginas have burst forth from bell jars and are embarking on perineum pilgrimages. Orgasms are looking inward and clitorises are suffering from severe self-esteem issues while the Cinderella complex has gone underground. Black phalluses have come out of the closet and admitted that there is more to them than meets the eye, while white phalluses are on the run and becoming shape-shifters in order to save themselves.'

'And now I may as well become Iron Man,' he screams, transforming into a tall and muscle-bound Marvel comic character. 'Fuck integrity!'

'Who started this mayhem?' asks the Victorian gentleman.

'Legend has it that it was a blonde who walked into the room – one of those who appears quite innocuous on the outside, but carries within her mind a weapon of mass deconstruction. Some say she came straight from the bed of the devil. No one knows quite why it started, but our guess is that she was denied expression of some sort and all hell broke loose. They say she suffers from Beloved's Poltergeist syndrome if she feels she is misconstrued.

'But she is now in mortal danger. Rumour has it that she is being pursued by the Queen of Abjection, who is in fact a diabolical lesbian coupling of the Chess Queen from Alice's story and some genre-specific Freudian-influenced philosophy birthed by a feminist named Julia – but who is in fact, a doctor in drag employed as an undercover agent for phallogocentrism. 'His/Her plan is to perform a clitoridectomy on the blonde and then brainwash her with a pink dildo and an academic essay on literary theory, when he/she catches her.

'The Queen's handler is none other than the fringe poet, Charles Bukowski. What she does not know though, is that Charles is not, and never has been phallogocentric, except in the minds of his critics. He is as soft and mushy as a turned-on vagina and plans to

save the blonde from the brainwashing. He will kill the Queen by suffocating her with a pair of full tits borrowed from his fat whore of a girlfriend. Then they will join Jacques for a cocktail at the punctuation bar, where they will probably come to some sort of hybrid BEE/Post Feminist deal with Tokyo and start a media empire sans punctuation. After a short spell in the world of over-constructed deconstruction, he gets the hell in and tears the place apart with mad footsteps in the night — then disappears to write his last book.

'The blonde is a true Joan of Arc, as it were – a martyr. It seems that she really only surfaced to concoct a plan of action with her Xhosa husband and her golden child, to bring down the giant at the top of the social ladder, explode the Bell Curve debate and rid the world of the Prevailing Master Narrative for good. They may all die for the cause, according to the scribe witches, who have looked into the future. Not only that, but they are on the list, along with the black Jesus and his mother Medusa, as the rational world's most wanted and dangerous anti-status quo terrorists. We may be able to circumvent their imminent death if we get her to change her script and not go to the Karoo — for that is where it all begins. And ends for that matter. I think her worst transgression is that she wrote the script with mother's milk and not the standardized black ink. How she wrote without a pen is one of the troubling mysteries she has left to solve.

'But first we have to find her for she has gone underground – burrowed her way into a subjective narrative which obfuscates the complexities into simple rhythmic sentences. It's an excellent disguise, but I have to warn her that some will misread it and think it is pornographic — or Buddhist, or, God forbid, Buddhist pornography — which may bring her down. Unfathomable to say the least!

'There is a small gathering that believes she has gotten lost somewhere and may not even remember her own name.

'Look, I'm talking too much and my story is a bit jumbled – make of it what you can – that I have no control over … but for now I have to go and find myself a heart. If you

come across her, please tell her she is in danger and should just screw the scriptorium and get on with it. Also tell her not to go to the Karoo if she can help it. Her documentary will never make it beyond the shores of Africa – the Gyre Octagon will ban it from Europe and the USA and anywhere else they preside over, anyway. Just tell her, please.'

He disappears in a flash of illuminating fire.

The Victorian man looks at me and says, 'Thank God I castrated myself years ago. It was Alice, you see.'

'Go away, I say. I do not want to hear this one.'

He does.

I feel the entire day stretching ahead of me. I am filled with an apprehension that consumes me like the white room. I really do want to get out of here and join the fracas outside. I see the door in its place and run towards it quickly before it disappears. I crash into a white wall. I turn around and see the door on the opposite wall – I slide my feet quickly, as if I am skiing towards it. I crash into the white wall again. It is obviously pointless. I go to sit on the bed. A second later the young black man walks in with a tray. It contains some watery coffee and a plate of steaming oats porridge. I am hungry.

The man says , 'Get into your bed and then I can serve you.'

I do. He pushes the silver tray towards me.

'How did you come through a door that does not exist?' I ask him.

'What do you mean?' He looks at me, puzzled.

‘That door is not really there.’

‘Yes, it is. I just came through it.’

‘My point exactly – I have tried on numerous occasions to open it or even find it and it is never there when I get there.’

‘Well, it is always there for me.’

‘What does this mean?’

‘It means, I suppose, that the door exists for me – but not for you.’

‘But if I see you coming through the door then it must exist for me.’

‘Then why can’t you find it? Maybe you don’t really want to leave this room.’

‘But I do – I do!’ I cry out. ‘There is a revolution on the go and I am missing it again.’

‘Well, if you did, then you would find the door.’

‘Let me show you,’ I say, getting off the bed and walking towards the door. ‘You will see that it disappears before I get there.’

I walk up to the door and it is there – right in front of me. I am able to grab the handle. My heart lurches as I turn the handle slowly. Then some glass breaks. A white pigeon crashes into my chest. Winded, I fall to the ground. The pigeon panics and flies around the room, crashing into the mirror and walls. It falls on the ground next to me. I pass out.

*

I am lost in a warped and shifting paradigm. I see a bench and go to sit on it. There is an elderly man in an old grey coat sitting there already. He has a bottle of booze tucked into a grubby brown paper bag.

'How do you do?' I say to him.

He turns a ragged face towards me and says, 'Despite my appearance I am the
Caring sort –
Redemptive and
Eternally kind – an
Artificer perhaps – but nonetheless
Trustworthy,
Omnipotent and
Radiant.'

'Are you really?' I say, reaching out and touching his ravaged cheek.

He smiles.

I say, 'If you are, then why have you not potty-trained father time?'

I tell him how sick I am of wading through piles of ancestral bullshit, but he gets up, burps and leaves before I can tell him I have lost my way somewhere. So I pour my memories onto the pavement, pick them up, squeeze them dry and ask the DO NOT LITTER sign for directions somewhere. I walk for a long time until I reach a forest.

There is a warrior in the forest. He has long matted hair and the lower half of his body is that of a ram. I recognise him. He is the man that used to stand at my shoulder from standard one and tell me the answers to my exam questions. He is the man who helped me get a hundred per cent for everything four years in a row. He is after me. He means to kill me with his bow and arrow. I am not afraid. I think I will kill him first – he is of no use to me now. I pull out a knife and slice off my right breast. I can manoeuvre my

weapon better that way. We prowl around the forest in pursuit of each other. I shoot him and my arrow scrapes his shoulder. He winces but he gets away. I climb up a high tree and jump down upon him. I pull his long hair and beat him with my hands. He pulls me off and grabs me around the throat. He pushes my head towards a rock and then stops short just before crushing it against the granite. He puts his fingers together and hits their points against my sternum. He has a glazed look in his eyes and cannot even see me. I am afraid. My arrows are finished. He is too strong for me. I say 'Stop!' but he cannot. He throws me to the ground and holds me tight around the neck. The world turns black. It is desolate. I am dead. It is not a nice place. The loneliness is unbearable. I am walking down a long dark tunnel. It is damp inside. I think it is raining outside. There is a bit of light in the distance. Some strange, reptilian hunched-up men watch me from the shadows. I hear my name. I slowly make my way out of the tunnel and find the light. I am on all fours. The warrior comes upon me and humps me from the back, his hairy legs chaffing my thighs. I howl and grunt in animalistic pleasure. Then he is gone.

*

A doctor is shaking my shoulder. He is dressed like Alice Cooper with white make up caking in the wrinkles around his eyes and down the side of his mouth. His leather pants are loose around his buttocks.

'Why are you dressed like that,' I ask?

'Isn't it obvious,' he replies?

'No,' I say.

'I'm a rock star.'

'I thought you were a doctor.'

'Yes, but in the end we're all rock stars really.'

‘Who all?’

‘All of us good looking men in high professions.’

‘There is no such thing as high and low,’ I say.

He ignores me.

‘And there is nothing more pathetic than an aging rock star,’ I say.

He seems not to hear.

‘Are you here to give me my sleeping pills?’ I ask. ‘Please say yes.’

‘Well, I can’t give them to you now.’

‘Why not? I am the patient.’

‘Yes, but you are also the reader. I cannot give them to you until you read that part.’

‘What part?’

‘The part where I give you the pills.’

‘For goodness’ sake! I’m here in a bed in a hospital asking for my pills. What has this got to do with the manuscript?’

‘Everything. There are still more pages.’

I look at the pile on my bed.

‘So what now?’

‘You must carry on reading,’ he says and walks out.

I throw the manuscript against the wall again. It hits the mirror and explodes into a fountain of fluttering pages. Filled with instant remorse, I run to catch them as they float around the room. I grab a handful of loose pages and return to my bed.

The manuscript is spread all over the white bedspread. I sort the pages and start to read it again, hoping to find some hidden clue that I could have missed on my first reading. If I read it out loud so that I can hear my voice echoing off the walls it will make more sense to me.

I love the Karoo with its restrained hues and endless sameness of landscape. We are travelling towards the Blue Mountains, which are never blue when you reach them. My little boy says for the hundredth time – Mom and Dad, are we nearly there? Lunga turns around to answer him when he hears my exasperated sigh…

‘Jesus Christ! You’re not going to repeat everything, are you?’

‘What?’

‘You are not going to repeat the whole damned thing!’

The voice is coming from under my sheets.

‘Who the hell is down there?’

‘It’s me – your oldest friend.’

The voice is coming from between my legs.

‘Who is that?’

‘Your vagina, pussy, bearded clam, vertical smile, beaver, cunt, trim, hair pie, ax wound, fur burger, cooch, pundenda, punani, snatch, twat, lovebox, box, poontang, cookie, fuckhole, love canal, flower, nana, pink pussy, cat, muff, roast beef curtains, the cum dump, chocha, black hole, sperm sucker, fish sandwich, cock warmer, whisker biscuit, carpet, love hole, deep socket, cum craver, cock squeezer, slice of heaven, flesh cavern, the great divide, cherry, tongue depressor, clit slit, hatchet wound, honey pot, yoni, meat massager, nappy roots, dick mitten, mystical folder, koek ...’

‘… and whatever other name has been assigned to me and my kind.’

‘What the hell!’ I jump out of my bed and try to brush the speaking spectre away. There is no way my vagina can talk.

‘Come now, sistah, calm down. It was you who taught me to talk.’

‘No way!’

‘Yes way – you said you were bored – that there was no one out there to engage in what you consider to be real conversation – mainly about yourself – so you started to talk to me … long self-involved monologues. One day there was something that you said that concerned me entirely and I just could no longer shut up. I spoke out big time.’

‘Look – I don’t know who I am – but clearly you do, you garrulous goodie basket … or whatever. Why did it take you so long to speak out?’

‘Hey! I was taking a much-needed break – you’ve put me through a lot you know.’

‘Tell me more.’

‘Man, I’m joking – wowee – I see the 18th century has taken the wind out of your sails – deflated the humour bubble somewhat, nê? But still I don’t want everyone to think I am in the same state as ol’ Mol’s broken and buggered up nether region. No, siree. I’m still sassy, quick on the uptake, tight as a wound-up elastic and as pliant too. Ain’t no-one gonna take that away from me.’

‘Why should people think that?’

‘Come now. It’s the way the world is wired. Idiotic really. The only thing that can bugger me up is about ten natural births – but let them have their little judgmental fantasies. Ain’t nothing gonna get me down.’

‘What’s with the black Southern accent?’

‘Something I picked up from you when you read to your son and slip into Indian, Afrikaans, and black Southern accents. Hilarious. This was my favourite of all.’

‘My son?’

‘Yes, the most sweet-honey-muffin-delicious-caramel-peanut butter boy. And I’m particularly grateful that he left me out of his introduction to this world. My God – can you imagine!’

‘So you know where my son is?’

‘Of course.’

‘But I’ve got nothing left to read. What am I going to do?’

‘Well now, that just does not make sense.’

‘Where, here?’

‘Huh? Can you hear yourself, girl? Have you completely lost it?’

‘In this room with no windows and a shifting door? Christ, please help me.’

‘Lordy, Lordy, Lordy. You gotta learn to help yourself, girl. Stop calling on the first man that enters your head.’

‘I just want to read – anything – Kurt Vonnegut for instance. Slaughterhouse Five. That’s what I want to read right now.’

‘Get a grip woman. You’ve gotta get out of the 18th century first.’

‘I don’t understand. What the hell are you on about?’

I have started to wring my hands, scratch my skin and pull at my hair. I feel a massive panic attack about to invade my being. I cannot breathe.

‘For Christ’s sake – doctor! DOCTOR!!’ shouts my vagina.

A young Cuban doctor comes running through the door.

‘What is it? What’s going on?’

‘It’s her. She thinks she is dying. Help her before she convinces herself that she is and none of us get out of here alive.’

The doctor lifts the sheets and sees my vagina rattling off. She winks at him.

‘Cummon doctor – just give her the medication and then get back down here as soon as possible. You’re one tasty morsel of a man – yes siree! And I intend to eat you all up.’

The doctor sits me up. `he has two bright yellow jelly beans in his hand.

‘What are these?’

‘The pills someone prescribed to make you sleep for six months.’

‘No!’ I shout. ‘I’ve changed my mind – I do not want to sleep for six months – please no …’

He puts the pills into my mouth while it is open in protest. He tilts my head back and pours some water in. There is nothing I can do but swallow.

*

I am in a field of restrained hues. There are some blue mountains in the distance. There is no-one around. A man on a white horse appears on the horizon. He approaches me slowly. His hair is light blonde and his skin is fair. He has a strong, stocky but tall body and his blue eyes are as cold as ice.

He says, ‘Who are you?’

I say, ‘I am I.’ I cannot remember my name.

He says, ‘What are you after?’

I say, ‘I am collecting the ribbons of my husband’s body, which has been shredded into one hundred pieces.’

I feel as if I am plucking these words from the air.

He says, ‘But that is how I die. I get killed by a Xhosa chief and cut up into a hundred pieces. The chief is from the Mina clan.’

I almost shout out ‘That is my husband’s clan!’ but something in the icy blue stare tells me I should not.

I say, ‘Who are you? You look vaguely familiar.’

‘I am Tiaans de Waal – the son of Andries Gelde de Waal from Veenwouden, who arrived in Africa in 1716. I am also the brother of Johannes, Hendrik, Nicholaas, Paulus and Andre. They call me the White God or the Lionheart.’

I remember him from Hendrik’s farm. I say, ‘How do you do? I am your niece from the future.’

He looks at my clothing and says, ‘I thought you were a boy.’ Then he notices my breasts and says, ‘Oh.’

He says, ‘I am looking for the Xhosa chief who is going to kill me. I think I will kill him before he gets to me. Have you seen him?’

‘Yes,’ I lie. ‘I saw him running towards the Blue Mountains in the distance and he looked afraid.’

Tiaans smiles a cold cruel smile and thanks me. He gallops off into the distance on his white horse.

I see the strips of my husband scattered around the landscape. I remember that I have to collect him and put him back together as a matter of urgency. I run into the veld and continue gathering up the ribbons. I have ten pieces in my arms and have one piece left to find. My husband is heavy and I strain under the weight. I stumble and fall into a gully filled with my ideas. They are playing hide and seek. I reach out to grab them to put them back in my head but they are elusive. I hit my head on a rock as I stumble forward. My ideas run away, giggling like crazy. When they quieten down I hear a

familiar tapping in the back of my head. I have a strong sense of *déjà vu* … as if I have read this story before. Perhaps I am still reading it – but the landscape feels real enough. I can feel the heat of the sun on my face. I stand up and wipe the dust off my clothes.

I am wearing jeans, a black coat and topaz jewellery. It is hot. I take off my coat and tie it around my waist. I feel someone tap me on the shoulder. I turn around and see the Queen. She is wearing a long blue dress and her crown is back on her head.

'So we meet in the landscape of your imagination.'

'Yes, I guess we do – but who invited you in?'

'Oh, come now. What does that matter? You know you want to know. What am I?'

I see the razor blade glinting in the sun.

She begins to dissimulate herself and prance around the veld in discordant movements.

'Absolutely ridiculous!' I shout.

'Bitch!' she screams, running at me.

I turn on my heel and make off towards the Blue Mountains. She is a fast runner and gains on me. Just as she grabs my coat I feel myself being swept up into strong arms and placed upon a horse. I turn around and see the unruly man from Hendrik's farm. His body is huge against mine.

'Get in time with the canter,' he says, as he sees me bumping around like a sack of potatoes. I whip my one leg to the other side of the horse so that I am astride and get into the canter.

‘That’s it,’ he says. ‘Mmmm mmmm – I’m looking forward to more of that rhythm. I’m told you’ve got music in your hips.’

‘How would you know?’

‘I’m married to your husband’s mother. He’s the one who told me.’

‘All right then,’ I say.

‘So how many more pages before I can get my hands on you?’

‘I don’t know what you mean. All I am doing is running from the Queen.’

He laughs.

‘What is your name anyway?’ I ask.

‘Coenraad,’ he says. ‘Coenraad de Buys.’

We gallop off into the distance. Then we come across a long tar road.

Coenraad says, ‘That is strange. What is it?’

I tell him it is a tar road. He does not comprehend what I am saying.

He says, ‘It is the long serpent sent by my Xhosa wife to spy on me. Her clan is the clan of the serpent who will strike the enemy in an instant.’

‘OK,’ I say.

We gallop along the serpent. Coenraad looks angry. Then we see a blue car. It is mangled. There is glass and metal strewn around the ground. A little brown boy lies

asleep on a blanket near the car. A blonde woman lies curled around him. The top of her head is sliced off. There are strips of a black man's body lying around her.

Coenraad is confused. 'Is that you?' he asks.

'Yes,' I say.

'Whose child is that?'

'Mine.'

'And what is that blue thing?'

'It is a car – our ox-wagons in the future.'

'No,' Coenraad says. 'It is the eye of the giant sea serpent that my wife has sent to spy on me.'

'OK,' I say.

In the veld I see little colourful creatures running around screeching happily.

Coenraad and I fly off into the wilderness.

'Where are we going?' I ask him.

'To join the rest of the story.'

'What story?'

'The bit that you amputated and left stranded in the veld. Unless we get there with you these people will never finish their mission. Why did you leave it out?'

I have no recollection of amputating anything, but for some reason a word floats into my subconscious.

‘Bourgeois!’ I say out loud.

Coenraad looks at me, throws his mighty head back and burps. ‘Fuck bourgeois,’ he says.

I take in a gulp of air and burp louder than him. I agree.

He laughs a hearty laugh.

We ride for a few days and eventually come across a posse of men waiting around aimlessly. A tall blonde man with cold blue eyes throws a stick over and over again. I recognise him as the Lionheart.

‘Did you find the Xhosa chief?’ I ask him.

He looks at me blankly. The older man walks in a circle. I see Adriaan sitting on a rock staring into the distance.

Coenraad says, ‘OK men – we can now embark on our journey. Bring me that steed.’

He tells me that the chestnut is mine. I jump down from his horse, sorry to leave the shelter of his large body. I look down and notice I am dressed in the same clothing as the rest of the men. My breasts have been tightly bound to my chest. The men are already on their way.

Coenraad surveys me with wicked eyes. I feel a thrill in the pit of my stomach. I am excited at this journey. We head off into the wilderness, my heartbeat rapid and light.

Night falls and we set up camp amongst the scrub. Coenraad makes a fire with the dexterity of a devil. He waits till the men have fallen asleep and then he comes to me. He pulls me by the hand and we move a safe distance away.

My breath quickens. My loins throb and my heart explodes with anticipation. He pushes me up against a tree and begins to unravel the hessian around my breasts. They pop out and expand like well-set milk jelly puddings in the moonlight. My rose-pink nipples have been chafed. He holds my breasts with his big rough hands and suckles them – softly at first – but then a fiend possesses him and he sucks harder as if to cause me some pain. My breath quickens to an animal rapidity and my hips strain towards him. He rips my trousers down and eats me. I want to scream. I do not care that I have not bathed for weeks. A sweet nectar river flows from between my legs and we lie down in it. He spreads my legs as wide as he is able and pierces me with the ferocity of a demon and then he turns me around and wolfs me inside out. I am a moving mass of never-ending orgasm and even when he stops my body continues its inward spasms. We dress and go to sleep near the fire.

I ask him, 'What now?'

He says, 'We finish the chapter.'

In the morning I fix the men their breakfast, my body giving off a little shudder now and then. I feel his green eyes settled on my every move. He is a predator and I am his willing prey.

I am lost on this journey. I know that we travel for weeks, that Tiaans kills some elephants and we hack them up for supplies and rip their tusks from their mouths and leave the carcasses to rot in the sun. I know that we climb up mountains with our horses, nearly die at the hands of a skilful and marauding band of Bushmen; hear the sound of Xhosa folk in a nearby village and move stealthily away; that we run out of water and find some just before we all die of dehydration – that the trip is never ending and I am thin and weary by the time we reach the seaside village of the white women

from the Grosvenor wreck. But none of this means anything to me. I am hypnotized into nothingness under the spell of the wild Coenraad. I live from moment to moment, only alive when he is imposing his demon ways upon my body. And I take him like the demon goddess Kali, for in his wildness I have met mine.

Sometimes we hang back and let the men forge ahead while we take each other viciously in dusty potholes, or over sharpened rocks, or he turns me over fallen trees and comes upon me like a wild animal. Or he ties me up, hands above my head and legs spread-eagled, dangling from yellowwood branches while he consumes my wetness with hands, tongue and cock. And then, back at camp, he watches me with languid eyes, licking his chops like a wild wolf-man, and thinks of new ways to degrade and shame me – break my unruliness – for he cannot believe that a woman can possess the same wildness as he. But I live for the fiendish moments spent in his lascivious company and the rest of the world disappears into a hazy nothingness. I have entered the subterranean with my demon lover and I have no interest in surfacing.

Finally we behold two white women amongst the savages, but they are just as savage. They wear the clothes of the Xhosa and only speak their language. Tiaans is able to speak Xhosa. He tells the women of another life – the life of white people with their civilised God, their heavy bible and their guns. He tells them of the long dresses and eating utensils and beds and homesteads. He tells them that in their way a man only has one wife. The women listen intently. An occasional ‘e-he’ escapes their mouths as they nod their heads solemnly.

They have not seen pale men for a very long time – not since they were children. They note that these men stink, that their skin is rough and hairy, unlike the smooth velvetiness of their own husbands, who do not stink. But something inside them makes them want to go back to their own – to feel what it is like to be with people of their kind.

The women agree to go back with the expedition. I cannot believe it, for when I look at their orderly village near the sea, the gleeful children and the happy women, I know that

they will live to regret their choices. I shake my head at them and try to communicate in sign language that they must not do it – but they look at me as if I am a madman. I see Coenraad surveying me with amusement on his face. Then he turns his gaze to the young Xhosa women around him and I can see that he wants to lay with them. I turn around and walk along the beach. I am tired and find a spot to lie down. My body is worn out by its congress with a demon. I welcome the midnight blue.

I am naked, except for a skin skirt around my loins. I stand near the sea and watch a beautiful man, the shade of sea foam, emerge from the ocean. His eyes are azure and his hair is long and wavy – the colour of the sand. He looks at me and says, 'I am Poseidon, from the tribe that lives below the ocean. We bring our cattle to graze on your shores at night.'

'I know,' I say. 'You are angering my father because you do not know how to share. You just take.'

'Yes – I am afraid that is our nature – and now I want you.'

I say, 'I do not know who I am.'

He says, 'I cannot wed a woman who has no sense of self. Let me show you who you are.'

He hands me an open shell as shiny as glass. I look into it and behold a beauteous brown face with large black almond-shaped eyes, shapely lips, beautiful teeth and tight wiry black curls.

I cannot stop looking at myself.

'The message is in your name,' he says to me.

I say to the man, while still admiring my face, 'But this is not I. I am not she.'

He says, ‘But you must be what you see.’

I say, ‘But what if I am not?’

He says, ‘It seems this conversation is not going anywhere. Why don’t you just give it up and jump in with me? You can travel to the depths of the ocean and access your deepest unconscious. Then you’ll understand.’

I cannot pull my eyes away from the beauty I perceive in the shell.

‘Come,’ he says. ‘Come away with me.’

‘Will I have the mirror? Will it be mine?’

‘Yes – only if you come with me then the mirror will be yours, for it will disintegrate in an hour up here.’

‘Then I will surely go, my love,’ I say to my reflection and walk towards him until I reach the bottom of the ocean.

I feel water lapping at my legs. I wake up with a start and see that the tide has come in and my trousers are drenched. I have gritty sand grains all over my legs and feet. I wipe them off as best as possible and make my way towards the village. There are fires everywhere and families sit around and eat joyfully. The smell of fish and crayfish fills the air, mingling with the sweet smell of wild potatoes grilling on fires. A low mooing and the cluck of chickens blend in with children’s laughter. I walk towards Coenraad, who is sitting between two maidens. He has washed his huge body and his hair is being plaited by the girls. He smiles and chats to them in Xhosa. I am furious at this big randy man, but there is no stopping him. I will not give in to him when next he turns his attention to me. He looks fabulous with his new hairstyle.

The white women are busy gathering up their possessions. They do it in secret, quietly, lest their husbands know what is happening and slaughter the lot of them. They organise their light-skinned children and grandchildren, readying them for the trip that lies ahead. My heart breaks for them, for I know that most of them will die before they reach Graaf Reinet. I wish I could speak their language. I could kill Coenraad for not telling them what lies ahead – but I already know that he is a man who thinks no further than his own gratification and is probably already imagining how many bastar wives he can procure for himself. The men eat and drink and sleep.

In the morning the women are waiting with their huge bundles of pots and skins. There are at least fifty bastars with them, children and adults, also with their bundles.

Tiaans roars out, 'No! We only take the white women – you bastars must stay here where you belong.'

The white women look at him, aghast. Did he think they were going to leave their children behind? Did he not know that a woman could leave her husband but that it is not possible that she would leave her children or grandchildren?

'No!' they shout. 'We will not come with you unless our children come with us.'

Tiaans tells them this is not going to happen. The Dutch East India Company gave them strict instructions to bring back only the white women who survived the Grosvenor wreck.

They shout back that they were not from that ship – that they came on another ship from India. They say, 'We are not the women whom you were sent to find, so you must turn around and go back.'

Tiaans and Adriaan discuss it. They agree that these are not the women they were sent to find. They agree that these women are too steeped in the ways of wildness and are

unsalvageable. They decide to go back home empty-handed. We turn around to make the journey back.

That night we camp in the wilderness. We boil some dry fish that the Xhosa have given us in exchange for tobacco. We eat it with wild potatoes. Then I settle down around the fire to sleep. Later I feel a big man's hand on my shoulder. It is Coenraad. I shrug him off but he will not accept no for an answer. He becomes quite forceful, lifting me up and carrying me to a place behind some rocks. I have already handed over. My internal muscles are in spasms and a heat has spread outwards from between my thighs. He is able to take me easily. The demon in me has subsided. Instead of fighting, I collapse on his big chest and sob and heave and he holds me for a long while under the moonlight. From then on he is a bit gentler with me, but every now and then our common fiendishness surfaces and we dance demonically in the moonlight. Sometimes from the corner of my eye I see a bearded man with goat legs sitting upon a rock, watching us with merriment in his eyes.

We are nearing the end of our journey. Coenraad is acting weirdly. He stares into the distance with a sad look upon his face. He is pining for someone. At night I hear him shouting in Xhosa in his dreams. One night I wake him up. He is drenched in sweat.

'What is it?' I ask.

He grabs me and throws me to the ground. Then he comes on me roughly and screws me with a passion that is filled with pain. He shouts in Xhosa as he comes. When he is satiated he looks at me and says, 'It is time to tell the rest of your story.'

I am overcome with fear. I start to vomit. He strokes my hair as I retch bitter bile into the sand.

'That's my girl,' he says gently. 'Get it all out.'

I write it in the sand.

‘My father is a paedophile. My mother discovers this when a string of parents came to see her at our flat above the Pick ‘n Pay in Cape Town. He has been feeling up pre-adolescent girls in the stairwell. My father likes girls between eleven and thirteen.

‘My mother throws a bottle of his vodka at his head and we run away in the middle of the night. My aunt comes to fetch us. I am terrified. There is blood all over the kitchen. This is my fault. I told my mother that one of his friends stuck his tongue in my mouth. I am four years old.

‘We move into a boarding house. It is Christmas. We are sleeping. He breaks into our room and kicks all our presents against the wall. He throws my mother against the wall. We cling to each other in abject fear.’

I begin to cry. The tears flow and my heart is ripped with a pain that cannot be possible. I throw myself onto the ground and cry into the sand. Coenraad strokes my hair. When I roll over I am in a psychologist’s office lying on a couch. Coenraad sits in a chair nearby.

He says, ‘You are now in a deep, deep sleep. Tell me what you see.’

‘I am a baby. I am standing in a cot and crying for my mother. There are other cots around. I am afraid.

‘I am a little girl in a red cardigan. I have been thrown into a room full of little brown suitcases. I am crying hard and loud.

‘I am four years old. I am standing in the kitchen with my siblings. My father is fixing the washing machine. I switch the plug on and a bright light flashes in the kitchen. He is thrown against the wall. He hits me hard on my head and sends me to my room.

‘I am in the garden. My father has made us a kite. He is laughing and we are happy. The kite falls from the sky to the ground. I run to pick it up. I stick my fingers through the paper. We cannot fly it anymore.

‘I am sitting at the dining room table. My father is drunk. He takes off all his clothes and stands on a chair. His buttocks are strange. He does a little dance and falls off. My mother looks sad.

‘I am in my bed. My father comes into the room. He takes off my pants and opens my legs. He has a torch. I say, ‘What are you doing?’ He says, ‘Shush – I am looking for worms.’

‘We are all in a car. There is a big man with a beard driving. He seems angry and is shouting. My mother is in the front seat. Between her and the driver is a budgie in a cage. We are running from someone. I think it is my father. We drive for a long time past empty landscapes. Then we stop at a hotel. The man with the beard climbs into an empty swimming pool. He is still shouting.

‘I am eight years old. My father has come to drop us off at the station to go to boarding school. He waves goodbye. When we get to the next station he is there. He runs besides the train and we try to touch him. He is laughing. When we get to the next station he is there again. At the fourth station I look for him but he is not there. The pain in my solar plexus is huge. I stare out the window at the passing tracks.

‘I am nine years old. I am in a double bed with my little sister at my Ouma’s house. I am crying because I wanted to sleep in my father’s room – but my brother refused. My father comes to my bed. He climbs in beside me and strokes my body. He is drunk. He tells me he loves me. His hands are everywhere. I am shaking like a leaf. I want him to go. He tells me I am his favourite child and kisses my ear. I smell whisky and false teeth. There is darkness.

‘I am running up and down the corridor of my boarding school. There is a smell in my nose. It smells like burning bodies. I cannot get rid of it. I scratch my face and cry for my mother. They ask me what it is. I say a smell in my nose. They hit me with a stick on the back of my legs and send me to bed.

‘I am eleven. I am in the Holiday Inn with my father. I wake up and he is fondling me. I grab my sheet and run to the bathroom. I lock the door. My father calls from the door. He says, ‘Sweetheart – I won’t hurt you.’

‘I stay in the bathroom all night. In the morning he is asleep and I run all the way back to my Ouma’s house. I do not see him again for another five years.

‘I am twenty-seven. I have not seen my father for years. I am addicted to sex. I think maybe if I can forgive my father I can stop the cycle I have gotten into. I think maybe I am eradicating my father by screwing so many men. I think I screw black men because they do not resemble my father. I need to work this all out. I phone him. He says, ‘Hello sweetheart – how is your sex life?’

‘I am disappointed. I tell him I need to see him. We arrange to meet that weekend. It is Tuesday. I am going to meet him in Johannesburg on Saturday. On Thursday my sister phones me to tell me that he is dead. On Wednesday he electrocuted himself.’

‘What happens then?’ asks Coenraad.

‘I go out and get drunk. I phone one of my lovers and invite him over. I want him to hurt me when we fuck. I beg him to hurt me. He does.

I wait for him to fall asleep and then I cut off his balls. I behead him and hide his body in my closet. I lock the door. From then on I invite lots of men over and engage in off-the-wall sex with them. If they hurt me I cut off their dicks. If they don’t hurt me I still cut off their dicks. I behead them all and keep them in my closet. Those who come to

my home know that they are not allowed to look into that closet. If they unlock the door they will face a fate worse than death.

There is only one man who does not end up in my closet.'

'OK, you are back in the desert,' says Coenraad, feeling his neck. I open my eyes and vomit a river of self-abjection into the red sand and then I float above myself. I hear the self-important cackle of a woman's laughter coming from the mountains.

I recognise the Queen's voice as she screams out, 'I too am a versifier. Veritable versatile verbigerate-ion virtually verifies veridical in vile vomit – verily verboten but in verso viewed from the versant.'

'Just ignore her and get it all out,' says Coenraad.

'No,' I say. 'That is it. I have worshipped at the shadowy altar of my self-destruction in my dark revolt of being. I have tasted the bitterness of my deeply buried self-abjection … seen my story as it really is in the vomit on the sand. But frankly I am getting bored with it now and I have finally expelled myself, spat myself out and transcended my pain.'

He looks skeptical. 'Who exactly are you quoting?' he asks.

'Seriously, Coenraad,' I say. 'I think I've sidetracked myself – there is something of more import around the corner and I need to get on with it.'

He smiles at me and wipes the vomit from the corner of my mouth. I fall asleep in his mighty arms.

*

When we reach the Sneeuburg, Coenraad has perked up.

He says, ‘It is time for me to get back to my own story now. It’s been great, it’s been cathartic, it’s been a bit crazy, but what the hell – the sex was good.’

I say, ‘What is your story?’

He says, ‘I’m not certain yet, but I’m going to make sure it’s one heck of a fringe epic that will inspire generations to come. It’s going to be full of surprises, I reckon … coach robberies, polygamy, misogyny, misogamy, miscegeny, hidden treasures and lots more.’

He grabs me in his arms and kisses me deeply … then he mounts his horse and rides off into the distance. I turn around and survey the flat landscape. For some reason the silence is all-pervading and I am really tired – no not tired … paralysed. I cannot move, I cannot think clearly, I …

Hettie is calling me. It is night-time and she is sitting at the table writing in a large dusty book.

She says, ‘Please look out for Hendrik and the children.’ I am allowed to read the bible but I am not allowed to write.

I sit near her and watch the door.

I say to her, ‘Can I see what you have written?’

She says, ‘Can you read High Dutch? It is very different from speaking it.’

I ask, ‘Can you read it to me?’

She says, ‘Meet me at the red koppie tomorrow and I will read it to you then.’

She looks excited. I sit there for hours while she writes and then I slip away.

*

I am lying next to my son on the road. A wind howls around my cavernous head. I want to find the top of my head but it is too late now. I wrap my body around my boy to keep him warm. Then I am levitating above my body. I see myself in a deep sleep in a hospital bed. A doctor has his head between my legs. In the distance a huge man and a blonde woman ride by on a horse.

*

In the morning Hettie is waiting for me at the red koppie. I see her mouthing the words as I approach her. She turns to me and smiles for the first time since I have met her.

She says, 'I am ready to read to you. No one has ever read my work before.'

She flicks the pages back to the beginning. I sit on a warm rounded rock and listen.

'I have been in a state of anxiousness all month until the 28th of the same month; until the Lord revealed full happiness to one such as me. This lasted almost the whole day and I was in such spiritual joy in my soul. Yes, I was so ignorant about spiritual matters I myself did not know into what happiness I had come. O yes, spirituality was to me so sweet and I was so afflicted that I was again in darkness. I stayed in my bed for three days, at war with the evil one and my children stayed outside for they say I was screaming as if I was myself the evil one. Then I called out for Jesus and he came to me in gentleness and kissed my burning brow and truly I knew that I am the bruised and battered reed he will not break off and the smouldering wick he will not put out until he leads justice to victory and his gentleness will lead me to salvation.

'I embraced him with my body and soul and in that moment he told me that he will lead me, a sinner, to the light. My heart was once again brimming with happiness and I left

my bed to see to my children, for they too were running with the wildness of the evil one and at once I knew that in my sinfulness I had given birth to the children of sin and at once I knew that they too will be led to salvation by Jesus.

'I have found him who loved my soul. I held fast to him. I did not let go of him. Then he kissed me, not only with kisses of his mouth, but the King took me into his inner room. And the kiss of his mouth flowed from the sacrifice of Jesus. I am wholly and altogether wasted. Yes, one love burnt in Heaven and took possession of my soul. With one-god like love in view, my whole soul flees to him – Jesus having suffered for me.'

She looks at me and says, 'Do you mind that it is so personal?'

'No,' I say. 'Do you?'

'Not with you, but you must tell no-one. Shall I carry on?'

'Please,' I say.

'It often happens that I am so overwhelmed with love that I am configurated into a heavenly being. Only three weeks ago my soul stood still but I came to again, going into a trance. Then I had a second journey, which I had feared and thought that was nothing else but death, but with the guidance of the Lord Jesus, I gave myself over willingly, even if was to death. It happened four times that I fell into trance and tasted such spiritual joy with a strong faith and trust in my God and sanctifier that I praised and thanked the lord and greatly glorified God. For a period of three weeks I lived close to the Lord as a result of his grace and my firm faith. I was then involved in a difficult struggle, in which Satan continually disputed with me that there was no truth in my work. Yes, it did not only touch my soul but I was sick in body and spirit.

'But in a sweet way it came to me again that my sins were so big and heavy before the Lord that He will never again consider taking care of me. Yes, I saw myself as a despicable and sinful monster before the Lord with my heavy load of sin and guilt.'(3)

(3) Landman, C. (1994). *The Piety of Afrikaans Women: Diaries of Guilt*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press. These are the actual diary entries from the writers Mitochondrial grandmother – Hester Venter.

She glances at me. I am just about to comment on her writing when she says, 'I've also written poems. Can I read you one?'

'Yes,' I say.

'Jesus love, here is my heart;
Jesus love, here is my soul;
Jesus love, here are both my body and soul

O love, ardour of lust,
flowing from the sacrificial blood of Jesus,
Through a kiss from Jesus' mouth,
I was loved from eternity

Burning coals from Christ's love
My heart and soul are completely pierced.
In the kisses from your mouth,
I find in you my Jesus.'

I see Hendrik walking towards the Koppies. I tell Hettie. She slams her book shut and slips it between two rocks.

'Come quick,' she says to me and we hurry to the other side of the koppie. 'Pretend we are looking for mushrooms.'

I do. Hendrik sees us.

He says to Hettie, ‘You must prepare my provisions. I have been called to the Gamtoos River where Tiaans’ commando is fighting the Xhosa and the Khoi Khoi. They are all along the Oliphant’s River all the way down to Commando Drift. Eight of our men have already been killed, including our nephew. Seuntjie has just ridden in with the news. Hurry, woman! I will be leaving in an hour.’

I run back to the house with Hettie.

‘You must help me,’ she says.

‘But I want to go,’ I say. ‘Give me your son’s clothes.’

She does. I bind up my breasts and mount my chestnut. Hester runs out with a bag of supplies for me. Hendrik ignores me and mounts his horse with his guns and supplies. He gallops off and I follow him.

I sidle up beside him and say, ‘Your wife is a talented writer. Why have you forbidden her to keep a diary?’

He shrugs his shoulders. ‘Women’s heads are full of hysterical nonsense,’ he says. ‘Who would be the slightest bit interested in her scribblings?’

‘You’d be surprised,’ I say. ‘She is studied in quite a few universities around the world in about 250 years’ time.’

He looks at me blankly. We continue to ride in silence.

When we get to Commando Drift we get news that Tiaans has moved on to the Kouga Mountains on his way to the Baviaanskloof where the Xhosa are assembling in great

numbers in the Winterhoek Mountains. It is days before we reach him. When we do, he tells us the story of the 13,100 cattle raided from the enemy and the pile of dead Khoi Khoi they have left in their wake. He says that he has buried his son along the banks of the Sundays River. He does not appear to be sad. His eyes are hard and blue.

For days we engage in battle along the Baviaans River, my eyes constantly scanning the horizon for Coenraad.

Tiaans says, 'You will not find him. He has made his way north in search of gold.'

I am deflated. I have no reason to be here except to bump into my demon lover.

The following day Tiaans makes his way into the mountains with only a Khoi Khoi tracker. He tells me he is still searching for the Xhosa chief who kills him so that he can kill him first. I never see him again.

They tell me that he was ambushed while he was in the mountains sniping at animals, women and children. They tell me it was Chief Boland, of light complexion, who got him in the end. They say that when the Lionheart was dying he played his last card and pulled his trigger killing five of the chief's followers as well as Boland as he went down. They tell me he died as he lived.

But his Khoi Khoi attendant tells me something different. He tells me a lone kaffir with wildness in his eyes and hair cascading in snakes from the top of his head crept up on Tiaans that day and plunged a spear deep into his Lionheart. He tells me that Tiaans was taken completely by surprise and died with a look of shame upon his face. He tells me that he watched in frozen terror as the wild kaffir chopped him up into a hundred pieces and bit by bit the rest came to take their piece of him and wreak revenge on the White God for the death of their loved ones.

When he told the commando what had happened they began to make up their own version of the story. ‘The White God, or the Lionheart, could never have been killed by the hand of a lone kaffir without a gun,’ they said.

‘But,’ said the attendant, ‘this was no ordinary man – this was Chief Typhos who had lived in the mountains alone for a long time – hiding from the Boer. This was the father of the Queen Nonesi who had died on the snow-filled mountains while gathering wood for her people. This man was from the aristocratic Mina clan – a clan of warriors and queens. It is said that they are descended from the virgin maiden who was locked in a hut because she only had one breast – but that the king fell for her anyway and fathered a tribe of formidable warriors from the one-breasted queen.’

Now the burghers’ enthusiasm for military activity is no more. They go back home to tend to their families and their farms. They do not get over the death of their leader, whose bravery and reputation was a byword. ‘Truly,’ they say, ‘he was the greatest of a family of great men, men of whom Lieut. Col. Richard Colliers testified that their bravery was as conspicuous as their humanity and faithfulness.’ Four de Waal brothers died in service to the colony.

I go back to Hettie. Hendrik does not return home. He is out wandering the landscape in a seeming state of madness. Hettie looks happier, more invigorated. She gives me an unexpected comradely hug when I go back to her homestead. She makes me strong tea and asks me about my travels.

‘What year is this?’ I ask her.

‘1802,’ she says.

‘Have I been here that long?’ I ask.

‘Yes,’ she says.

I am anguished. I need to get to my husband and son. I run out the house and look for Tau. I hear his laughter ringing in the air but I cannot see him. I run to Hettie.

'Where is my son?'

'You mean the little bastar?'

'Yes,' I cry, 'Where is he?'

'He is on the lookout for the Xhosa – out in the forest.'

'Is he alone?' I cry.

'No – he has a Bushman child with him who will run back and tell us if they see the enemy.'

I sprint towards the forest but I never get there.

Hettie comes to me and says, 'You have been running in the same spot for hours. I can no longer stand it. You must give it up and come to sleep.'

She leads me to her bed and pulls the covers over me.

My mouth is parched. I am in a dusty yellow landscape. I am dehydrated and dishevelled. In the distance I see a kraal with cattle inside. The landscape has melted into diaphanous layers. I need to get to the cattle kraal to find some humanity. The Queen is pursuing me, although I have not laid eyes on her for days. My dress is dusty and my feet are dried out and cracked. My skin is red and sore from the harsh sun. I inch my way forward.

Finally I reach the kraal. The cattle are not cattle. They are men, tied up against each other. Their mouths are white and dry and their eyes are expressionless. I try to ask them who they are but my throat is too dry. They look vaguely familiar.

One of the men rasps, 'Please don't tell our story. We should not be here.'

'What do you mean?' I rasp back.

'Do not include us in your story so that he does not capture us.'

'Who is he?'

'The Xhosa warrior with snakes growing from the top of his head.'

'If you tell our story now he will kill us all,' whispers another man.

'No, you fools,' I shout out. 'His mission is much bigger than you. He doesn't care about you. You're already dead anyway. I killed you.'

I hear a blood-curdling scream and notice another kraal in the distance. I inch my way there. Five women and a child are tied up in the kraal. One is the Queen. Her crown is dented and hanging lopsided from her head. Her mouth is gagged. I manage to pull the gag off her and she screams in my face, 'Post fucking modern!'

I am startled.

'Who did this to you?' I ask.

'The fucking doctor!'

'Who are you?' I ask another woman with a gentle face and bleeding wrists.

‘Lilith,’ she says.

A younger woman looks at me and says, ‘Grace;. A little blonde girl with freckles says, ‘I’m Greta.’ There is another woman standing naked, every hair on her body shaved off. Her eyelashes are blonde.

‘What happened?’ I ask.

‘The story around the corner was not an allegory,’ she says sadly.

‘Why are you here?’ I ask them.

‘Because you put us here,’ they say. ‘Our names are all contained within yours.’

‘I am sorry I have no control over anything any more,’ I mouth painfully as I pass out in the dust.

*

‘Lila. Lila.’ A familiar voice is calling me. I wake up. It is Coenraad, but he looks different. He is taller and lighter and he wears long white robes. His beard has grown into a mass of dreadlocks and his long raven hair is tied in a knot on top of his head. I have met him before in a forest once, when I was a child. He beckons to me.

‘Are you a yogi?’ I ask.

‘Perhaps,’ he says. ‘But then what is that exactly? I am pure awareness.’

He hands me a manuscript. ‘Burn this,’ he says.

‘No,’ I cry. ‘These are my words, my memories, the altar to who I am.’

‘Listen,’ he says, ‘just burn it.’

‘No,’ I cry out. ‘I need to build a monument to the lover in me now.’

‘You’re really one for instant gratification, aren’t you? But look over there,’ he says, pointing into the distance.

I look and see a long organic totem pole, pushing up into the heavens. It has a bean vine wrapped around it.

‘What is it?’ I ask.

‘It is the totem you have been building for the past few months.’

I have no recollection of building anything.

‘Just let your mind go and you will understand,’ he says. ‘It is your stairway to heaven.’

I throw my manuscript into the fire and walk towards the totem to begin the long climb up. I grab the first rung. It is an erect penis. I look up and the ladder is constructed from erect penises all the way to the top. I turn to Coenraad. He winks at me. I begin to climb as a fire spreads through a mighty forest below me.

‘You will die!’ I shout.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ he shouts after me. ‘You have burnt the forest of your ignorance with the fire of certainty – now go beyond sorrow. I’ll meet you there.’

I see a young and slim blonde girl making love to a myriad of men from all corners of the earth. Her body is pale and lithe, but with a soft roundness to it. Her legs are strong, her breasts full. I watch her fuck and love and perform and give and take and my heart swells with compassion for this young creature who understands so much and yet so

little. I see energy escaping through her hara, her navel, the centre of her being and I reach out to place my hands protectively over her tummy.

She says, 'Don't worry. I harness it all in the end,' and then she is sucked away into multiple orgasm.

I climb up further and see the faces of men whom I have loved, men who have loved me back, destroyed me, used me, hurt me and inadvertently taught me everything I know myself to be. I begin to dance. My body undulates and vibrates inwards and outwards in a dreamlike trance to music that emanates from the darkness around me. My navel rolls and gyrates and harnesses golden light, which spreads to my toes and the tip of my nose. My arms move like snakes. One by one my dead lovers are drawn into the dance and we cavort around a fire.

I worship at the Shiva Lingum with my sisterhood of Shaktiities and we dance to the primal hum of Durga. Serpents coil at the bottom of our spines and release themselves upwards in hot liquid as our eyes roll backwards and honey nectar drips through our minds.

My feet stomp into dust to a repetitive drumbeat and hot silver liquid bursts from the bottom of my spine, shooting in a fountain through the top of my head and falling to the ground to become a black serpent chasing its tail. I am a small yellow woman – there are lots of people like me dancing around the fire. My body is no longer mine. It is the rocks and the trees and the sand and the fire and the stars.

Now a velvet dress adorns my body and I hold a dagger up to the sky, drawing two triangles, I summon the energy of the divine mother. My husband hands me a goblet of wine, his long hair falling down his back. I drink from it and we are wrapped in a cascade of light as our bodies meet on the autumn leaves. The scribe witches come to me and tattoo the sacred Celtic puzzle of life around my belly button. Along my pelvic line they tattoo the two-headed dragon.

‘You are now part of the order of the two-headed Dragon,’ they say as they take their leave.

My husband turns to me. ‘I have made love to you for centuries,’ he says, ‘and still I want you.’

‘You are my soulmate,’ I say. ‘It is written in the light that surrounds us.’

We look down at our sleeping baby boy. It is a trinity that continues forever.

I am at a river collecting watercress. I hear the horses in the distance. My little boy is playing near the water. I run to him, kiss his brow and watch his little face go blank as I hold him under the water. His strawberry blonde hair cascades around his head. ‘I’m sorry,’ I whisper as the men dismount their horses and throw me to the ground. My soul floats above my body to meet my son as I shield his eyes from the depravity being wreaked upon my body below. We fly off on the back of a two-headed dragon as a large man ties a stone around my abdomen to see if I float.

Now Coenraad is there. He laughs and throws me into the air, tousling the golden hair of my boy-child.

‘You are a wise man,’ I say.

‘Perhaps,’ he says.

‘But then why do you cause so much kak in the late 1700s?’ I ask.

‘Because I can,’ he answers. ‘And because my kak, as you put it, was the perfect mirror for those other fuckers around me. Why do you think your ancestor decided to make peace with the yellow people?’

‘But I still have not found my one true voice. Those fuckers, as you put it, made sure of that.’

‘Oh, Christ – is that what this has been all about? Because you cannot find your one true voice?’

‘As far as I know. Although I am sure there is more to it.’

He laughs hard and loud.

‘Here, take one of these,’ he says, wiping the tears from his eyes.

He shoves a tiny star into my mouth.

A beautiful chestnut-brown man appears beside me. He is wearing a long green coat and his dreadlocks cascade down his back.

‘Will you be my wife?’ he says.

‘I am already – I will always be your wife, but I will never marry you.’

‘That suits me fine,’ he says and begins to film the golden-haired child dancing in the ether. The child turns towards us and transforms into a little Buddha. His cheeks burn a rosy hue and the saffron robes flow from his body in auric energy. His perfectly round head is shaved and his long eyelashes grow towards me.

‘Tau!’

‘Yes, Mom – I am the Golden Mean.’

I look at his perfectly-balanced features and the atmosphere turns a warm orange hue.

I say, ‘Are you the Buddha too?’

‘No, man, Mom,’ he says. ‘There is no such thing as the Buddha – there is only the state of being awake.’

He puts his hand to his ear and says, ‘Do you hear that? I do. It is a continuum of humming vibrational voices that wraps around us and we explode into a shower of waves and particles, mingling into oneness. My child takes on his bodily form and reaches out to touch the me that no longer is.

‘That is the only voice that matters … but some battles are worth the fight,’ he calls into space. ‘Let us get back to our initial task.’

He transforms into a small Tibetan warrior and begins to climb the ladder.

‘Follow me,’ he shouts to Lunga and I. We do.

When we reach the top we behold a shapeless giant blob with one evil eye oozing pus. Behind him a mighty army of men in suits congregates. They carry briefcases shaped like machine guns. Rows and rows of men in religious and military fundamentalist regalia form lines behind the men in suits. I see a few women in severe outfits amongst the men. I recognize the Queen and Margaret Thatcher. Then I see some women I recognize from somewhere else, standing by. They wear yellow and green Women’s League T-shirts with pictures of a large man with a roll of fat on the back of his neck as their icon. He pushes a humungous fleshy entity in a wheelbarrow in front of him.

An army of men in camouflage gear rolls out their defense – a colourful array of blow-up dolls and live Barbies. They form manifold rows in front of them, mouths open, eyes glazed over, knees knocking, while teetering in stiletto heels.

Behind us the Shaktiites gather in great force. A choir of black goddesses begins a low hum and little yellow people stomp their feet into the dust. Men of all colours join the

army. They wear their vaginas on their sleeves. I turn around and see the Queen. Her eyes twinkle as she holds up the razor blade.

'God's truth,' she laughs. 'I've been trying to give you this for pages. It may come in handy.'

She hands me the razor. I nick my little finger on it.

'But …' I say, licking my blood and pointing to her on the other side.

'Don't worry … there are about three versions of me in your story.'

A terrible smell of old cabbages fills the room.

'Fee fo fi fum – I smell the blood of a literary mum!' shrieks the unseemly giant.

'Go to hell!' I shout back with great force.

He laughs an evil cackle and shouts, 'Not much of a turn-out, is there, lass?'

The smirk is wiped off his face as the rest of the army manifests from the margins. When we see the expression on his face we turn around and behold an army of Thyiads dancing a frenzied, wine-induced dance of death. They twirl in ecstatic union, becoming one with Bacchus. A hurricane of supernatural and violent energy sweeps towards the blow-up dolls and Barbies, whipping them into the whirlpool of naked ferocity and transforming them into pulsating Bacchae. They hurtle towards the army of men and rip them apart with bear hands and bloodied teeth.

Dancing yellow people create a ring of fire around the army and sing their n/om as they transform into the spirits of 1000 antelopes which stampede through the enemy lines with the force of ancient actuality. Rationality cracks apart in brittle non-belief.

Behind them the nine muses lassoo their tropes around the writhing one-dimensional men and soon epic poetry, history, lyricism, tragedy, choral dance, romance, sacred verse, astronomy and comedy have entwined the army in a mesh of criss-cross complexity.

Lunga musters up his mighty Xhosa army and they rush the enemy. Short swords brandished, they make mincemeat of the last of the army of the Prevailing Master Narrative before they join in the revelry of mythology, intuition, primal androgynous energy, inherent wisdom and the unknown, in a phenomenological irrational cosmic rave.

A midnight blue envelops me.

I AM

Spinning

Spiralling

A

Vortex

hurtling at

Ponderously

Measured

Breakneck Velocity

Now

Awareness

Now not.

Time immemorial

Crams

My inside out

Now there

Now gone.

Glass

Fractures into

Melancholic tinkling

While

Dreams career through

Shattered

Mirrors

Shredding into

countless

Ribbons

To join a

Diaphanous

landscape

Wait! I cry into

Pulverised veracity as

Burning rubber

assaults

my senses

Mother love

Grinding

Painfully through

Broken fortitude

I crack

into myriad versions

and

hand myself over to

a midnight blue

Now

Falling

I resist

Tumbling

I grab handfuls of

Stars

and crush them

against

Tormented

Reflections in

Broken mirrors

Disappearing

Into

Empty

Spaces

Spinning

I cavort with devils

on

Blackened wings

to satiate

my

Darkness

Dancing

On

Pillaging phantoms

Studded with my

Desire

More!

More you fuckers I cry

Into the

Wailing of my

Insatiability.

Now

Sucked into

Vortex

Spinning

Starburst

Still

Still

Stillness

Flying feather

lightness

On a breeze

I glide above my

Broken

Body

and

Kiss myself

Goodbye

Yes

my

Love

We

are

nearly

there.

There is a lot of wailing. Hettie shakes me. ‘Hurry, the Xhosa are coming!’

I say, ‘So?’

She says, ‘Come on woman, they will kill us all.’

I say, ‘No man, don’t be ridiculous, I am married to a Xhosa man.’

Her jaw drops open. She says, ‘Woman, you have not recovered from your accident.’

She grabs my arm roughly and pulls me along with her. I wonder why Hendrik did not tell her about the camera.

I see the young Xhosa woman look hopefully into the distance before she is swept along with the rest of us. We go to a rocky outcrop and hide. The Bushmen are told they cannot hide here. They are left looking for non-existent bushes to conceal themselves behind. I cannot believe Hettie. I say, ‘Let them come here.’

She says, ‘If they are there it is less likely that we will be killed.’

I cry out, ‘Where is my son? Where is he?’

I feel his gaze on the back of my neck. I turn around and he is sitting close to his mother sucking his thumb. I stare at him beseechingly. He transforms into a little bejewelled elephant with a bindi on his third eye and kohl around his large eyes. I cry

out, ‘Lord Ganesh!’ And then he is a little brown boy again. He smiles at me for the first time.

In the distance we see a cloud of dust. A sea of dark men in skins and feathers rushes towards us. The man leading them is on a white horse. I study him as he approaches. It is my husband, Lunga. He has his dreadlocks piled up on top of his head and carries himself in the haughty manner of a king. His eyes are wild as he leads his posse in a bloody battle, cutting off the heads of any Bushmen that they see. I can see the bloodlust in his eyes. He is scanning the rocks. The young Xhosa woman jumps up and runs towards him. My son follows her. Lunga’s face lights up when he sees her but he pushes the little boy aside. He hands the woman a piece of bleeding flesh.

He says, ‘We have killed the White God and cut him up into a hundred pieces. I am taking this piece to Targa and then I will marry you.’

My child is left alone as he watches his mother disappear. I call out to him. My heart bleeds all over the orange sand of my hideout. He turns around and places his index finger against his lips. I can no longer stand it. I run to embrace him. My husband turns around and sees me. He lets out a bloodthirsty yell and runs towards me, brandishing his short spear. Hettie runs from the rocky outcrop, falling on the ground between us.

‘No! Take me!’

He turns with a smile and plunges his spear deep into her chest. She looks ecstatic.

She cries out, ‘Oh Jesus, my beautiful man! I am yours forever now!’

He turns to me and lifts his spear.

I cry out, ‘For God’s sake, you cannot kill me – I am your wife – the mother of your son!’

He brings the spear swiftly down and plunges it into my heart, screaming in Xhosa: ‘For all the blood of my people spilled by yours!’

I am dying. I see Hendrik appear on his horse with a posse of men. They survey the bloodbath and all the children still hiding behind the rocks.

Hendrik says, ‘At least I still have my sons.’

I slip into the blue once again.

I am next to my car. I see baby Ganesh looking down at me. He says, ‘Let me help you,’ and he goes to retrieve the rest of my husband’s body. He has two sets of arms. He lays the last eleven strips of Lunga on the road. I start to wail. My heart is bleeding all over the tar.

Baby Ganesh says, ‘No Mom – it will all be OK.’

He begins to put my husband back together again.

Then he says, ‘Please Mom, lie back so that I can open up your chest.’

He takes a thin razor blade from the medical aid bag he has retrieved from our car and slices me down the centre of my chest. He opens me up and says, ‘Lie still. I can only put dad back together with the map of your scars.’

‘I do not understand,’ I say. ‘You and Daddy carry the exact same map inside you – I can only put him back together if I read your map because his has been shredded.’

He slowly threads a needle with the gut he has found in the bag, puts one set of his hands inside me and uses the other set to sew up Lunga.

A beautiful hum emanates from his trunk. *Om mane padma ohm*. The repetitive mantra spreads out in a silver mist over the soft hues of the grass. I float upwards and look down at the bejewelled baby elephant sewing his father back together while gathering all my ideas towards him with the hum. In the distance I see a blue Shakti and purple Shiva, dancing, wildly, rhythmically and in complete unison. I see Hettie sitting on a rock, writing urgently in a leather-bound book, which has in gold lettering on the cover The Diary of Hettie Venster. Besides her I see a handsome man with a crown of thorns around his head and a wound in his side looking up at her lovingly.

In the distance I see Hendrik, Johannes and Tiaans on their steeds, galloping toward the Blue Mountains with a posse of sons, and in the purple grass I see their many daughters holding the hands of someone else's many sons. Just below I see the young Xhosa girl smiling at me as she walks by with her husband, her plentiful cattle and children and just behind her is Coenraad who winks at me with a devilish twinkle in his eye.

And then I look down at us and Lunga is almost complete and my map of scars glows a beautiful indigo in the evening light and my little brown boy is himself again. He finishes Lunga with a knot, kisses him on the brow, closes up my chest, puts my ideas back in my head and then holds his arms out to embrace me.

In the distance I hear the wailing of an ambulance.

After just now.

Reflexive Essay -- Gillian Schutte

Student number: 9709668T

> The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now.* (Barthes, 1977: 147)

> 'I don't have the feeling that I write my books, I have the feeling that my books get written through me... I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no ' I,' no ' me''(Claude Lévi-Strauss: cited in Wiseman & Groves, 2000: 173)

Feminine writing can never be theorized, enclosed, coded -- which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Helene Cixous, 1976: 313)

1. The beginning

Memoir and Metanarrative

In my initial proposal I had laid out the idea that my novel would be an experimental mixing of genres and the threading together of a few storylines that would speak of different layers of consciousness, which would illustrate the mind, body and soul conundrum of the human condition.

The main thread of the story would essentially be a first person narrative about the shattered coming of age experience of a young white girl growing up in a postcolonial Africa – where *terrorists* wore black faces in the larger picture, but in the intimate realm it would be obvious that the real terrorists of my protagonist's psyche were the significant 'white' men in her life in the form of an abusive father, an aloof stepfather, and a string of unsuitable lovers -- resulting in her developing an attraction for black men. It was to take on the basic form of memoir but slide off into more creative and abstract storylines that departed from the genre of memoir, to be rejoined with memoir elements at numerous points in the story. I was of the idea that I would write parallel narratives around history and politics, which somehow reflected the protagonist's fractured life, but from a wry and detached perspective. I had written some pieces in the previous year's MA Experiments in Telling course, and my memoir element had been well received then.

However, when it came time for me to flesh out the memoir I found it all but impossible. I had written the story of the protagonist's childhood as the memories

surfaced and had even spent two days in bed crying at the sadness of it all. But the ethics of memoir proved too much for me since I was basing this on my own very fractured childhood, and the pain it was causing my mother and siblings, who have not yet transcended or dealt with their own hurts, became a burden not worth bearing. It did not matter that I was taking a rather transcendental and wry approach to an unhappy childhood – when it came to the other major players in the story the humour seemed cruel and pointless. This left me with a concise and very readable précised version of my life with which I could do little.

What I did, instead of abandoning my memoir completely, was to begin to incorporate a metanarrative into my story about the ethics of writing a memoir. Thus the protagonist finds herself in a white hospital room about a quarter of the way into the story. She has a head injury and does not know where or who she is. She finds a hard brown suitcase under her bed and in it a short memoir which she begins to read. It is her own story but she does not recognise it as such. Although disturbing to her, she is compelled to read it because there is little else to do in the white room, which constantly shifts and changes and out of which there seems no escape.

The hospital room signifies for me, amongst other things, the restricted and anxious state an author/writer may find herself in when trying to write a story in which people close to her will recognize themselves – even if the *truth* is disguised in fabulation. No amount of fabulation or fanciful literary disguise will make a mother feel any better about her dreadful mothering skills when pointed out by her daughter in a book which may go public – even if highly fictionalised and based on subjective interpretation alone. Nevertheless, Waldo Emerson's views expressed to me the real reason I could not write a straightforward memoir. He says: 'But our wiser years still run back to the despised recollections of childhood, and always we are fishing up some wonderful article out of that pond; until, by and by, we begin to suspect that the biography of the one foolish person we know is, in reality, nothing less than the miniature paraphrase of the hundred volumes of the Universal History' (Emerson, 1841: 323).

Therein lay my problem, for not only was I struggling with the ethics of writing about my family, I also found that I was incapable of writing what could easily become a another whiny story about a dreadful childhood. I was way more interested in the universality of the human condition and the transcendental capacity of the human spirit. It was this, along with the ephemeral nature of truth and the empty egoist gaze of subjectivity that I attempted to highlight in my metafiction, using memoir as a catalyst to explore this notion. I explore this notion as much through style as through content in that my writing has a certain feeling of detachment about it, in keeping with my worldview (which I explicate further into this essay). Thus I wrote the memoir into the novel and by so doing, created a playful discourse around the ethics of memoir with the attitude of non-attachment to suffering, guilt and blame, from a self-conscious perspective. This culminates in a telephone conversation between the protagonist and her mother, whom she does not remember, on a phone she is not sure is real.

> A phone rings. I jump up startled. I had not noticed a phone before. It must be my imagination. I lie down and try to imagine it away. It continues. I put the pillow over my head. It drowns it out. I fall into a slumber. When I wake up the phone is still ringing. The nurse rushes in.
>
> 'For pity's sake will you please answer the damned thing?'
>
> 'No!' I shout back.
>
> 'Then I will,' she says … 'helloo. Yes she is …. it's your mother.'
>
> 'What!'
>
> 'Your mother – she needs to speak to you.'
>
> 'Shit. Fine.'
>
> I get up and slide towards the phone.
>
> 'Mom?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'What is it?'
>
> 'You cannot just go writing my story like that.'

‘I don’t think I have.’

‘Well Tina told me you are.’

‘Who’s Tina?’

‘Your little sister.’

‘But I don’t even know who I am right now. I don’t even know where I am.’

‘Don’t start that story again. You tried that when you were fourteen.’

‘I did?’

‘Yes – and then you refused the medication. You always were slightly mad if you ask me.’

‘But what number did you use to phone me?’

‘Your number.’

‘What – my home number?’

‘Yes.’

‘But I am stuck in a hospital somewhere – in a white room with no way out. You need to help me. I’m being held against my will.’

‘What nonsense is this? That is the nonsense you are writing and I bet you’re putting all the blame on me.’

‘I am not writing.’

‘Look here – you need help. Call an ambulance. Declare yourself certifiable.’

‘You know I don’t buy into that rubbish. Madness is a choice. I chose not to go that route.’

‘For God’s sake, Lila, I do not want all that stuff dredged up again. I’ve changed. I’m not the person I used to be. Besides I had no choice. Maybe I should have left you all in the homes. Maybe then you would have had the stable life you all wanted – gone to three schools like the rest of the world. I’m sick of your story about how many schools you went to. Don’t forget you chose to be born – did you have to choose me as the vehicle – come rushing into my life to make it as difficult as possible …’

‘For Christ sakes Mother – just get over yourself! I have every right to tell my story if it is indeed my story.’

‘No – you are telling my story and that I will not allow.’

‘Am I? Really?’

‘Yes – if you’re going to tell the story of me at least focus on the fact that I did everything I did for you lot. I held down three jobs, married a farmer, got jobs at universities so that you could get a free education – put you in a home – all because it was the best thing I could do at the time. You have no right to tell it any other way.’

‘Look here, if that was the case I appreciate it – but I am unable to tell your story because it was not my experience. All I can write about is what my life consisted of from my perspective. But don’t worry – as far as I can tell I’ve transcended the blame game. I love every dastardly thing that ever happened to me – if it did.’

The phone clunks down in my ear.

‘Christ almighty,’ I shout out and skate towards my bed throwing myself down.

‘Yes dear?’

‘Oh no,’ I scream pulling the pillow over my head. ‘No, no, no.’

Once I had entered the terrain of metafiction there seemed no turning back. Literary theorist Patricia Waugh says that: ‘Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text’ (Waugh, 1984: 2).

I began to work with metafiction in two senses. The first was to comment on the writing of the novella itself within the novella, and therefore draw attention to its status as an artifact. The scene at the end of the white-room scenario, when the protagonist begins to read the manuscript again (just before the vagina dialogue, where her vagina berates her for starting to read the entire memoir again) she in fact begins reading the novella’s framing story and not the memoir. She reads the opening of the framing narrative, beginning at the beginning with the line ‘I love the Karoo …’.

This is a conscious statement about the intervention of fictional worlds within fictional worlds, exploring the possible fictionality of the world outside of the memoir and the fictionality of the memoir itself. It also alludes to the possibility that the protagonist resides within the various realms/narrative threads simultaneously, suggesting that time and space are possibly one and the same thing, thus exploring the illusory nature of past and future as everything takes place in the moment. I also wanted to *play* with the narrative structure and throw a curve ball in terms of what constitutes possible reality for the protagonist (as well as the reader) as the story outside of her own reality within the white room, intercepts the memoir. From this point on she finds herself in the landscape of the historical story and is no longer in the white room reading her memoir.

This shift is signified by the sleeping pills, which she decides she does not want but is force-fed by the doctor. Thus she leaves the anxious state of the white room and enters the realm of her deep unconscious where she engages in the (now) uninterrupted adventure with characters from the historical narrative. The protagonist, however, lacks the awareness that she has shifted from one scenario to the next. She also lacks the awareness that she has been living and experiencing different realms simultaneously. She simply experiences whatever is thrown her way, indicative of my views on causality -- in which the protagonist is not totally in control of her own destiny, or rather does not set up a conflict with her destiny but yields and surrenders to the material reality she finds herself in (a concept I discuss in more detail later). The fact that she becomes *reader* of a *text* that she does not recognize as hers signifies for me the attitude that it is *reader* and *literature* that take precedence over authorial ownership as expressed by Roland Barthes in his essay *Death of an Author* (1977). In it he says that to give a text an Author and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it is to impose a limit on that text, and suggests that readers must separate a literary work from its creator in order to liberate it from interpretive tyranny. He proposes that 'each piece of writing contains multiple layers and meanings, drawing an analogy between text and textiles, declaring that a text is a tissue of quotations, drawn from innumerable centers of culture, rather than from one individual experience. The essential meaning of a work is dependent on the impressions of the reader, rather than the passions or tastes of the

writer; a text's unity lies not in its origins, but in its destination' (Barthes, 1977: 142-149).

Barthes saw the author as merely a *scriptor* rather than the focus of creative influence. He argued that the 'scriptor exists to *produce* but not to *explain* the work and is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, [and] is not the subject with the book as predicate. Every work is eternally written here and now, with each re-reading, because the origin of meaning lies exclusively in language itself and its impressions on the reader' (Barthes, 1977: 142-149).

The scene below signals my depiction of the notion of Barthes' *Death of the Author*, as my protagonist seems not to recognize her writing as belonging to her. The nurse, who questions whether she is in fact real or simply a figment of her own imagination, pushes her enquiry even further. The nurse then suggests that by virtue of being the reader of the text she may well also be the author of the text, or at least complicit in the content she is reading.

> The nurse bustles in. 'What – are you still reading? It's getting late. Almost time for your supper.'
>
> I slam the manuscript down and ask, 'Why am I here?'
>
> 'Why are we all here?' she says.
>
> 'True – but specifically why am I here in this hospital bed in this room?'
>
> 'Are you sure you are here?'
>
> 'As sure as I can be.'
>
> 'Yes, but just how sure is that?'
>
> 'Well, I can feel this metal bed – I can touch you. Surely this is enough proof that I am here.'
>
> 'The imagination can do incredible things – you only feel these things because the imagination allows you to imagine them to be there.'

'OK – but please just tell me, within the realm of my imagination, why I am here?'

'But I do not know if you are here. Without you thinking you are here you would not be, so I cannot give you a clear answer.'

I feel anger rising in my chest. I grab her arm.

'Look here. I need to know. I am here – but am I her – the woman in the book?'

'It depends which one – in effect you are all of them because you wrote them.'

'So I am the writer?'

'Not necessarily – but you are reading it, which means in some way that you wrote it.'

'How?'

'Well, those words resound in your mind while you are reading it; so who's to say that you are not complicit in its very existence?'

'What about all the stuff that's been written that I don't get to read?'

'Well, who's to say it is written then?'

A secondary use of metafiction in my text was to comment playfully on writing tropes, theory and literature that exist outside of the novella. Discussing metafiction, Edward Said observes that, 'fiction is viewed not as an intervention into reality, nor as an addition to it -- as was the case with classic realist fiction -- but rather as an intervention in other fiction, or in other writing' (Said, 1983: 43).

I began to write prolifically about the process of writing using reference to other texts and literary tropes (playfully intervening other texts) but very much disguised in the fabulist genre. As well as make use of well known literature, I'd hear a comment, see a newspaper headline, read an article or a bedtime story to my son -- and all this became

fused into a narrative about my writing process. I simply let it happen. At the same time I had just started to read Kristeva's theory of abjection, Cixous, Lacan, Freud and Kant – and my grappling with these ideas and influences also became embroiled in my narrative.

There was some concern in the workshops that metafiction was potentially dangerous ground because (and I quote a workshop participant) 'it's been done to death by amazingly brilliant writers, for a long time now, starting way back in the 1960s (John Barth, Robert Coover, Kurt Vonnegut, William H.Gass). So, unless it's quite brilliant it's likely to come across as belated. That's a big ask for any of us in this age of fiction oversupply and impatient readers.' Although this shook my confidence and filled me with self-doubt I could not stop this line of thought and obsession, and so I didn't. Firstly I was not writing a purely metafictional narrative – rather I was weaving metafictional threads into a narrative that was fast becoming a tapestry of fabulation and other genres. Secondly, I agreed that this had been done before, but then so has everything else. Memoir is no less 'done' than metanarrative, although perhaps less ambitious. It was this notion of *doneness* anyway, that was driving my writing into the experimental realm where I was working playfully with a few 'done' literary tropes. Metafiction was simply one of the layers. In addition, I was not trying to emulate Kurt Vonnegut or John Barth or any metafictional author. In fact I was not trying to emulate anyone in particular. In a sense I was in virgin territory because I had simply not read any novels for many years. Almost a decade had passed without me so much as picking up a novel, so caught up was I in survival mode as a result of being independent of any employer for years, which pushed me into freelance writing for newspapers and academic institutions, building up my film production company, and many other creative endeavours. What I had been reading, perhaps out of necessity, were books of a more metaphysical and spiritual nature. Starting with the Bhagavad Gita and Ashtavakra's Sutras, I devoured my way through interpreted Vedic literature, Buddhist literature and Transpersonal as well as Jungian psychology books – in fact any literature that could feed my voracious appetite for a reality that made more sense than the one I encountered on a material level -- and quite possibly heal my fractured inner child.

I was however, obviously influenced by my *memory* of literature whilst writing and as an avid reader in my youth, these influences were somewhat catholic. As a young teenager I was reading D H Lawrence, John Fowles and Ayn Rand from my mother's bookcase. By the time I was sixteen I had already been exposed to the Beatnik writers such as Kerouac, Leary and Burroughs and had read every Hesse and Vonnegut novel there was. I majored in Magical Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism at UKZN and read Kafka, Marquez, Puig, Coetzee, Doctorow, Faulkner, Winterson, and a list of authors who blew my young mind. So in a sense I was fairly well read, but also fairly dwarfed in that I had not yet read Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges or any of the seminal writers whose names I had heard once or twice in the MA workshops.

I also had no former schooling in philosophy and literary theory other than through reading and my major experience of fabulation was through my love of childhood stories and fairytales. In a sense then, my writing of this novella came from an academically feral space and because of lack of time and human capacity to engage with theory on the level I would have liked to, given my huge film work load, I stayed there and wrote from this place with a self-aware reflexivity. As a result a lot of my metafictional writing is also about this feral space in which I imagine myself to be trapped through lack of rigorous literary schooling and lack of time. This concern then, combined itself with everything else that was playing out in my *literary memory* and mixed with my active imagination and metaphysical interests. Add to this some occasional fairly stark and hard feedback in the workshops and what transpired ultimately was a weird kind of alchemy. If I felt slighted or misunderstood it would somehow result in me accessing more storylines about the process of writing.

Most workshop participants gave me consistently positive feedback on my writing, while a few simply did not take to it and there was some concern about my approach to story, structure and content (namely my interest in Buddhism -- and Archetypes which I signified through Tarot symbols), but I had already decided that I would follow my flow of thought and content so I was not put off by this commentary. Rather my struggle was with how to find a structure that was not overtly controlled and linear and kept the labyrinthine, mandala feel of my narrative alive. I wanted to deconstruct structured

narrative without detracting from the storyline and without any theory about what deconstruction meant. The *Alice in Wonderland* vignette is perhaps the hallucination that best describes this struggle.

> 'Right, let us begin,' bellows the Queen in a strident voice. She points her long bony finger and shrills out, 'You first.'
>
> An odd-looking man gets up and says to me, 'What am I?'
>
> 'A man,' I reply.
>
> 'No!' booms the man and begins to dismantle his body. He takes his head off and attaches it to his elbow. He takes his arm off and attaches it to his head. He removes his penis and attaches it to the side of his head.
>
> 'Now what am I?' he shouts.
>
> 'Slightly mad,' I say.
>
> 'No!' shouts the man as he removes his upper body from his lower body and turns them in the opposite direction.
>
> 'Now?'
>
> I am blank.
>
> 'I am a man – but what school of thought do I represent?'
>
> 'Horror,' I cry out.
>
> 'Oh, for God's sake!' shouts the man and sits down.

After writing this Wonderland vignette I realized that I had most probably written it in response to my first workshop session, in which I was told that my approach to literary genre's and terms was a 'buckshot' approach. I rather liked this image of scattered buckshot and this word set off a whole trend of thought which amused me. I went to sleep simultaneously obsessing about the feedback I had received and giggling at the mental imagery the word buckshot had inspired. The following morning I woke up and stretched. So I wrote those words down. 'She woke up and stretched'. From thereon my fingers flew over the keyboard and it was only after the fact that I realised I was writing a grotesque, 'buckshot' *Alice in Wonderland* version of my first workshop experience. In this piece the protagonist is being forced to guess what certain literary or

philosophical schools of thought are, through a game of charades, but she is blank and guesses them all wrong. This theme continues throughout the story as the Queen pursues the protagonist in all the different narrative lines, razor blade glinting in the sun. In the end, while she (the Queen) is held captive in the desert and the protagonist has just ripped off her gag, the Queen finally cries out in sheer desperation, 'Post fucking Modern.'

The Queen is also a parody of Kristeva's postmodern theory of abjection and I allude to this with an actual quote from Kristeva's essay *Powers of horror* (1980: 7).

> The Queen shrieks in a self-important voice – 'The theory of the unconscious, as is well known, presupposes a repression of contents that, thereby, do not have access to consciousness but effect within the subject modifications, either of speech, or of the body, or both. As correlative to the notion of repression, Freud put forward that of denial as a means of figuring out neurosis, that of rejection as a means of situating psychosis. The asymmetry of the two repressions becomes more marked owing to denial's bearing on the object whereas repudiation affects desire itself.'

It simply pleased me to incorporate this rather ludicrous and absurd interpretation of theory into my story, (a game I engaged in with myself in order to understand the theoretical language). I enjoyed the notion of taking the language of these constructs and building animated and pictorial story around them so that the construct itself became deconstructed into absurd imagery, verging on underground comic or Fellini type images. This entire wonderland vignette is a bizarre pictorial play on various constructs. Dada – deconstruction – horror/monstrous feminine -- abjection – causality – surreal unconscious writing and postmodernism. It is a microcosm of the macro text which makes use of this borrowing, parodying, quoting and mimicking of other literature and emphasizes pastiche, bricolage and intertextuality. The excerpt below is just one example of my playful handling of constructs – in this case Dadaism.

> 'Right, you!' shrills the Queen, pointing at a handsome man on the corner of the table.
>
> He immediately jumps upon a spinning ball, whips out his clarinet and plays it while laughing uproariously and juggling words. A monkey in lipstick cycles by on a unicycle, pulls the man's pants down and gives him a

> blowjob. A woman in tight black leather underwear whips his rear with a cat-o'-nine-tails. The man laughs uproariously and drinks brandy while playing the clarinet, juggling words, receiving a blowjob and getting spanked. Somebody walks up to him and throws paint on his body. Suddenly his James Dean hairstyle turns a golden orange. I recognise him.
>
> 'Dada!' I shout, reaching out to him.
>
> The man laughs and then disappears.
>
> 'Correct!' shouts the Queen excitedly. 'Now it's my turn. If you get this wrong you shall be severely punished.'

Postmodernism and Intertextuality.

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pecuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth, of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. (Barthes, 1977: 149 – 50)

At one stage in my reading over my work, I began to suspect that my MS/novella might fall into the category of modernism in that the narrative embraces some of the tenets of the genre. Literary theorist, Mary Klages, writes that modernism encapsulates the ideas of 'rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness.'

However, in my post novella analysis I began to understand why my writing is referred to by many of my readers as postmodern and not modernist. While postmodernism writing encapsulates all of the above, postmodern thought (and art) differs from modernism in that it 'favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject' (Klages, 2006: 165).

Klages explains that ‘while postmodernism seems very much like modernism in these ways, it differs from modernism in its attitude toward a lot of these trends. Modernism, for example, tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history (think of The Wasteland, for instance, or of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*), but presents that fragmentation as something *tragic*, something to be lamented and mourned as a loss. Many modernist works try to uphold the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which has been lost in most of modern life; art will do what other human institutions fail to do. Postmodernism, in contrast, doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather *celebrates* that. The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense’ (Klages, 2006: 165/66).

I feel my text falls into this fragmented and celebratory postmodern view of the world as the protagonist simply experiences what *is* with no real need to lament or make any sense of the worlds in which she finds herself. In fact some seemingly tragic moments are presented in the laugh-out-loud mode. Brothers Willem and Hans Bertens, in their book *The idea of the idea of the Postmodern* and referring to theorist Alan Wilde, say that ‘postmodern writers do not seek so much to understand the world, as to accept it, in all its fragmentation and incoherence, without seeking to control its tensions by aesthetic means as the modernists used to do’ (Bertens, 1994: 73).

Playing with nonsense particularly appeals to me and my text does quite a bit of that. I make reference to *Alice in Wonderland* within the novella as I feel that perhaps Lewis Caroll was the first postmodern writer I was exposed to and it was through his writing (as well as Dr Seuss and AA Milne) that I developed a taste for playing with nonsense since childhood. Writer, Rikki Ducomet sums up this appreciation concisely when he notes:

> A playful mind is deeply responsive to the world and informed by powers instilled during infancy and childhood, powers that animate the imagination with primal energies. A playful mind is guided as much by attraction as consistency and coherence—and I am thinking here of Lewis Carroll’s Looking Glass world—its consistent tyrants, the coherence of its nonsense and the energy of Alice’s fearless lucidity. The Looking Glass reminds us that the world’s maze is attractive to eager thinkers.
> (Ducornet, 2004). http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com/i/the-deep-zoo/full/

I also borrowed my title from the postmodern stable. *After just now* is a phrase that literally means Post Modern. 'Modernity' takes its Latin origin from 'modo,' which means 'just now'. The Postmodern, then literally means 'after just now' (Appignanesi and Garratt 1995: 35)

The use of pastiche, bricolage and intertextuality within my text was born largely out of writer's anxiety and writer's block in terms of not being able to follow through on my original proposal. As a result of this anxiety, and my inability to pen a realist narrative, I began to write other spontaneous material that seemed to manifest out of nowhere and would often become wound up with my dilemma around writing. This manifested in a type of fabulist intertextual metanarrative -- a weaving of my writing concerns with my (previously mentioned) memory of childhood literature as well as literature read and enjoyed at various stages of my life. Add to this my personal grappling with western philosophy and literary theory whilst in the writing process -- merged with my more eastern worldview -- and what transpired ultimately was a narrative that borrowed from, quoted, alluded to and parodied other texts and literary characters.

Theorists of intertextuality problematise the rank of authorship, treating the writer of a text as the orchestrator of what Roland Barthes refers to as the 'already-written' rather than as its originator (Barthes 1974, 21). 'A text is... a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations... The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them' (Barthes 1977, 146).

My text became a playful intertextual tapestry of literary theory, philosophy, history, politics, childhood literature and imaginative fabulation (which seemed to float up from the unconscious.) In some instances the narrative began to write itself and it would feel as if I was not the actual writer. Sometimes, after reading my own text I would recognize that some of the theoretical thought I was reading had infiltrated the text and I would then consciously manipulate the text further. In many instances I make bold

reference to this conscious manipulation of my text -- as in the following excerpt in which I make indirect playful reference to the term Bricolage (a term which is associated with intertextuality).

> I am led to the head of the table. A cup of tea is thrust in front of me.
>
> 'What do you do?' the Queen shouts at me. 'What are you good at?'
>
> Everyone around the table strain their bodies or bits and pieces in my direction. I cannot think. I do not know my right from my left. Then a kindly woman dressed in an academic gown mouths something at me from across the table. A light bulb goes on in my mind.
>
> 'Well, I think I'm a bit of a ...'
>
> The white rabbit runs across the grass, grabs the rest of my sentence and pours it down the Queen's left ear.
>
> 'A bricklayer? Preposterous!' she screams at me.
>
> 'No, no,' I call out. 'I think what I do is ...'
>
> Again the rabbit runs across the grass, grabs the rest of my sentence and pours it down the Queen's left ear.
>
> 'Bricks are large?' shouts the Queen.
>
> I am desperate. I look across at the kindly woman in the academic gown but she is nowhere to be seen. I hear a commotion in the corner and see her in a boxing ring with a man who towers over her. She appears to be pregnant. He is beating his fists mercilessly against her body.
>
> 'Stop it; stop it!' I cry out.
>
> 'No,' shouts the man. 'Not until she admits to dot, dot, dot, period.'
>
> 'But she is pregnant,' I call out as he smashes his fists into her body.
>
> 'Right, let us begin,' bellows the Queen in a strident voice. She points her long bony finger and shrills out, 'You first.'

My text makes bold use of wordplay and imitation and I make obvious reference to other literature, which, like a bricoleur (bricklayer) I use to build my own particular

narrative construction. In some instances I quote directly from theoretical structures I am working with, as in Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection -- as seen in the excerpt below which borrows again from her essay *Powers of Horror* (1980).

> 'No,' I say. 'That is it. I have worshipped at the shadowy altar of my self-destruction in my dark revolt of being. I have tasted the bitterness of my deeply buried self-abjection… seen my story as it really is in the vomit on the sand. But frankly I am getting bored with it now and I have finally expelled myself, spat myself out and transcended my pain.'

In this instance I am working Kristeva's theory of abjection into my story and the reason my protagonist is in conflict with her is because I am, in real life, struggling to understand the language of her construct. Because of this struggle and as part of my metanarrative stance, Kristeva becomes wound up in the Queen and becomes the villainous pursuer of my protagonist. What I begin to do in the text is to deconstruct her construct into bizarre pictorial imagistic renditions based on the language of her philosophy.

> She turns towards me ferociously and screams, 'What am I?'
>
> She performs a whole lot of angular, disconnected movements. I am worried. I bite my lips. I screw up my face. I raise my eyebrows the same way a very stern-looking man is doing just across the table from me – but none of it helps. She breast-feeds from a woman who is nursing a piglet – I can see the watery whitish liquid sliding down her throat. She projectile vomits on the table. She defecates with abandon.
>
> 'What am I?' she sobs, straining her sphincter.
>
> 'I don't know!' I shout.
>
> She turns green as the sun turns black. She takes a knife and stabs the woman from whom she has breastfed only moments before. She grows a pregnant belly.
>
> 'Jesus Christ!' I cry out.

In other cases I make playful reference to the actual authors who have a direct influence on my writing such as Calvino and Borges.

> 'Come, come,' he says. 'Join us for tea.'

I am afraid that I will fall into the same trap but this man has a certain gentleness about him. His eyes overflow with self-mirth.

'Don't be afraid. We're going to help you.'

I follow him. He is slim and dark. His movements are lithe and playful. He mutters long meandering and lyrical sentences while he skips through the forest. Finally we reach a little concrete courtyard. A big flaccid man sits at the table sipping thick black coffee from a ridiculously small white cup.

'I said no tea,' he says to the little dark man.

'OK, but the caffeine – she is already strung out as it is.'

'Sit, sit,' says the flaccid man.

In the distance an accordion plays a happy yet melancholic tune.

He extends a clammy hand to me.

'I'm "This and That" and this here is Italics – I like to call him Italics coz he may as well be – ha ha. Right, so we have been following your progress. It is just so refreshing that you cannot find your one true voice. I'm not sure, and we've been discussing it, whether you should ever believe yourself to have found it because, well, it may just ruin the fun.'

'Blah blah,' shouts Italics. 'Blah blah blah yadda yadda yadda.'

'This and That' and Italics then proceed to give the protagonist advice on how best to construct her story -- which becomes part of my metanarrative about my writer's block. In this piece they make direct reference to their own genres. I also take this opportunity to make reference to a childhood tale that impacted on my imagination in my early reading years and that has found its way back into my adult writing.

Italics shouts after me, 'Switch tenses!'

'This and That' shouts, 'Continue dialoguing in a phenomenal cosmos … just stay out of the damned labyrinth.'

I chuckle, thinking of the matrix. Labyrinth indeed.

'Stop tinkering! Find a format,' shouts Italics. 'This old geezer simply used detective novel plots to hang his words on. Believe me, they all do it in the

> end. Just find the framework and then fill it in. It works! What about Alice in Wonderland as a start?'
>
> 'More like Chalice in Ponder-land,' I cry out as I make off into the forest. 'Or Phallus in Yonder-land.'
>
> They laugh. I run for a long time. I realise the trees are nothing more than unprocessed pages – their leaves are unwritten text.
>
> I shout out, 'A story is nothing until it is written down.'

Unconscious writing

Once I had been drawn into this hodgepodge imaginative realm there was no turning back as I began to enjoy it far too much. Quite simply I became addicted to the process of storytelling and had accessed a fecund inner world of play that I was loath to leave. In a sense then, my narrative also centered itself very much on this sense of the enjoyment of the narrative process itself. Much of the time I had no idea where the narrative would take me and I simply handed over and followed the course of story. It was only on completion of the novella that I went back to my text and, in many instances, found that I could attribute meaning and sometimes theory to what appeared to be simple imaginative storytelling. The most conscious aspect of the narrative was in finding the framing story and basing this on actual South African history through the catalyst of my family history. (I also consciously designed the layout of the many bits of narrative within the framing story). But even then, once I began to write, the story would seem to take on a life of its own and it took me to places I could not possibly have consciously conjured up. This process became fascinating to me and I began to work this fascination into my narrative as depicted in the white room scenario.

> A nurse walks into the room. She clucks her tongue as she sees me out of my bed.
>
> 'You must not get up,' she says, leading me back to the bed.
>
> 'Why?' I ask.
>
> 'Because we do not know who you are.'

‘Neither do I.’

‘Yes – but you must remember.’

‘Maybe I am not real.’

‘That is what we are afraid of.’

I clutch the manuscript. ‘Whose is this?’

‘We do not know. It was in the suitcase.’

‘Is the suitcase real?’

‘As real as it can be.’

‘That helps,’ I say, lifting my feet into the bed.

‘The best way to remember is to forget,’ she says, and walks out the door.

In my quest to find a theoretical language or body of thought that could best explain to me the unconscious writing process and the endowment of meaning in text after it is written, I began to explore writers who expressed the idea that writing takes on *meaning* beyond what the author had in mind and how this is intrinsically linked to *playful* writing. At this early stage in my writing I had witnessed this phenomenon in various readers’ responses to my work, which they indicated, had turned out to be very playful both in the sense of wordplay and content. My exploration eventually led me to the authors Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, John Barth, and Ernst Gombrich. I began to explore their literature as well as writings around their works and later in the writing process I began to consciously work some of their ideas into my text. It was Calvino’s paper *Cybernetics and Ghosts* (1986) that initially gave me some sort of framework in which to understand what *happened* to me in my writing process, a process that seemed to occur as if I was on automatic pilot. It felt afterwards, that something else would kick in and I would be surprised, sometimes elated and often perplexed as to where the thoughts had manifested and how they found their way onto my document. In the end I would read over my story and wonder how it is I was writing about a lot of different issues within a fabulist tale -- the signs of which I would see after the fact. Art

historian, Gombrich, whom Calvino quotes in his paper, *Cybernetics and Ghosts* (1986), sums up this phenomenon succinctly when he notes:

> The processes of poetry and art are analogous to those of a play on words. It is the childish pleasure of the combinatorial game that leads the painter to try out arrangements of lines and colors, the poet to experiment with juxtapositions of words. At a certain moment things click into place, and one of the combinations obtained—through the combinatorial mechanism itself, independently of any search for meaning or effect on any other level— becomes charged with an unexpected meaning or unforeseen effect which the conscious mind would not have arrived at deliberately: an unconscious meaning, in fact, or at least the premonition of an unconscious meaning.' (Gombrich in Calvino, 1986: 19)

This combinatorial game plays out in much of my script, but the more obvious childlike play of words and meaning would be in scenes such as the bar scene below.

> *He was relieved when he reached the blonde's unstable dichotomy (w) and looked into her face, which he expected would be rather vacuous. Instead his gaze was met with a glint of urbane wit – which flustered him – he blurted out – can I buy you a dictionary? She narrowed her green eyes squashing his (ego) into parenthesis and said – why is it that all you upper casings assume that blondes are lacking in brain matter? And by the way – yes I am a natural blonde. She took his face between her pale hands and pulled him willingly towards her naked cliché, which was indeed covered with natural blonde (,,,,,,,,). And that is where he momentarily lost himself in a kind of ecstatic suspension, which was probably best not recorded in lexis. The blonde soon tired of his antics and asked the anachronism if she could order a tall story.*
>
> *' Not on this page' replied the anachronism – ' but you will most certainly get one in the allegory just around the corner.'*
>
> *Tokyo ordered another as he watched the blonde walk out of the room.*

This particular piece was inspired by a comment made by the course convener in one of the Experiments in Telling Workshops in the WITS MA Creative Writing, in which he said that the most boring sentence in the world has got to be 'a blonde walked into the room.' For some reason this presented a creative challenge for me and I began to write a piece that attempted to disprove this statement. Of course it had to be rather more erudite than the usual genre of writing which would include a banal sentence such as 'a

blonde walked into the room,' and so my brain kicked into overdrive and I began to play with concepts and words. Initially I had no idea that my story would become a game of semantics, punctuation, syntax and semiotics – but my concern about my own fairly lax grasp of formal punctuation became embroiled in my thinking, as did some ex-political prisoner politics my husband was dealing with, and the next thing I had created a short story to which different readers' applied different stratas of explication, some of which I had no conscious grasp of rendering whilst writing.

John Barth, (author of metafictional novels such as *Lost in the funhouse* (1963), and the famous essay *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967)), expresses a similar situation in an interview when asked what his intentions were in his novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960)

> I had some things in mind when I wrote it, and it is interesting and cheering to find out later that I had more in my mind than I thought I had. I don't really say that facetiously – one works by hunch and guess and intuition, with some conscious patterns in mind, too, and one has a character to do *this* instead of *that* because one feels this is appropriate. Maybe in the act of setting it down you say, 'I know why he did that,' but then you are looking at it as a college teacher. More often you read a piece years later by some bright fellow, interpreting your work, and you realize that … he's got your number … in a way your recognize for the first time yourself. This is a rather upsetting, but pleasantly upsetting, experience: to be told by someone else what you were up to and recognize that he was right. (Barth, in Harris, 1983: 4)

In Calvino's view, meaning created in text can be attributed to internal and external sources. Referring to Gombrich's article, he writes:

> Literature is a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit in its own material, independent of the personality of the poet, but it is a game that at a certain point is invested with an unexpected meaning, a meaning that is not patent on the linguistic plane on which we were working but has slipped in from another level, activating something that on that second level is of great concern to the author or his society. (Calvino, 1986: 20)

Because my writing had found its way into the experimental, streams of consciousness mode quite by accident, I had no idea at the early stage how it would turn out and what form the narrative would take, save for the fact that I had a host of concerns and

interests in mind that played themselves out in my writing over and over, as well as a loose idea of a story. In hindsight I should have been concerned that as a conceptual or experimental writer, I would have to guard against losing my instinctual and spontaneous relationship with language and thereby render something less than genuine. As Barth cautioned in his novel *Chimera (1972*), 'One must distinguish between meretricious or gratuitous experiment and genuinely experimental writing. The writer who transforms his contrivance into a powerful, effective, and appropriate metaphor for his concerns has made a piece of art, whatever its imperfections' (Barth, 1972: 24).

Barth continues, 'Never mind the spiritual or psychological reasons why one is interested in … any … particular narrative device. Anybody who sets out to be interested just for the sake of elaborateness would be a bloody idiot. Somewhere in your artistic sense, you intuit that this is a metaphor for other things you are concerned with. You don't explain why it is a metaphor – you're no bloody critic at this point … you just know some concepts haunt you, speak to you in electrical ways, and you learn to trust your intuition' (Barth, 1972: 24).

The Unconscious.

Father of psychology, Sigmund Freud, defined the unconscious as a collection of images, thoughts and experiences the individual refused to, or was unable to process, which lead to neuroses**.** Freud believed that the principal driving force that motivated men and women's activities was repressed or expressed sexuality and that unfulfilled sexuality led to pathological conditions. The unconscious to Freud was the storage facility for all repressed sexual desires, thus resulting in pathological or mental illness. Only through laying bare the unconscious could a person discover how to live happily and recover from mental illness.

Analytical psychologist Carl Jung added to Freud's definition of the unconscious by stating that each individual also possessed a collective unconscious, a group of shared images and archetypes common to all humans. These often floated up to the surface of

the personal unconscious. Dreams could be better interpreted by understanding the symbolic reference points of universally shared symbols.

In contrast to Freud, Jung believed that sex constituted only one of the many things that drive humans and not necessarily a source of neurosis. He also believed that humans are driven by their need to attain individuation, wholeness or full knowledge of the self and that emotions drive humans to act in psychologically unhealthy ways which were actually a longing for the desire to feel complete. Jung felt that the unconscious often strove on its own for wholeness, and that mental illness was not pathology, but an unconscious regulation of emotions and stored experience tending toward individuation. (Ellis-Christensen, 2003).

My writing was influenced by a Jungian definition of the unconscious and I make a conscious but playful effort to privilege Jungian thought over Freudian thought in the text, especially in relation to sexual drives and wholeness. I also have an ongoing interest in the study of archetypes and have trained as a Tarot card reader/therapist in the Jungian school of thought. This entails doing readings based on interpretation of archetypes rather than on fortune telling and I have sometimes used this system to enhance my writing and stimulate my imagination. My study of archetypes and Tarot symbols (Arcanas) infiltrates my narrative and although it clearly irritated some workshop participants who interpreted it as new-age and arcane, there are many scholarly writings around Tarot. Professor Gerald Schueler explains this Jungian view of Tarot as follows:

> The Tarot deck contains archetypal symbols that can be related to the analytical psychology of the Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung. The Tarot deck, especially the major arcana or trump cards, can be used effectively in therapy. The client, with the assistance of the therapist, conducts a reading or uses several cards to tell a story and then discusses possible meanings of the symbols in his or her own words. The therapist then relates the symbolic meanings given by the client to the client's problem in much the same manner as in Jungian dream analysis. This therapeutic process can be explained by using a chaos model. Using a chaos model of therapy, a period of psychic instability is deliberately induced by the therapist through stimulation of the imagination via the Tarot symbols. Concentration on the

> Tarot symbols induces bifurcation points that the therapist then uses to direct change toward desired attractors. This is similar to the well-known techniques of paradoxical communication, paradoxical intervention, and prescribing the symptom, all of which induce a temporary condition of psychic instability that is required for a bifurcation. (Schueler, 1997) www.schuelers.com/chaos/chaos7.html

According to Carl Jung, the human mind is made up of an unconscious divided into two discrete parts which he named the 'personal unconscious', a deeply hidden part of ourselves which is best accessed through therapy and dream work, and the 'universal unconscious', which is a shared set of images, called archetypes, common to all people. He further postulated that the universal unconscious was expressed in art, literature and myth (Ellis-Christensen, 2003).

Jung describes the mind as a battlefield of these conflicting psychic forces, both personal and collective. Such forces were not necessarily neurotically sexual, as Freud would have it, but emerged as archetypes: predispositions of beliefs, activities and symbols in which the unconsciousness becomes articulate and consciously manifests in our minds. Archetypes of the collective unconscious are the recurring *images* to be found in any culture, and the artist, like all human beings, is simply their midwife.

To Jung the goal of all humans was the achievement of *individuation,* a state where the unconscious is known and integrated into the conscious mind. A focus of individuation is the integration of the anima or animus and the bigger integration of the shadow. Archetypes of the personal unconscious (particularly the shadow, and those masculine or feminine aspects of personality known as animus or anima) are dispositions we each need to acknowledge and embrace if we are to mature as persons and take our place in society.

In this model any literature involving any type of heroic (or anti-hero) protagonist can be analysed through Jungian literary criticism by the steps in the 'hero's journey' which guide the hero toward individuation. In the reading of work from a Jungian point of view, the central protagonist is viewed as real, while most other characters are seen as symbolic representations of aspects of the central character's unconscious self. A male, for example, represents the animus, the masculine side of the character's personality.

An antagonist represents the shadow (Ellis-Christensen, 2003).

This Jungian influence seemed to infiltrate my writing on various levels. On reading it after completion I realized that I had incorporated many elements of the personal and the collective unconscious which embody these archetypes – the shadow (Queen/Kristeva) the animus (De Buys and the Hanged Man) the personal self (Lila, first-person protagonist) and other minor archetypes. I do this through a host of characters, but I most obviously allude to this aspect by the inclusion of an actual Tarot reading, which becomes a virtual part of the journey. This virtual Tarot reading centers very much on the integration of the protagonist's animus (The Hanged Man) with her well-developed feminine side (The Empress). These archetypal equations are indeed based on my own numerological and Tarot constellations, which are worked out through date of birth, and while this has no bearing on the actual story this represents a playful transmutation of elements of my own context as well as a cathartic literary attempt to deal with them.

The journey of my protagonist is one in which she bumps up against elements that may have been repressed into the shadow side, or personalities unbalanced by denial of the animus or anima elements, and this provides a basis for a layered and imaginative journey through a landscape of the unconscious and unresolved, the personal and the collective, towards a state of individuation. It is a story that unfolds via different threads, all interconnected, in which the protagonist finds herself in different epochs and environments, all of which she experiences in the first person present tense. This will be my first clue to the reader that this book is based purely on subjectivity – it is the *I* in the *now* who meets *herself* in the myriad characters (both real and phantasised) in the *wilderness* of her psyche. She has accessed this inner terrain because she is in the state of dying. Her inner world flashes before her eyes and at the end of the story it becomes apparent that she is still in the motion of falling, that she has in fact not even touched the ground and that everything that has transpired from the inception of the car accident has been a play on the illusion of time or the trick of time.

I employ the simple language of fable or fairytale and occasional realism so that the story can be read on the level of story alone. However, if one digs a bit deeper or reads

it with a fully attentive mind then one may notice that I have in fact, set up a playful dialectic beneath the surface of the narrative. In the narrative twists and turns that occur within the story, I dabble in a myriad of word games, playful philosophical discourse and disputation as well as bizarre interpretations of history and current politics. In all threads there appears to be a conscious effort to de-familiarise stereotypes, norms and even archetypes. Instead of experiencing repulsion toward the demon shadow male (incubus) my protagonist enjoys the animalistic sex. Instead of wanting to be the universal mother archetype as in the Empress archetype, she complains to the Lion (inner beast/strength) that she would rather be Charles Bukowski (another shadow male but also a version of the animus). In all instances she is making mischievous reference to different literary tropes and in this case she is saying that she too wants the freedom to delve into a narrative thread where she can unselfconsciously express sexuality in the way that writers such as Charles Bukowski and Henry Miller do when writing about women, (without judgment from society), that women possess the same propensity as men for the playful reprieve of the profane and that she intends to explore this unsanitised realm of female sexuality within her narrative. It is a mirror image of a woman writing about her own sexuality but in some cases using similar language to certain male authors. There is also a hinting at the notion that the protagonist may already have experienced a level of individuation and awareness within the story and is thus able to play with her shadow aspects in a manner that implies integration rather than fear.

Writing the body

> Ever since her story had manifested itself to her she felt charged with a sort of extraterrestrial energy, as if she was connected by a series of intricate burnished meridians to the vastness of the cosmos while wound up in a web of organic tendrils that reached upwards from the dankness of the subterranean. A cosmic yet physical current pulsed through her body, up her spine and exploded in white light in her mind, while a warm mirth played mischief in her belly. She took many hot baths simply to quell the vigor of this charged phenomenon, which she was sure could drive her mad, but these only proved to be steamy think-tanks where thoughts, ideas and storylines proliferated at an alarming rate. She hardly slept and when she did she found herself surfing the ocean of her narrative, tumbling in tumultuous waves of cut-up-text and words and dancing gleefully with the

> characters that found their way into her fable. She would often wake up laughing at some amusing twist and turn in her possible allegory and it was for this reason that she held fast to her decision to follow its course, for she had finally found that the best way to enter her writing was indeed to cross the threshold into the labyrinth of the multifarious chronicles that had been incubating in the deep creases of her psyche for a long time. There was simply no stopping the stories within stories within stories that began to unfold in her body.

Whilst in the writing process I began to read up on the unconscious in fiction and accessed the writings of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and Jacques Lacan. Despite the fact that I am Jungian influenced I was fascinated by this Freudian influenced literary theory and in hindsight I recognize that this theory also became playfully embroiled in my narrative. On reading it now I realise that much of my narrative very much centers on feminine writing or what Helen Cixous referred to as 'écriture féminine' – a form of feminine writing that was born out of a reaction against the primary motive of a patriarchal language and phallogocentricism -- a concept coined by Jacques Derrida to refer to the privileging of the masculine (phallus) in the construction of meaning. It is also a form of writing that delves into and derives from the unconscious – or the semiotic -- described by Kristeva as the preoedipal stage that women should go back to. She draws a distinction between the semiotic (unconscious) and the symbolic (language) as follows: 'the *symbolic,* dominated by the father, the phallus, and the law; and the *semiotic*, haunted by the vengeful traces of a lost pre-Oedipal maternal world' (quoted in Ellmann,1994:25). What women are interested in is this lost maternal world where there is no phallus, no father, no law. Kristeva argues that language is constituted by his penis and her lack. Therefore, a woman cannot use *that* language to speak *her*self.

Jacques Lacan refers to the unconscious realm as the Real and explains the idea of the phallus as central and dominant. He describes the Real as the stage that an infant goes through just before it enters the stage of language at around 18 months of age. The Real is the stage in which there is no law, no patriarchy and no domination because it is the bond with the maternal in which all needs are met and therefore there is no need for language. It is the space where the child experiences only union and wholeness, a place where all demands are met and where there is no lack or want. Everything is there (Klages, 2006: 78-86). However, as soon as the child begins to speak, s/he comes across

absence for the first time because it is the realm of language and according to Lacan 'language is always about loss or absence' (quoted in Klages, 2006:78-86). We need symbols to fill the absence: 'you only need words when the object you want is gone' (Klages, 2006: 78-86). So words are symbols for what is not there.

According to Lacan the first lack that a child encounters is the mother's penis and through this develops a fear of castration – a trauma which separates the infant from the mother and forces the child to renounce the mother. From then on 'all pleasures will be substitutive, for sexuality consists of the pursuit of metaphorical alternatives to lost felicities: indeed, desire in Lacan is nothing other than the drive to linguistic substitution' (Ellmann,1994:19). This substitution leads to the notion of otherness -- for since language is based on differences in the Saussurian sense, when the infant crosses the threshold into the symbolic order, s/he begins to perceive the world in terms of differences. Therefore, the structure of otherness and the structure of lack coexist in the symbolic order and since the self is always defined in relation to the other this then gives rise to the possibility of an unlimited sense of lack. (Peksen; 2005)

The father then becomes an important central figure 'a function of linguistic structure' (Klages 2006: 78-86) because, according to Lacan, 'the most important other in the child's life is the mother' (Klages,2006: 78-86) and when the child realises the mother's lack and consequently experiences the fear of castration the father becomes the Law that separates the infant from the mother. When the child discovers the language, s/he discovers the father -- then enters the symbolic order and becomes a subject. Submission to the rules of the language is submission to the Law of the Father (Klages,2006: 78-86). Both the symbolic order and the law of the father are patriarchal. It is at this stage that the child recognizes sexual differences: 'To achieve subjectivity, the infant has to be conscripted into the lexicon of kinship, in which its identity as a child, son or daughter, is determined by its difference from other subjects' (Ellmann,1994:16).

This hypothesis leads us back to the concept of the phallus as central, which is the signifier to confirm the patriarchal, dominating, hegemonic nature of language. In a Derridian sense, the *other* is the center of the system-- the center that everyone wishes

to reach but cannot because it is the beyond reach -- taking on the status of God. Mary Klages writes that this center is also called the phallus 'to underline even more the patriarchal nature of the symbolic order' (2006: 78-86). It is the governing principle of the whole structure. It is the signifier of the difference between the sexes and as such it stands 'for all the differences that structure the symbolic order' (Ellmann,1994:19). All the differences are defined in relation to it, since it is the centre, and everything related to women is defined with regard to the phallus as well. Therefore, the father and his penis have the central role in the system of language which consequently affects all other systems and discourses: 'The phallus is the kingpin in the bowling alley of signification: knock it over, and all the other signs come tumbling down. It takes the place of God as the absolute guarantee of meaning' (Ellmann, 1994, 19).

My first-person protagonist thus became a catalyst for the exploration of this discourse, but in a childlike, playful and fabulist manner. She refuses to be beholden to a phallogocentric thesis and uses everything in her mind, body and soul to overturn this state of affairs. Thus she performs the text in an abandoned, amoral manner – not only in terms of her sexuality in both the fantasized and memoir elements of the narrative, but she is also amoral in terms of the narrative structure. She breaks the rules of linear narrative and does not live up to any genre expectations. She goes wherever she pleases and expects the reader to accept the state of affairs as she does – with little judgment of herself. In the narrative she names and gives voice to the vagina as well as grapples playfully with Kristeva's theory of abjection, amongst many other signifiers of the feminine discourse. While the Queen is presented as a villainous pursuer -- she finally meets her on the right side of the war against the one-eyed phallic monster that resides at the top of the penis ladder and is representative of the order of phallogocentricism. It turns out that the central adventure in the story, which the protagonist senses but never really grasps (until she is informed by the Tin-Man, whom it turns out is not only devoid of a heart, but also a penis) is the overthrowing of the order of phallogocentricism, which she, her golden child and her Xhosa husband lead, along with an army of mythological characters -- all indicative of a lexis that is not beholden to a phallocentric principle. This culminates in a war of ideologies where rationality breaks apart in brittle disbelief -- as seen in the excerpt below.

He transforms into a small Tibetan warrior and begins to climb the ladder.

'Follow me,' he shouts to Lunga and I. We do.

When we reach the top we behold a shapeless giant blob with one evil eye oozing puss. Behind him a mighty army of men-in-suits congregates. They carry briefcases shaped like machine guns. Rows and rows of men in religious and military fundamentalist regalia form lines behind the men in suits. I see a few women in severe outfits amongst the men. I recognize Margaret Thatcher. Then I see some women I recognize from somewhere else, standing by with their mouths gagged. They wear yellow and green women's league T shirts with pictures of a large man with a roll on the back of his neck, as their icon. He pushes a humungous fleshy entity in a wheelbarrow in front of him.

An army of men in camouflage gear rolls out their defense – a colourful array of blow-up dolls and live barbies. They form manifold rows in front of them, mouths open, eyes glazed over, knees knocking while teetering in stiletto heels.

Behind us the Shaktiites gather in great force. A choir of black Goddesses begins a low hum and little yellow people stomp their feet into the dust. Men of all colours join the army. They wear their vaginas on their sleeves. Someone taps me on my shoulder. I turn around and see the Queen. Her eyes twinkle as she holds up the razor blade.

'God's truth she laughs' … 'I've been trying to give you this for pages. It may come in handy.'

She hands me the razor. I nick my little finger on it.

'But' … I say licking my blood.

'Don't worry … there are about three versions of me in your story.'

A terrible smell of old cabbages fills the room.

'Fee Fo Fi Fum – I smell the blood of a literary mum!' shrieks the unseemly giant.

'Go to hell!' I shout back with great force.

He laughs an evil cackle and shouts – 'Not much of a turn out is there lass?'

The smirk is wiped off his face as the rest of the army manifests from the margins. When I see the expression on his face I turn around and behold an army of Thyiads dancing a frenzied wine-induced dance of death. They twirl in ecstatic union, becoming one with Bacchus. A hurricane of

> supernatural and violent energy sweeps towards the blow-up dolls and barbies, whipping them into the whirlpool of naked ferocity and transforming them into pulsating Bacchae. They hurtle towards the army of men-in-suits and rip them apart with bare hands and bloodied teeth. Medusa joins them, snakes whipping venom and deep laughter shattering eardrums that have never heard.
>
> Dancing yellow people create a ring of fire around the army and sing their n/om as they transform into the spirits of 1000 antelopes which stampede through the enemy lines with the force of ancient actuality. Rationality cracks apart in brittle non-belief.

In understanding feminine writing it is to the work of Helene Cixous that I turn as I am inspired by her discourse which deals with the how to write our bodies. Her article 'The laugh of the Medusa' (1976) seems to present a passionate call to all women to create a common language that would do away with the subordinating male language and its limitations to women. Her article is boldly feminine and original, offering solutions and as pointed out by theorist Pam Morris 'instead of the feminine as lack and absence, Cixous's writing practice in 'Medusa', embodies abundance, creative extravagance, playful excess, the physical materiality of the female body' (Morris,1993:121-122).

My narrative, I feel, takes heed of this call and pushes the boundaries of playful excess, creative extravagance and the physical materiality of the female body.

Sexuality

Cixous stated in 1976 that historically there had been a lack of strongly sexual feminine writing from the (heterosexual) women's stable of writers -- due to the dominant Post Victorian moralistic and phallogocentric renditions of female sexuality which have kept feminine writing very much in the margins. While there have been women writers who have written sexuality Cixous says that these works were 'in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women' (1976,311). Therefore, women should write as women, not as men.

> The body is linked to the unconscious. It is not separated from the soul. It is dreamed and spoken. It produces signs. When one speaks, or writes, or sings, one does so from the body. The body feels and expresses joy, anxiety, suffering

> and sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is the least constrained, the least bridled manifestation of the body. 'Feminine' sexual pleasure is overflowing, undecided, decentralised and not caught up in the masculine castration scene, and is not threatened by impotency. The body lets desires pass through and this desire creates images, fantasies and figures. Feminine desire is flowing, so we often find images of the spring, of liquid, of water (Cornell,1990:39).

Cixous argues that by writing their bodies women would take back their bodies, make it their own and make it be heard: 'It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence' (1976:312). Women have become estranged from their bodies through the theories of the patriarchal discourse, made to believe that their bodies were incomplete, dark and sometimes even filthy. Patriarchy forced women to repress their femininity and thus they became strangers to their own bodies. Cixous, however, tries to overturn this fallacy by pointing out that women are not castrated, do not lack anything and do not need to be fulfilled (1976). Woman's body is open-ended, and her language should also reflect this open-endedness. She calls this Writing with her white ink (breast milk):

> her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to love them at the point closest to their drives; and then further, impregnated through and through with these brief, idenficatory embraces, she goes and passes into infinity (Cixous,1976:317).

Cixous writes passionately about what women could scribe using this language. She suggests that they should write everything about femininity because nothing has been written about it yet by *women*. They should write about 'their sexuality...its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies...about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings' (Cixous,1976:315). They should write about their bodies through their bodies; a language that should be free from all the fixing, subordinating, centering notions of the symbolic order and should surge like the juices in our bodies, making use of metaphors that come from the semiotic. Only then will our true selves be projected authentically. However, she cautions, feminine writing cannot be described or defined

using the terms of the patriarchal language. It should rather be shown by practice as Cixous does in her article (1976) in which her writing exemplifies the theory of écriture féminine by writing her body: Cixous not only practices feminine writing herself but she also encourages other women to do the same. (Peksen; 2005)

Inspired by this discourse I decided to attempt an exploration into this terrain of lexis around feminine sexuality in my narrative. In terms of language, I wanted to find a way of writing boldly about sex from a woman's perspective without the limitations of emotional neediness, moralistic boundaries or male agency over women's sexual expression … so the writing would be visceral and imagistic, celebratory, sometimes profane, and hopefully literary. I would therefore avoid crude use of banal sexual language such as 'he entered her … he plunged into her etc'… but I hoped that the lack of overt description would charge the scenes with a primal sexual energy. It was to be psycho-linguistic experiment on language and Eros. In effect I wanted the writing of these scenes to have the same effect as highly descriptive erotic writing -- but for the reader to discover after the fact that in fact I have not used overt sexual (pornographic) language to describe sex. I also attempt to show the enjoyment of the other, rather than binary opposition of the sexes so that the sex scenes would be a celebration of male and female energies.

> They whip out their horns from their pants and blow long mournful, hollow notes through the forest. My loins throb with an intensity never before experienced. My breasts explode with expectation. I squirm like a jewelled serpent on the damp leaf bed I have made my own. And then he comes – a tall and magnificent creature with hair the colour of morning light playing upon water. His stature is that of the trees. He is naked and the magician between his thighs casts an immediate spell upon me. My breath quickens to an animal rapidity and I strain upwards to meet him. We drink each other in long deepness as he fills and empties me with rhythmic artfulness. Serpent pleasure generates endless unconscious undulations and lion lust pulls him inwards in strong muscular contractions while I burst like an overripe plum onto his hardness. He wolfs me inside out and outside in and I meet his every move – pliant and strong I take him in ways that only one who has been initiated in the underground forest can. We burst forth simultaneously in an explosion of nectar and a howling of wolves meets our cries and spasms.
>
> Exhausted, we lie back on the leafy ground.

> ‘He says,’ – ‘I have been seeking you out for eons and when I find you, you are naked and bursting like a hot overripe plum. Where is the chase?’
>
> I say – ‘There is no chase after eons. You have been teasing me for too long.’
>
> He laughs and licks my drenched neck with his elongated tongue.
>
> He says – ‘It is now time for you to tell me who I am for that is why I have sent my army to hunt you down.’
>
> I stroke his magician until it is hard again and then I mount him.
>
> I say – ‘Follow the patterns of my tattoo as I move into you and away from you, for it is in this meditation that you will see yourself.’
>
> I ride him as Isis rode the Dog Star Sirius and he falls into a hypnotic state and in the movements of my hips he sees the key to his soul through the lexis of his essence – and as he exhales the immense silver vapour that has been gathering in his chest for eons, I breathe it in and die a little death … but I do not find my one true voice.

I often used erotica to allude to other matters. For example, the doctor performs cunnilingus on the protagonist after she has swallowed the sleeping pills. As a qualified Kundalini yoga instructor and having once been a student of Tantric yoga, I wrote with the knowledge that cunnilingus is a well-worn Taoist practice to achieve immortality through the sipping of female fluids. For me this scene signifies the fear of death in the realm of mind; the death of the intellect as the unconscious takes over. Even though the narrator has entered the realm of her deep subconscious (through the sleeping pills) her intellect attempts to remain fixed by drinking the life enhancing female fluids of the sleeping narrator. This situation relates to the set up of the battle between the intellectual and the irrational that is dialogued within the white hospital room. The series of Doctors are indicative of the rational, didactic and sometimes restrictive approach to *intuitive* expression.

The link to Taoism (or Eastern thought) is thematic throughout the story. Perhaps this link is obvious only to me. In some instances I distinctly felt that some workshop members mistakenly thought of my writing of sexuality as a personal projection from a forty-three-year-old woman, forecasting her fantasies about her own thirst for sex into

the script, thus the occasional occurrence of congress with phantasised males was deemed *lustful* rather than *erotic*. However, I am also aware of the possibility that this is my own perspective derived from the dastardly hold that a Christian education retains on the female psyche, begging the question whether one ever really transcends one's history – which is also a theme in the story.

For me the profane is funny, intellectual rather than gratuitous, and inexplicably necessary to my writing process. Despite this there was an element of self-consciousness in my writing of sex as it is difficult to keep up the language of the erotic in a novella that is being presented in a workshop situation, since every person has their own barometer of what constitutes erotica and what is downright pornographic or lustful. As it is I had some value judgments uttered in commentary and soon I began to censor myself -- so while I was of the mind to take the sexual text (sext) much further than I did, I felt the workshop scenario not quite the appropriate situation for pushing these sexual boundaries as I felt my writing of sexuality was already challenging to some of the participants. At one stage, when I was in a state of high anxiety over the sexuality of my narrative, I self-consciously took all the overtly sexual material in my writing, whether a sexual encounter or a sexual innuendo, and pasted it together – largely to gain some perspective on just how far I had pushed that boundary. It all comes to less than a page and a half so it surprised me that many of my readers responded to the so-called sexual or lustful nature of my novella when in fact there is less than two pages of writing on the matter.

This suggests to me then, that there may be something in the narrative language and play of words that has a libidinal current running through it, a play on the state of abandon, desire and sexuality. Could it be that the very act of imaginative linguistic expression is itself cerebrally erotic and that sexuality can reside in narrative that does not concern itself with the topic of sex itself? I have always felt that expressive/imaginative language is, by its very nature, intellectually erotic. I have also always felt that the state of creativity one enters when writing is almost as concentrated and visceral as the state of orgasm, only more prolonged and less intense. Perhaps, as text is described in Barthes' book *The Pleasures of the Text* (1975) where the emphasis

shifts to the ways in which texts *open* instead of *close* meaning (via playful citations of other texts, deliberate ambiguity and so on), my script could well be a brazen intertextual hussy who has opened herself to many interpretations and thus lacks morals and properness -- but achieves joy as a result --and this source of pleasure is on bid to the finely tuned reader -- a grasp of signification itself, the fabulous moments of meaning-construction, or the moments when one glimpses whole arrays of hidden meanings implied in the sign. Barthes describes this ecstatic pleasure as *jouissance*, a word which has suggestions in French of 'achieving orgasm' although more prosaic/modest accounts sometimes talk of these moments as the 'joyous loss of self' (Barthes,1975: 171). Jouissance also refers to joy-in-life fuelled by the libidinal/desiring energies and finds one of its expressions in orgasm, another in textual play. It is my hope that my text celebrates this joy. The excerpt below speaks to me of this joy.

> *A blonde walked into the room. Tokyo's loins stirred like a shifting crocodile on the banks of the Limpopo… or perhaps a mole on the first day of spring … or possibly an idea about to be birthed. The point is they stirred and this took him by surprise. He had not felt stirred for some time now, which had not really bothered him much. What bothered him more was the fact that they were now stirring quite a bit and he was inclined to visualise all sorts of wanton erotic scenarios in his head. The irksome thing about this was that he knew he was in a novella for specific consumption and thought that the descriptions that played out in his mind may well be rather too graphic for this particular pallet – although he did think that it might be more acceptable coming from a him in third person – as opposed to a her in first person – especially if everyone knew that it was autobiographical for instance. And this got him thinking in sentences that started with I, which did not feel right at all. For God's sake what tense is this, he asked himself looking inside his mind? Ah third person past tense. He was relieved. He still had time for a few more. He turned to the anachronism behind the ingot and asked for another. Another what? Another glass of inverted commas, of course.*

A concern that plays itself out in my writing is my anxiety that perhaps only those with an interest in semiotics/semantics really engage *fully* in the game and the entire array of meaning construction woven into the narrative -- and whether this type of writing is too vexing for the modern reader in that it may demand a fully attentive mind and body. I feel that perhaps we now live in a world where readerly texts are appreciated over writerly texts that, as pointed out by a workshop participant, 'test a reader's patience'.

Roland Barthes in his essay, '*S/Z*' (1974), outlined the significant difference between readerly and writerly texts.

A 'readerly' text he defined as a text that makes no requirement of the reader to 'write' or 'produce' his or her own meanings. The reader may passively locate 'ready-made' meaning.' Barthes writes that these sorts of text are 'controlled by the principle of non-contradiction,' that is, they do not disturb the 'common sense,' or 'Doxa,' of the surrounding culture. The 'readerly texts,' moreover, 'are products [that] make up the enormous mass of our literature.' Within this category, there is a spectrum of 'replete literature,' which comprises 'any classic (readerly) texts' that work 'like a cupboard where meanings are shelved, stacked, [and] safeguarded' (Barthes, translated by Miller, 1974: 156-200)

A 'writerly' text he defined as a text that aspires to the proper goal of literature and criticism: '... to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text.' Writerly texts and ways of reading constitute, in short, an active rather than passive way of interacting with a culture and its texts. A culture and its texts, Barthes writes, should never be accepted in their given forms and traditions. As opposed to the 'readerly texts' as 'product,' the 'writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.' Thus reading becomes for Barthes 'not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing,' but rather a 'form of work' (Barthes, translated by Miller, 1974: 200).

Barthes identifies the writerly text as the dominant mode in modern mythological culture in which forms of representation seek to continually blur the divisions between the real and the artificial. He proposes that the ideal text blurs the distinction between the reader and writer (Barthes, translated by Miller, 1974: 200).

It was with this knowledge then that I sought to define myself as a writer who wrote 'writerly' rather than 'readerly' texts, because for me, writerly texts are way more

interesting and because I wanted to grow my writing in the field to which I was naturally drawn. For me, it became of interest to write a novel that at least aspired to Barthes' description of a workable text in which '…the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable . . . ; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language (Barthes, translated by Miller, 1974: 156-200). This spoke to me of the Mandala shape that had begun to form in my mind in relation to the non-linear journey of my text.

Cixous writes that the reader's role is equally important in feminine writing, because the reader has to open up her body in order to understand the texts of écriture féminine (Sellers,1990). Thus, the reader should avoid the impositions of the symbolic order but also be open to the text. That is, the feminine reader must open the self 'to the meanings of a text, without seeking to impose 'his' preconceptions or desires, or attempting to make sense of the text in order to construct 'his' position as reader' (Sellers,1991:146).

Despite the fact that I sometimes feel I did not fully write the novella, that it took place through some strange 'other' force that worked through my finger tips alone, I hope to evoke a considered response to the layers of meaning and play within the narrative and would be disappointed in a response that did not reveal a holistic interpretation of the text. This concern is illustrated in a conversation in the white room between a Doctor (who signifies the phallogocentric reading of a feminine narrative) and the protagonist.

> A doctor walks in. How are you feeling, he asks?
> Pretty confused, I say.
> Is it that, he asks pointing at the manuscript?
> Yes I say – whose story is this?
> Is it a story?
> I'm not sure – what do you think?
> That I cannot tell you.
> Oh so you've read it?
> Sort of.
> What does that mean? How can you sort of read something?

> You can skim over it and get the gist.
> No – that's not possible. You can never do a script justice by simply skimming over it. There are too many nuances – hidden agendas.
> All I will say is that it remains to be seen.
> What does?
> Whether it all pulls together in the end – we'll have to ask the council.
> What council?
> I'm not sure.
> For goodness sake you are so evasive. What's with you?
> No what's with you?

I would add though, that this scene also signifies the inability of the doctor (and readers like him) to fully respond to the underlying game of the text and in this failure respond negatively to the irrational elements of the story, writing it off as new-age and arcane and misreading the play of words and profanity into bland pornography-- as expressed in the following excerpt from my text, when the Tin-Man enters the white room.

> But first we have to find her for she has gone underground – burrowed her way into a subjective narrative which obfuscates the complexities into simple rhythmic sentences. Excellent disguise but I have to warn her that some will misread it and think it is pornographic -- or Buddhist, or, God forbid, Buddhist pornography, which may bring her down. Unfathomable to say the least!

This piece was largely written in response to some of the male views around the workshop table where criticism was leveled at my writing for being 'too Buddhist' or 'irritating because of the use of Tarot symbols and wholesale importation of mythological symbols' -- amongst other critiques. Terms such as 'litany of abuse,' and 'lustful rather than erotic' destabilized me somewhat – albeit only from three male perspectives -- and despite my claim of expressing jouissance with boldness, there is a deep nausea that comes with the uncertainty that is provoked through authoritative and negative responses to one's work – especially when said with the weight of those who know better than you. This type of certainty tends to shake the very roots of the recipients' intuitive joy and confidence in her instincts. In my case I began to feel quite mad, distasteful and ashamed at times. Cixous in *Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) discusses this phenomenon.

> I wished that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst --burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! What' the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her /naiveté/, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a...divine composure), hasn't actually accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble. (Cixous, 1976: 875-93)

The one definite overall amorality of my narrative does lie in the fact that my protagonist is clearly not beholden to the moral master narrative that lies very much in the domain of the white middle class male. Despite my occasional suspicions that I must indeed be sick and sexually aberrant to be writing so boldly about my own sexuality, I stuck to my guns and chose not to try to be *good or proper* and thereby gain agency in terms of what a white middle class woman *should* be. I chose to only present congress with phantasised males (outside of the memoir element) as a signifier of this willfulness and a breaking away from these post Victorian expectations of white femaleness. Wildness will have congress with wildness outside of the boundaries that white male agency has on white femaleness. Coenraad de Buys is white, but he presents a whiteness that has rebelled against all middle class constraints. He is a wild man. I have also chosen to be boldly sexual (and not pornographic) in the writing of these sex scenes, a fact that was very much appreciated by many of my female readers who resonated with the lack of constraint or morality – but also the lack of pornography.

It was not only men who critiqued some of my decisions. One reader (a woman) challenged me on the fact that I finally present the abuse of the character, which this reader took to overthrow everything I had presented about the wildness of female

sexuality. But I do not see that scene as having done that at all. She picks herself up from the sand where she has played out the theory of abjection by vomiting out her abjection and then she quotes Kristeva. (1982)

> 'No,' I say. 'That is it. I have worshipped at the shadowy alter of my self-destruction in my dark revolt of being. I have tasted the bitterness of my deeply buried self-abjection… seen my story as it really is in the vomit on the sand. But frankly I am getting bored with it now and I have finally expelled myself, spat myself out and transcended my pain.'

Coenraad asks her whom she is quoting exactly. She does not answer. She recovers quickly and tells him it is over and that there is something of more import around the corner. There is no need to delve into this abjection – she does not own it. She simply accepts that there are residual elements of an abusive past, and she overturns the expectation that this history has any bearing on her wildness. She is not wild because she was abused. She is wild because she has transcended the status quo. I retained this scene to illustrate the point that wildness simply is, despite the shackles and constraints of civilisation.

Some questioned why my sex scenes had underlying and sometimes obvious elements of sado-masochism. I answer that sado-masochism is a by-product of the constraints on feminine wildness (in Western terms) the need to injure a woman if she does not represent the status quo and indeed the need to be injured physically (by women themselves) many of whom have all but handed over their primal instincts through the historical constraints of the male view. Thus the one version of the Queen threatens to cut off Lila's clitoris if she does not play the game and follow the rules – she is at risk of losing the very instrument that gives her pleasure and joy -- the very instrument that leads her around the world and I would say the very instrument with which she writes. Lila runs -- as she is encouraged to by Sylvia (Plath) in the hospital room. She does not want Lila's feminine and joyous expression to be thwarted. Neither does Lila. She intends to keep her clitoris.

Later on in the story Lila has a conversation with her vagina, clitoris intact, in which she is berated for reading the memoir again. Her vagina is salacious, outspoken and

boldly sexual, making an aggressive overture to the young Cuban Doctor who administers the sleeping tablets. This scene gave me the opportunity to name the vagina. In fact, my first offering was exactly three pages of names for the vagina, some of them not complementary. I was advised to shorten this but I sometimes think that I have curtailed my statement by shortening it and I may just put all three pages back in my final text.

The one question I do ask myself is why the absence of sex between the white female protagonist and her black husband? This is fairly complex for me in that the answer does not spontaneously come to mind. I had included a chronology of sexual encounters between the protagonist and a compendium of black lovers but it became dull and open to misinterpretation so I, on advice from some readers, chose to exclude it. I also think that a sex scene between herself and her husband might have come across as gratuitous, even voyeuristic.

Their map of scars matches at the end of the story. Therein lies the connection between the two. Both deemed outcasts from the status quo, both lacking moral rightness or authority, (he murders and she is sexually amoral – he is not in charge of the telling of his history – she is, but at the risk of being expelled from her security) deemed wrong or bad by those who hold the agency on these two terms. Both possess a wildness that refuses containment and restraint and this is what they have in common. Their map of scars matches because there are certain injurious consequences for not adhering to the Master Narrative. It is the potential commonality between the white woman and the black man, who meet on the social ladder of a capitalistic world. White women and black men, by some strange turn of events, share a middle rung on this ladder in closer proximity than the others. It is the progeny of the couple (the Golden child) who sews them back together in the end, using his white mother's map of scars to navigate the healing and mending of his Xhosa father's shredded body.

2. Other influences.

Literary Philosophers.

The writer who influenced me most would have to be Jorge Luis Borges and it is to him that I look as the Maestro in terms of how he tells a story and what his stories are concerned with. I am strongly attracted to Borges' presentation of literary and philosophical history as well as 'the contamination of reality by dream' in his narratives. Even before I had read or heard of Borges my writing concerned itself with things of a spiritual, playful and phenomenological nature and I had a compulsion to play with linguistic, historical, and political constructs within my work. I did this intuitively with no reference framework, so it was with great pleasure, admiration, humility and respect that I read about Borges, the seminal writer, and other writers such as he, who were playing vast and grand games of philosophical exploration within their writing of fiction. I am in awe of Borges' gifted capacity to deal with 'Big Ideas', mysticism, mathematical theory, complex philosophical notions and debates within his writing of fiction. As pointed out by Daniel Bourne in his introduction to his conversation with Borges, which is recorded on the Internet literary site *The Artful Dodge*, 'not a writer of characters and emotions, Borges is at home in a universe of philosophy, speculation, and Big Ideas, and the sheer density of his thought cannot be measured by the length of his stories. Borges says more in five pages than most writers could put forth in a trilogy, dazzling the imagination with explorations of time, space, language, identity; and even the very nature of reading and writing itself' (Bourne, 1980: www.wooster.edu/artfuldodge/interviews/borges.htm).

It would make sense then that I am equally attracted to writers who have been influenced by Borges, or present similar excellence -- such as Italo Calvino. In the words of John Barth in his article: 'The parallels!' – In which he outlines the similarities of both Borges and Calvino, he says:

> To begin with, both writers, for all their great sophistication of mind, wrote in a clear, straightforward, unmannered, nonbaroque, but rigorously scrupulous style . . . crystalline, sober, and airy . . . without the least congestion.
>
> Both writers inclined toward the ironic elevation of popular narrative genres: the folktale and comic strip for Calvino, supernaturalist and detective-fiction for Borges. Calvino even defined Post-modernism, in his ' Visibility' lecture, as ' the tendency to make ironic use of the stock images

> of the mass media, or to inject the taste for the marvelous inherited from literary tradition into narrative mechanisms that accentuate their alienation' —a tendency as characteristic of Borges' production as of his own. Neither writer, for better or for worse, was a creator of memorable characters or a delineator of grand passions.

He goes on to say that, 'what most of us want from literature most of the time is what has been called passionate virtuosity, and both Borges and Calvino deliver it (Barth online: www.dalkeyarchive.com/article/show/6)

Both authors seem to be formidable scholars as well as writers of fiction and this makes me realise that if I aspired to write like them I would need to expand my scope of knowledge and philosophical thought. For now I have to content myself with writing (and having fun) within the parameters of my own knowledge sphere, and if I can widen these parameters just a little, through constant exploration of the many bodies of thought that exist in this world, then I believe that I could quite possibly widen my storytelling vocabulary and ability in the literary playing field. Writing of this nature is after all, a game of exploration and as well as exploring the knowledge field outside of one's own sphere, the constant exploration and discovery of one's own writing is also part of the game.

For example, when I began to read/explore my narrative for the sake of analysis, I became aware that my writing of characters is not to create people with whom one should relate to emotionally, but as vehicles to explore a host of other issues that interest or concern me – in my case issues of the collective and personal unconscious and the manifestation of archetypes, as based on the Jungian system, psychology, sexuality, playful profanity, writing, reading as well as issues of a metaphysical and spiritual nature. My central characters are curiously devoid of expressed emotion, devoid of judgment of themselves or others (amoral) and are often involved in journeys through a maze or labyrinth of experience and chaos, finding themselves in different paradigms, different epochs and even different genres on occasion. My characters slip from realist to fabulist landscapes with ease.

Very often my protagonist will encounter figures (other characters who are mere props on the protagonist's journey – or aspects of herself in Jungian interpretation) and they engage in conversation or action. In some cases my protagonist will have tea with 'This and That' (a code name for Borges) and Italics (a code name for Calvino), engage in cryptic conversation with a character who could well be Lewis Carroll, get chased by a neurotic and foreboding Queen of philosophy who threatens to cut off her clitoris if she cannot guess what school of thought she represents, become embroiled in a quasi-sadomasochistic relationship with an actual historical figure from the frontier war days in the Eastern Cape, collide with her ancestors' history and be murdered by her husband, who happens to be a fearsome Xhosa warrior in a parallel universe. She finds herself in a white hospital room, which may be a metaphor for writer's block. Here she will interact with characters from her own novella and read a memoir which she does not recognize as her own, have a telephone conversation with her mother, whom she does not remember, about the ethics of writing memoir and engage in a bizarre conversation with her vagina. She enjoys animalistic sexual relations with the incubus, epic sex with the Hanged Man (a major Arcana from the Tarot card system which signifies surrender) and violent sex with a wild man (a major Arcana from Tarot which signifies the Devil/experience). She embarks upon an expedition to rescue three white women who were survivors of a shipwreck in Pondoland and she orders a glass of epiphanies in a broken down bar but is given a cup full of words and a Remington instead. My narrative will twist and turn and hopefully surprise, all the while taking on the playful dimensions of magic, as in the way magic happens in children's stories.

The content is not always happy and savoury – but in keeping with my approach every aspect of the journey, whether gross or light, will be handled with the same playful tone. If there is horror to be found in the narrative it will be found by the reader alone, for the writer sets up the protagonist as one who has transcended personal pain (transcended Self). Her suffering is only seen in her need to protect her son, and even this anxiety is rendered in magical terms. I am most comfortable in the magical world of imagination and fabulation and use this realm to explore a host of other issues that concern me in the real world, or the inner world.

Borges says that in his case, 'magic, is a means to clarity and vigour. It has the evocative advantages of the atavistic, but it is also formally lucid, and intellectually diverse; it is governed by all natural laws, and by imaginary ones as well' (Borges, 1970: 80). I cannot help but be inspired by these possibilities.

Borges takes these imaginary laws into the realm of causality (that everything that happens must have a cause and effect). This is a theme in many of Borges's stories, and as well as being a stylistic device, is also an express extension of his worldview. The loss or transcendence of the Self is the basic characteristic of causality which means the individual is never in control of his or her own destiny, for beneath the surface of all events and action/s lies the spark of Chaos, that soundless eruption of forces which orders and then re-orders our reality. Borges' fiction, especially the more fantastical of his work, epitomizes this loss of the Self, as well as the struggle to come to terms with the disclosure or unearthing of our own unrealities. 'Let us admit', he writes, 'what all idealists admit: the hallucinatory nature of the world. Let us do what no idealist has done: seek unrealities which confirm that nature' (Borges, 1994: 207).

Eastern Philosophy

This hallucinatory view of the world fits into my particular belief system which leans towards Eastern philosophy. I hesitate to use 'belief' because in truth, there is nothing to 'believe' in this view. It is more a case of not attaching material significance to *matter* or the matter at hand – a type of non-belief as it were. My interest in Western philosophical constructs lies in the bodies of work such as Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism and phenomenology and the link to Eastern thought. Dan Lusthaus presents these similarities in his book on Buddhist phenomenology. He writes: 'Phenomenology and Buddhism both take the whys and hows of *human experience* as their starting and concluding points. Both focus on similar epistemological issues, such as perception, sensation, cognition, noetic construction, embodied conditioning and the overcoming of embodied ways of seeing the world. Both propose through methodic investigation of the ways we cognize, to resolve the most fundamental human dilemmas and problems' (Dan Lusthaus, 2002: vii).

Marian Hillar in her paper on Kant's moral philosophy and its reinterpretation, draws a more specific parallel between Kant and Eastern philosophy:

> In analysis of the outer world Kant came to the conclusion that we do not perceive the objects as 'things-in-themselves' (*Dinge an sich*) (*noumena*) apart from our intrinsic cognitive relation to our representations (that is as unknown and beyond our experience or knowable in some non-sensible way). Rather we find in objects through our faculties of representation something that determines how objects must be, at least as objects of experience or *phenomena*. In our faculty of sensibility receiving impressions we find not only contingent contents but also two pure 'forms of intuition': space which structures all outer representations, and time, which structures all inner representations. And this explains why synthetic *a priori* propositions of mathematics apply with certainty to all objects of our experience which necessarily conform to our representations. Thus mathematics and metaphysics of our notions of space and time can reveal an evident proposition that there is one infinite space.
>
> Kant's doctrine is not an empirical one, but a metaphysical thesis which enriches empirical explanations with an *a priori* postulate. But this postulate itself is explained as being 'constitution of human sensibility.' (Hillar, 2003: 72)

She goes on to acknowledge that, 'there are many parallels in Kant's thought with the ideas developed by the ancient Stoics (Zeno of Citium, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Cicero, and others) and Eastern thought developed in Indian culture and in China. His thought is thus an elaboration on the themes of the ancient philosophers' (Hillar, 2003: 72).

In his paper *Critique of Pure Reason* (Guyer, Wood. 1999), Kant seems to echo a Hindu/Buddhist interpretation of the immeasurable and dynamic field of the unknowable:

> This world presents to us such an immeasurable spectacle of variety, order, purpose and beauty, shown in its infinite extent and in the unlimited divisibility of its parts, that even such knowledge as our weak understanding can acquire, we encounter so many marvels immeasurably great that all speech loses its force, all numbers their power to measure, our thoughts lose all precision, and our judgment dissolves into an amazement whose very silence speaks with eloquence. Everywhere we see a chain of effects and causes, of ends and means, regularly in coming into and going out of existence. Nothing has of itself come into this condition in which we find it, but always points behind itself to something else as its cause; and this in turn obliges us to make the same enquiry. The whole universe would thus sink into the abyss of nothingness unless over and above this infinite chain

> of contingencies one assumed something to support it –something that is original and independently self-subsistent, and which not only caused the origin of the universe but also secures its continuance. (Kant translated by Guyer, Wood, 1999: 622)

These aspects of the phenomenological thought of Kant, Borges's view of causality, and the Eastern philosophical world-view, which is premised on an awareness of the unity and mutual interconnection of all things and events, are incorporated into my narrative. My story thus presents a hallucinatory landscape into which the protagonist is drawn and in which she experiences different states over which she seemingly has little control. This is depicted in scenes such as the one when she meets a Yogi in the forest:

> 'Ksst, ksst.' I look around and see a yogi in a white robe motioning to me from between the trees.
> He says -- 'Follow me.' I do.
> He says – 'You are trapped in your mind. You desire to find your one true voice.'
> 'Well it may be so,' I say. 'Yes, yes, I think that is it.'
> 'Whatever,' – he says – 'just remember – misery starts with desire. Desire creates action and is the barrier to consciousness. When there is desire, one has the illusion to free will – but there is no free will.'
> I am suddenly running in a different direction to him.
> 'What should I do?' I shout after his disappearing figure.
> 'Absolutely nothing,' he cries out.
> 'OK,' I shout as he vanishes amongst the trees.

Her control though, does lie in her perception of events as they unfold. In Hindu or Buddhist writings the perception of things as separate objects and events is seen as an illusion, which some have mistakenly interpreted to mean that the world is an illusion. When we look to Kant's writing the discourse concerns whether the illusion lies in our point of view or perception.

These constructs, which acknowledge or grapple with the notion of a non-material realm or present the possibility of all forms as relative, fluid and ever-metamorphosing, largely inform the basis from which I write. I am most drawn to the Hindu view of the universe as a magical phenomenological world conjured up by a divine force, a rhythmic and dynamic playing field, which provides an experiential realm for the journey of spirit in body and I attempt to incorporate this magic into my writing. My

constant allusion to Hindu Deities and their meanings, references this view for me. My naming of characters also plays into this. For example, my main protagonist is named *Lila*, which is a concept from Hinduism that explains the universe as a cosmic puppet theatre or playground for the gods. *Lila* literally means *play*, but in religious texts refers to '*divine play* – life as a spontaneous game played by lighthearted forces beyond our understanding' (Capra, 1975: 105). This speaks to me of the playful nature of writing as well.

A further aspect of Hinduism, which I incorporate into my storytelling, is that of the depiction of sensuousness (bodily experience) as a means to enlightenment. Unlike much Western religious expression, in which sensuousness is repressed and seen as sinful, Hindu belief embraces body and soul as integral. In this system, bodily desires are not controlled by conscious will, but 'realisation is aimed at through the entirety of the human experience, which includes body, mind and soul' (Capra, 1975: 103). Hence my narrative plays upon this occurrence through the experiential process of the character and various aspects of character as she moves towards an integrated consciousness – or individuation (in the Jungian sense). Again my dreams or fantasy sequences are populated with Hindu iconography, which hints at this integration.

Foucault says in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*: 'In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice, and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered a relation to the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself (Foucault, 1990: 57).

I look to Foucault's writing when he distinguishes between 'ars erotica' (the knowledge of sensual pleasure) as practiced historically in the East and 'scientia sexualis' of Western thought, by contrast, 'which deals with confessions extracted from the unlearned rather than secrets passed down from the learned.'

3. Framing

Although I continued to write much of the material that has ended up in the novella, a month or so later I still had not found a framing story in which the stories could unfold. But finally it occurred to me that my framing story had been there all along in the form of a short story I had written a few months before, about a collision with my ancestor's history. It begins with a car accident and the protagonist flying out the windscreen and hitting her head on the road. At the same time her husband is shredded into one hundred ribbons and her son is spinning in a vortex. This provided the ideal framing story in which to explore all the stories within stories that had begun to take shape. If the protagonist was in a state of dying then she could access her deep unconscious and grapple with residual egoist attractions to the earthly realm while her spirit traversed the liminal zone. Thus she could travel through the stories and hallucinatory landscapes that represented the spiritual, the emotional, the material, the historical, the psychological, the political and the fantastical elements of the protagonist's imagination.

Re-versioning History

My framing story began about three hundred years ago, when my own progenitor first arrived on the shores of the Cape of Goodhope, from Friesland. However, it only manifested itself to me three years into my marriage. I met my husband, who is Xhosa, at a friend's wedding in 1996. Twelve years later we are both business and life partners, working as filmmakers and storytellers. We have a nine-year-old son. We had been living together for three years when my aunt, an historian, enquired about his Xhosa clan name. She was obsessed with our family history and the Dutch Xhosa frontier wars, in which our ancestors were active participants. When she learned that his clan name was Myhira, she told us the story of our possibly intersecting history through our ancestor, Tjaart van der Walt. Tjaart was a feared Commandant of the burgher commandos in the frontier wars that took place in the mid to late 1700's. I was instantly intrigued by this story and when I did some research I came across a book entitled *Geskiedkundige Swellendam*, written in 1943 by LL Tomlinson, in which he records the legend of Tjaart van der Walt. I quote large portions of the passage because

it sums up the period in which I set this framing story, the late 1700's in the Eastern Cape and Karoo and is the text from which I borrowed the story.

> After this short interval in which the struggle between the white colonists and the government normalised, the main struggle became the battle between boer and the ' barbarians' . At this time the intrepid Tjaart [Johannes] van der Walt takes the centre stage. His courage became the legend with the white and [non white] alike.
>
> Events in the life of Tjaart escalated on the frontier after 1790. In 1790/91, in company with this brother Piet (Petrus), [he went on the third Grosvenor expedition] in response to the rumour that white women who were living in Xhosaland were survivors of the Grosvenor wreck. The expedition, in fact, located three white women who were not survivors of the Grosvenor, but of a much earlier wreck. The women had many children, all of whom were descendents of Xhosa chiefs.
>
> After the journey to the wreck, Tjaart became actively involved in the troubled life of the frontier districts. On the 11th June 1792, two plundering bands of bushmen under Flamink and Couragie, captured 11,000 sheep and 256 cattle belonging to the Dutch East India Company. They killed a burgher and wounded a slave. Burger-lieutenant Nicolaas Smith of Graaff-Reinet, supported by Tjaart van der Walt and Philip Botha, gathered 33 Swellendammers and followed the thieves. On 24th July they fought and killed Flamink and 300 of his people. They took 15 children prisoners and retrieved 860 sheep, 53 head of cattle, 4 horses and eight guns.
>
> … But the problems began again. On the 1st June, 1802 the burghers of Swellendam and Graaff-Reinett were again called up on commando. Tjaart van der Walt, as Commandant-General, led a commando with a full complement of men. Over a period of eight weeks he continually attacked the Xhosa and Khoikhoi along the Sundays River and 230 of the enemy were killed and 13,000 cattle were taken. The enemy was on the point of retreating, when the Commandant-General was recalled to the area of the Gamtoos River, where an attack by Khoikhoi was taking place. Tjaart engaged the enemy along the Olifants River to commando Drift, where eight of his men were killed. The graves are visible today [1943]. From there the commando travelled over Rietvlei to the Langkloof, then along Kouga Mountains near the present-day town of Uitenhage.
>
> It was there that the valiant Tjaart was killed so unexpectedly on the 8th August, 1802. The commando had dismounted and Tjaart and Holland, his agterryer [Khoikhoi attendant], were following the spoor of enemy. Unexpectedly, on a footpath they were confronted by Chief Boland and six of his followers. Boland fired at Tjaart, fatally wounding him. Falling, the Commandent-General fired his last shot. Boland and five of his men were shot by the buckshot.

> The burghers took Tjaart's body through the kloof and buried him on Van der Waltsbult. At the death of the Commandant-General enthusiasm of the burghers for military service evaporated. They would not serve under Veld-Kommandant Botha who was second in command, and military action by the burghers ceased. General Jannsens negotiated peace with Klaas Sturrman on 1st March 1803.
>
> Tjaarts death was a hard blow for the frontiers farmers. His bravery and reputation were a byword. Truly, he was the greatest of a family of great men, men of whom Lieut. Col Richard Collins testified that their bravery was as conspicuous as their humanity and faithfullness. Four van der Walts died in service to the Colony. (Tomlinson, translated by Brann, 1941: 85-91)

My husband and I decided to make a documentary on our ancestry entitled *Chasing the Ancestors,* in which we would do a road trip through our common history and unpack the legend of Tjaart. We interviewed Xhosa elders on the matter in order to explore the different interpretations of the same story and were not surprised to find that their oral rendition of Tjaart was entirely different to the recorded version. According to the Xhosa elders, Tjaart was a genocidist who was eventually ambushed by a Xhosa Chief and was sliced up into 100 pieces by the chief and spread all over the landscape so that his spirit could never return to his body and wreak more havoc on the people. They said it was a Xhosa Chief who killed him and that the Afrikaners were ashamed of this – thus they changed the story. They said it was less shaming to have been killed by a man of lighter descent. (Source: Chasing the ancestors – documentary, 2005).

Thus began my premise for the rewriting of the Tjaart van der Walt story and in my rendition, my husband becomes the Xhosa chief who murders Tjaart.

My husband's clan happened to be from the Eastern Cape at the same time in history and his recorded oral history tells of two chiefs whom were in hiding in the Baviaanskloof mountains at the time of Tjaart's killing. We often speculated, along with my aunt, as to whether this could be possible, that his ancestor killed mine and by some strange twist of events, our clans had again come together through our meeting.

This combination of family myth and recorded history provided a wonderful platform from which to weave a story. But I wanted to take it much further than the speculation. It also occurred to me, whilst shooting our documentary, that my Afrikaans history had all the sign posts (literally) museums, monuments and records to track it easily – whilst my husband's history did not. Xhosa history as told from a Xhosa perspective, largely remains in the domain of memory and oral story telling.
(I make a distinction here between history available to the illiterate and those Xhosa history books written by (white) scholars.)

My husband traced his aristocratic lineage, through a rare record written in the late 1800's by a learned relative, to a Thembu King and Queen buried on his ancestral land in Queenstown, and when we tried to find the graves we were sent hither and thither by locals, who pointed to anthills and thorn trees and mountains as markers to find the gravesite. When we did, the Queen's grave was a mound of rubble and the Thembu King's grave sported a broken tombstone and was covered in blackjacks. Our five-year-old son's face was a picture as he said to me – but mommy they can't be a King and Queen – where is all the gold? The reality, that Xhosa history has been shredded, that it has not been honoured by the state as Afrikaans history has, struck me deeply and I wanted to weave these elements into the story.

The fact that the Xhosa husband is shredded into 100 pieces at the beginning of the story is symbolic to me of the disintegration of Xhosa history by colonialism. The protagonist spends much of her time on the roadside, trying to put the ribbons of her husband back together again, but is constantly foiled by interjecting events (narratives) -- which speaks to me of the inability of whiteness to fully understand the elements of Xhosa history and therefore the inability of whiteness to undertake the task of resurrecting this history. In the end it is the child of mixed heritage who sews both his parents back together. However, the ambulance's arrival is the very last line of the story and suggests an inherent miasm in the race war that still prevails in South Africa. Some readers have suggested that perhaps I am alluding to the possibility that those children of mixed descent from parents who voluntarily cross the race barrier, are the ones who will foster a wider understanding between the races … perhaps a twee and

optimistic speculation. I would analyse this occurrence in the Jungian sense and say that the golden child eventually heals the disparities in the protagonist's soul as she integrates the three elements of her psyche (anima, animus and inner child) in the moment of her actual dying.

I decided to base this story on my direct heritage. When my protagonist reawakes after the accident she finds herself in the company of Hettie Venster and Hendrik de Waal (pseudonyms for my direct ancestors, Hester Venter and Hendrik van der Walt). Hester Venter, my mitochondrial grandmother, was herself, a figure worthy of story. She is famous for her Diary – found by a traveler in South Africa and published in the 1800's in Holland as *The Diary of Hester Venter*, that was held up as a good example of the piety of Dutch women. However closer reading reveals a record of burning passion in which she wrote reams of erotic poetry and descriptions of her spiritually and erotically charged relationship with Jesus. Scholar Christina Landman, wrote about her in a book entitled *The piety of Afrikaans women – diaries of guilt (1974).* In the novella, when Hettie reads her diary to the protagonist, she is reading actual entries from the original Hester Venter's diary.

Hendrik, Hester's husband, was the brother of Tjaart and is recorded in history books as a man who made peace with the Bushmen, who themselves had managed to wage a fairly successful century of guerilla warfare against the frontier settlers. I use the term successful because although the attacks against them were brutal, devastating and often, the Bushmen still managed to avenge themselves quite fiercely and prevented proper settlement of certain tracts of land for many years. Describing the situation in the 1790s, traveler John Barrow gave an account of the pervasive insecurity in which the frontiersmen lived:

> An inhabitant of Sneuberg (sic) not only lives under the continual apprehension of losing his property, but is also perpetually exposed to the danger of being put to death. If he has occasion to go the distance of 500 yards from the house, he is under the necessity of carrying a musket. He can neither plough, nor sow, nor reap without being under arms. (Giliomee, 2007 :62)

Hendrik and his brother Jan Pieter van der Walt, devised a system of reconciliation with the Bushmen as a result of this continuing guerilla warfare against them. Traveler, William Sommerville observed in 1799 that,

> I had the opportunity of seeing about seventy Bosjesman at the farm of Johannes P. van der Walt on the river Tarka, ten of who are the only servants that he employs either in his household or the occupations of the farm. In several years everything has been trusted to them, and since that period his flocks never have been plundered by other Bosjeman. They seem to be a quiet people, contented to get their food upon easier terms than the risk they run stealing it. The Shepards are extremely vigilant and faithful. They go to the fields armed with bow and quiver of poisoned arrows. It seldom happens that they allow any of their flock to stray thro' negligence, or to be picked up by Lion, the Wolf, the Tyger, or Jackall. The women and children daily become more useful as their work becomes familiar to them. (Van der Walt, Translated by Brann, 1940. Pg 26)

This is further validated in the book *The Afrikaners* written by Professor Hermann Giliomee.

> Another leading figure now appeared among the frontier burghers: Field commandant J.P van der Walt. He was head of several commandos that rode out in the northeastern frontier in the 1770's and 1780's. In 1793 he settled in a division largely abandoned under Bushman attacks. He received a free hand from the government to set himself up, as the government phrased it 'with the help of his family to eradicate and extirpate the robbers.' There is no evidence that at this time he questioned the commando campaigns or the capturing of Bushmen children.
>
> Five years later, however, he had changed his views. After repeated commandos had been unable to prevent the Bushmen from staging attacks along a broad swathe on the northern frontier, many burghers abandoned their farms. Van der Walt asked the landrost to refuse requests for commandos to attack the Bushmen and capture their children since 'the burghers would also give their all if they were robbed of their children'.
>
> Under his leadership the burghers donated 283 sheep and supplies of tobacco and beads to the Bushmen clan to induce them to live peacefully on their farms. The veldwatchmeesters of Mid-Roggerveld and of Hantam also began to collect sheep and other gifts to hand over to the Bushmen to persuade them to stop stealing. Although attacks by the Bushmen on some parts of the northern frontier continued until the beginning of the second decade of the next century, Colonel Collins wrote in 1809, how satisfactory it was to 'observe the anxiety evinced by the farmers of the northeastern districts to

> preserve peace with that people rather by reconciliation than by terror'. (Giliomee. 2007: 65)

In an interview I conducted with Professor Giliomee, he referred to JP van der Walt as the FW de Klerk of those times. (Source: Chasing the ancestors documentary: 2005)

My story then is closely linked to my family history, which is recorded by scholars and verified in history books. However, I did not want this to be a rigorous rendition of South African history and therefore I chose to retell the story in a fabulist manner with elements of truth underlying the tale.

I had included the Wildman, Coenraad de Buys, into the story in the previous Experiments in telling year, when I had written the short version of the story. The line 'are you the Venter girl who disappeared with Coenraad de Buys?' is posed to the protagonist when she finds herself in her ancestors' company. Coenraad is an intriguing historical figure and his colourful character is ripe for literary translation. In my research I came upon a story that linked Coenraad to Tjaart's commandoes and records him as having lived on the farm next door to Tjaart in the Zuurveld in the late 1700's. (Interview with Giliomee: 2005) I could not resist but to include this archetypal bad-boy, this Wildman, this breaker of rules, into my overall story. For me Coenraad De Buys is representative of the Charles Bukowskis, The Jack Kerouacs, the Henry Millers and perhaps even the Ernest Hemingways, of the literary world – those men who follow their male instincts unselfconsciously and are somehow made into legends and sometimes even heroes as a result.

The more romantic version of Coenraad would be the literary depictions of the highwaymen or the pirates of epic adventure stories. The truth is that he was quite a destructive force in the frontier days, for both the indigenous folk as well as the frontiersmen, as pointed out by Giliomee:

> In this situation, with the political order already disturbed, the remarkable figure of Coenraad de Buys appeared on the scene, and Adriaan van Jaarsveld played his last desperate card. De Buys, the descendant of a Huguenot, had worked in his youth for a family that withheld his pay until

> he took them to court. In his 20's and 30's de Buys was described in tones of awe by travelers. Their accounts mentioned that he was an impressive figure, nearly seven feet tall with enormous self-confidence. His name first appears in frontier records of 1780's as the holder of the loan farm near the Bushmans River in the Zuurfeld. He lived with a Baster woman with whom he had seven children, then married the mother of Ngqika, the Rharhabe chief, and also took a Thembu wife living well beyond the border. De Buys appears in records complaining of the influx of Xhosa into the Zuurveld penetrating his farm. But he was a man who sinned as much as others sinned against him. A member of his family, also living on the social fringes of burgher society, described him as follows: 'He is an intriguer who has not a single friend. He has been no good since his earliest years. He has always been a disturber of the peace and a persecutor of the Christians as well as the blacks.'
> Maynier considered de Buys' conduct one of the principal causes of the outbreak of war in 1793.' (Giliomee. 2007: 74,75)

The stories of intrigue around de Buys are endless, but I chose to use him as a symbol of the protagonist's inner unruliness, the male counterpart to her own feminine wildness, which ultimately transforms into wisdom as signified in Coenraad's transformation into the wise man. This is the alchemy of wildness, which is inherently wise and in the Jungian sense, Coenraad is the ideal *physical* archetypal animus for the protagonist's psyche/anima, in contrast to the spiritual/emotional animus as found in the Hanged Man scene.

This story was also not to be entirely about family history. The fact that the character has woken up with her ancestors, but still finds herself at the roadside with the top of her head sliced off, begs the possibility that she is actually in a state of dying – or perhaps even dead. But this state provided the opportunity to explore the different states of consciousness I was compelled to write about. Also, the fact that her ideas are running riot all over the landscape introduces the possibility that this story will follow her riotous ideas rather than a straightforward narrative course.

4. 'I' and the matter of time

In all strands I employ the narrative technique of rendering everything in the *first person present tense continuous***,** and this is simply to play with the concept of

timelessness and to introduce a phenomenological narrative slant. Linear perception of time and space is played with as the character speaks of the past in the first person, and in the present continuous tense – slippage into fantasy and history also plays out in this mode of address. It becomes a play upon the problem of time and the possibly illusory nature of material-bound subjectivity. In my text, body, mind and soul implicitly grapple with different aspects of the trinity – body through the sexuality of the main protagonist – and mind through the interjecting of metanarrative as she grapples with the problem of writing as well as social, philosophical and historical constructs. Spirit is dealt with through the journey of the protagonist, as her story is one of transcendence and healing.

I did not find it necessary, in this type of narrative, to find a clear sense of distinction between the realms, chapters or beginning and end. Therefore I leave this as a story that has no chapters and begins where it ends. It will then take on a circular narrative form – again playing into the notion of perpetuity and infinity in the cosmic realm – as well as the circular nature of cause and effect.

5. Reflexivity and a little death

> In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled,* nothing *deciphered;* the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing),* by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law. (Barthes, 1977: 147-148)

In finding a conclusion to this essay I begin to feel somewhat fraudulent. Given that I have posited the notion that much of my writing happened in the unconscious I have to wonder how it is that I have excavated so much meaning within it. In the end I can only admit that I myself became a *reader* of a text that apparently came from me. Granted

much of the meaning I have attached to it is because these signifiers already exist in my imaginative bank and therefore are likely to be accurate in so far as my own interpretation goes -- yet I still feel as unresolved as I felt when my novella was deemed complete. Not surprisingly then, I have found resonance in Barthes' notion of the *Death of the author* (1977) in which he criticises the method of reading (and criticism) that relies on aspects of the author's identity — his or her political views, historical context, religion, ethnicity, psychology, or other biographical or personal attributes — to distill meaning from the author's work. In this type of criticism, the experiences and biases of the author are seen as a definitive 'explanation' of the text. (Barthes, 147-148). For Barthes, this method of reading may be apparently orderly and handy but is actually slipshod and defective: In my case the white room became an outlet for this dilemma.

Given my mosaic-like experience of the writing process, my suggested alienation as writer of the text within the fiction, (the white-room scene) and the regular manifestation of writing material out of apparently nowhere, I believe that Barthes offers an accurate description of my reading. In some ways I feel that my writing of a narrative in the *here and now* was an unconscious attempt to write Barthes' theory into my narrative, a detail I only became aware of after the fact. Yet I feel that I have now (in this reflexive essay) done exactly what he argues against.

In truth, I felt a great deal of ambivalence towards having to analyse my own writing and unpack the possible *meaning* within the text in order to explain what I as the writer was *attempting to do* – especially in relation to other genres or literature that I may have been influenced by. Firstly I had no schooled grasp of literary theory when I began to write and I was told not to use terms such as postmodernism in my proposal since I seemingly could not back it up in the academic sense. Rather I explored postmodern theory while I was writing my text and built this exploration into my narrative, sometimes inadvertently and sometimes consciously.

Given the way I write then, I would go even further and suggest that *writer becomes reader whilst writing* – evidenced in the fact that on re-reading my work I would see that Postmodern thought had become wound up in my text and I would go back and

consciously play with this notion, building in more theory. So although I wrote what many refer to as a postmodern novella, it was initially written with no knowledge of what this meant and without trying consciously to present a postmodern fiction. The only way ultimately, that I was able to write reflexively on my novella, was to split myself off from the work as writer and become reader instead… and in this reading process I became aware of how many rewritings or explications were potentially available to explore the text … and began to rewrite the story many times myself. To this end I feel that a definitive reflexive essay has serious limitations in terms of exploring the novella and presenting it as an authoritative account of the process and story.

On the one hand though, I feel relieved that I have *explained* my view of the text to the reader -- but on the other hand I worry that I may have sullied my story by unpacking it in this method and that I may have imposed restrictions onto the text for the reader, as subjective explication can serve to *close* off meaning rather than leave it *open.*

In conclusion then and despite the claims I have made within this essay, I feel that I cannot entirely give a fixed reason for the writing of the story, or a precise definition of the meaning of the story, or even a clearly defined description of the process of the writing of the story. At this point I would rather concede that my first novella is, quite possibly, about nothing except itself -- an open universe on offer to a variety of readers and therefore a variety of rewritings.

Bibliography

1. Appignanesi, Richard and Chris Garratt (1995). *Introducing Postmodernism*. New York: Totem Books.
2. Barth, J. (1960) *The Sot-Weed Factor*. U.S.A: The Anchor Literary Library.
3. Barth, J. (1968). *Lost in the funhouse*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co.
4. Barth, J. (1967*). 'The Literature of Exhaustion.'* Boston: The Atlantic.
5. Barth, J. (1972). *Chimera*. United States: Houghton Mifflin.
6. Barth, J. *' The Parallels!' Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges.* www.dalkeyarchive.com/article/show/6). On 23/09/09
7. Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z: An Essay*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang.
8. Barthes, R. (1975). *The pleasures of the text.* New York: Hill and Wang.
9. Barthes R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana/Collins.
10. Bertens, J.W. Bertens, H. (1994) *The idea of the Postmodern. UK:* Routledge.
11. Borges, J. L. (1964). *Labyrinths.* New York: New Directions.
12. Borges, J.L. (1970). *Dreamtigers.* New York: E.P. Dutton & Co.
13. Borges, J.L. (1994). *Borges on Writing*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
14. Bourne, D. (1980). *The artful dodge online literary magazine, Conversation with Borges.* www.wooster.edu/artfuldodge/interviews/borges.htm On 23/05/09.
15. Calvino, Italo. (1986). *The Uses of Literature. Cybernetics and Ghosts.* San Diego,

New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company.

16. Capra, F. (1975). *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism.* California: Shambhala Publications of Berkeley.
17. Cixous, H. (1976). *The laugh of the Medusa.* Trans. K. Cohen & P. Cohen, *Signs* 1:
18. Conley, V. A. (1991). *Helene Cixous : Writing the Feminine*. Lincoln: University of Nabraska Press.
19. Cornell, S. (1990). *Hélène Cixous and les Etudes Féminines*. In Wilcox H, The Body and the text : *Helene Cixous, Reading and Teaching*. New York: St. Martin's Press
20. Ducornet, R. (2004). http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com/i/the-deep-zoo/full/ On 2/08/09.
21. Ellmann, M. (1994). *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*. London: Longman.
22. Emerson, W. (1841). *' Intellect' from Essays: First Series.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
23. Ellis-Christensen, T. (2003-2009). *What is Jungian literary criticism*? Wise Geek.www.wisegeek.com/what-is-jungian-literary-criticism.htm On 19/04/09
24. Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction.* Trans. Robert Hurley. Vintage Books Edition. New York: Random House, Inc.
25. Giliomee, H. (2007). *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People,* University of Virginia
26. Guyer P, Wood A, (1999) *Critique of pure reason By Immanuel Kant.* UK: Cambridge University Press.
27. Harris, C.B. (1983). *Passionate virtuosity; The fiction of John Barth*. Urbana*:* University of Illinois Press.

28. Hillar, M. (2003). *Foundation of Kant's moral philosophy and its Reinterpretation. A quintessential humanistic doctrine* www.socinian.org/files/ReinterpretationKantEthics.pdf On 20/07/09

29. Peksen, S. (2005). *Feminine Writing as an Alternative to the Patriarchal Language* http://www.academinist.org/mp/mp_archive/archive/march05/amp021.html On 25/11/09

30. Jacobi, J. (1942/1973). *The psychology of C.G. Jung: An introduction with illustrations*. Manheim, R. (Trans). New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.

31. Jung, C.G. (1959/1990). *The archetypes and the collective unconscious*. Hull, R.F.C. (Trans). *Bollingen Series XX. The Collected Works of C.G. Jung.* 9 (Part 1). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

32. Klages, M. (2006). *Literary theory. A guide for the perplexed*. UK: Continuum Publishers.

33. Kristeva, Julia. (1980) *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*. Trans Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press

34. Landman, C. (1994). *The Piety of Afrikaans Women: Diaries of Guilt*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.

35. Lusthaus, D. (2002). *Buddhist phenomenology. A Philosophical Investigation of* London: Macmillan.

36. Morris, P. (1993). *Literature and Feminism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

37. Said, E. (1983). *The World, the Text, and the Critic.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

38. Sellers, S. (1991). *Language and Sexual Difference : Feminist Writing in France.* London: Macmillan

39. Schueler, G. (1997). *Chaos and the Psychological Symbolism of the Tarot,* Ph.D. www.schuelers.com/chaos/chaos7.htm On 19/04/09

40. Tomlinson, L.L. (1943) *Geskiedkundige Swellendam*: Tjaart Van Der Walt: Die Wit God. Geskiedkundige Swellendam. Cape Town: Nasionale Pers.

41. Waugh, P. (1984) *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Literature.* London: Routledge.

42. Van de Walt, D. (1940) *Die familie Van der Walt in Suid Afrika.* SA.

Video references.

1. Schutte G, Singiswa, S. (2005) Chasing the ancestors. SABC/NFVF